



My Brother With The Tics - And The Endless Pursuit of Acceptance.

Progress towards equality can be the width of a misfiring neuron

The sun is shining. Summer is here and with it the sound of laughter, enjoyment and togetherness. Humanity in Britain sure knows how to show up when the weather permits it.

My Brother and I are enjoying a day of wandering about Southampton - our hometown. Soaking in the rays whilst grabbing a bite to eat, accompanied with a beer to wash it down. A welcome respite from our daily 9-5.

We stop at a set of traffic lights, when from behind we hear the light touch of a horn, letting out a meek toot, as an elderly woman pulls up on a mobility scooter to the right of Lee.

His body convulses. Head swivelling unnaturally to the left - face down, chin brushing along his chest before snapping to the right.

He stares down at the elderly woman and out of him comes a harsh roar.

"FUCK OFF WHEELS!"

Everyone on either side of the road is captured by the moment. But before the woman has time to pause - to analyse and weigh up what has just occurred. Lee is already giving her a handsome and disarming Cheshire grin - a tactic I've seen him deploy on similar occasions.

It's the kind of smile that melts a heart - a look that exposes the pure and innocent side of his soul.

A soul that would see no harm come to anyone, or anything - including the wasp that stung him earlier.

"Fuck, I hope that wasn't a bee... they die when they sting..."

Lee and the woman's eyes meet, as he holds his hands up, open palmed.

"Sorry about that. I have Tourette's."

The silvery haired woman's nose wrinkles with affection - designed to put him at ease. She speaks reassuringly;

"That's alright dear - we've all got a bit of something..."

The moment concludes with the low hum of her mobility scooter, as we watch her ride off into the distance.

This was a common conclusion to most of my Brother with the tics outbursts. Most people would see that no harm was meant, would let the moment go and then move on with their day, not sparing another thought.

But now, we have witnessed a societal shift.

Acceptance of his condition has appeared to take twenty years work of steps backwards - education and awareness slipping away from the public psyche overnight. The night in question being this year's BAFTAs - where John Davidson, a long time sufferer and campaigner of Tourette's let off an uncomfortable tic, that took form of the N-word - whilst two Black gentlemen (Michael B Jordan and Delroy Lindo) were presenting an award.

A brief misfire of neurons ushering forth one of the most controversial words before a global audience.

The reaction was met with an awkward silence - both from the audience and from the gentlemen on stage.

Bated breath anticipating a reaction.

Such a racial slur carries immense historical violence. It is not simply just "a word". For the Black community, it connects them to the horrors of their past.

Slavery, lynching, segregation, humiliation and apartheid.

The type of word that when it's heard - even if involuntarily - will land like a punch of social injustice. Perceived acceptance and equality earned shattered. History repeating.

Therefore the hurt and response to this word - even in this moment - is valid and understandable. Likewise, no one has the right to diminish the lived experiences of this community.

This event is a conundrum. John Davidson was there to be honoured, due to the success of the film based on his struggles through life with his condition - the movie, *I Swear*.

A movie that has received critical acclaim and is arguably the jewel in the crown of John's lifelong activism. A finely placed emerald that acted as a green light to all sufferers of this disability, that he has helped herald in the time of acceptance.

Unfortunately, this outburst ushered forth the usual dismissive comments, questions and disbelief - the same adversity he has had to combat and navigate his entire life.

Inclusion, it seems, becomes complicated when two forms of harmed communities collide.

The word being thrown here, was due to a lack of control due to a mental disability - one that has unwittingly triggered race-related historical trauma.

Both versions of pain here are valid - and both marginalised groups deserve equality and acceptance in this moment.

A person cannot choose the colour of their skin - just like someone cannot choose what disability may afflict them.

Both groups have a right to safety in society - yet, post this event, we seem to have entered into some kind of weird oppression Olympics.

I would urge all those reviewing this event and providing commentary to approach it with unconditional positive regard and to take a second to reframe, before casting judgements. This is not a case for exchanging blows - it's a time to recognise an overlap of sensitivities.

If we as a species truly care about achieving equality, then it by definition must include uncomfortable edge cases - true inclusion is tested when two vulnerable groups collide, so it's important to recognise both sides and analyse the detail.

Tourette's comes with harmful words in small cases - like my Brother and Mr. Davidson - but it's the intent and context that truly matter above all.

Following the BAFTAs, Davidson has been brandished a racist - with people that have minimal education on how his condition works, citing that what he said was purely a, "reflection of what is in his heart".

I beg to differ and seek to offer an alternative view. These words don't reflect any type of poison in his or my Brothers heart - they echo the ugliness that has been perceived in a society that has failed minority groups at a systemic level.

When you look at it through this lens, you can see that both of these vulnerable groups are victims of failing systems that are full of hate - hate we should be coming together in all instances to abolish.

That night at the BAFTAs was a shame - but ultimately a failure of safeguarding for everyone involved.

I certainly don't feel it should usher in the sentiments that some have brought forward since - such as the removal or segregation of a disabled person so that people can be protected from, "hearing that shit."

Same as I don't believe recommendations of separating those in the Black community from events where those with Tourette's are present.

No, now is not the time to bring back any form of segregation, with aims to exclude *anyone*. We must say no to exile and context manage situations when they occur instead. The solution cannot be removal of either party. Instead the solution is to educate, prepare and contextualise quickly when something happens.

Pause long enough to ask: what was the intent?

I know that intent may not erase the impact, but impact will never erase context.

If we truly want a mature society that wants inclusion and equality, then we must learn to hold both.

Intent and context.

Once we have completed this exploration and are satisfied of both the intent and context, the only task that follows is simply acceptance.

When it comes to my Brother some of his tics can be absurdly funny - and others brutally offensive.

Such as the time we were on a train travelling to London, sat near some German tourists, and he just couldn't contain himself from crying out, "help me, I'm a Jew." It was brutal - but once we explained the intent and context, they softened.

Other times have been hilarious, like the time a gentleman in the queue before us in a supermarket had walked into the self service area, only to find all the tills were in use - forcing him to walk outside briefly of the shop and setting off the alarm.

"STOP, THIEF!" Cried out my Brother, as his tic forced him to hammer his foot down and let out a piercing whistle. The poor man stopping and protesting to the security guard that was on him, that he had every intention of paying.

That one had me laughing the entire length of the High Street after.

Both events were neurological misfires. Both had no intent - and in both moments, we went straight into explaining the context.

Despite the humour, it's hard for many to genuinely appreciate for those with Tourette's that their body betrays their core values in public. After every tic, a quiet humiliation follows.

Lee is often devastated when his tics hurt someone. The stress has sometimes translated his tics into physical violence against himself - punching himself in the face until he has a black eye.

An unfair and self-inflicted punishment.

Racial slurs carry history - this cannot be dismissed.

But neither can a disability.

Words can wound deeply - but that doesn't always mean the person who said them had a choice.

We can't and should not ignore history - just as we shouldn't ignore or punish those with a condition that presents via involuntary symptoms.

We must ensure we move to understanding before we move to judgement.

Rise above the misfiring neurons.

Because humanity can do better than trading suffering for suffering.

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