

The Education of a Young Liberal

Alex Zrenner, Trinity 2017

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I am a liberal and have always been. It has been a definitive part of my identity, and while I have not been willing to give it up, my identity as a liberal has evolved.

Some of my earliest memories are of talking politics with my dad, a Chicago Democrat, at the dinner table. When I was six years old, I voted for Al Gore in the Time Kids Magazine poll –because his name was “Al” and mine is “Alex” – and I felt validated because Dad was voting for him too. You can imagine my excitement as a fourteen-year-old with Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential run: the first black nominee and an advocate of national health insurance, bank regulation, and a Keynesian stimulus package. My excitement quadrupled when I voted for President Obama at age eighteen. I was a proud old-school FDR liberal.

Then I came to Duke and discovered that my liberalism was no longer enough.

As a First Year, I participated in Project Change with the Kenan Institute for Ethics. Liberalism now seemed to revolve around systems of oppression and power, topics foreign to this Midwestern-suburban girl who grew up in my family’s liberal bubble. I saw how minorities in Durham faced systematic disadvantages, even with things as simple as food access. I heard other girls at PChange describe how they protect themselves from sexual assault every day. I felt simultaneously powerless and culpable.

Liberalism now meant advocating for privilege theory. I was told that, as a white person, I couldn’t understand the racism people of color experience, and that I should acknowledge my privilege and listen. So I shut up and listened – quite an achievement for someone as talkative as me. But as a woman, I could understand and experience sexism. I could speak out and demand respect. So I spoke out.

But this modern liberalism still didn’t feel like enough. It didn’t seem to fix anything. With regard to race, I was told just to listen. As I listened, I felt ashamed. I had ignored the harms of racism for so long and now I wanted to engage. But I didn’t know how. So I stayed silent. With regard to gender, my speaking out shut others down. I remember my dad saying, “I don’t understand why you need feminism when I never treated you differently.” My dad raised me as Alex Zrenner, not as a girl; so when I said I needed feminism, he heard: “You failed.” So we stopped talking about it.

While I was still proudly liberal, I was deeply confused. What was I supposed to do now? This was not a rhetorical question. When Chimanda Ngozi Adichie spoke at Duke, I asked her, “As someone with privilege, and having acknowledged and accepted that, what do I do now?” At first, I was breathless because I got to talk to Chimanda Ngozi Adichie, who I deeply admire as a writer and woman. But I could not shake the feeling of

dissatisfaction. She told me we had *not* acknowledged privilege yet. I ended up feeling stupid for asking.

I was more confused than ever about how to address race, but at least with gender, I had an idea. Since I felt silenced as a person with racial privilege, I wanted to create dialogue with men about gender: I wanted to have a *real* conversation with my dad about sexism. By chance, I found John Stuart Mill's theory of the marketplace of ideas, which Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. summarized as, "The best test of truth is the power of thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market." While many see the marketplace of ideas as an incubator of hate, I see it as a solution.

The marketplace of ideas is Mill-liberalism, and it is the bridge between my FDR-liberalism and modern liberalism. Mill-liberalism tries to ensure that we discover the *truth*. As an economics major, I know that the market is usually efficient, but as an FDR-liberal, I know it can also fail. Modern-liberals think this marketplace has failed because it permits hate, and so we must fix the market. They correctly identify hate as the problem and that this is the result of some failure. However, they misidentify the failure itself. It is a failure of dialogue, not the market. The solution to hatred is not "fixing" the marketplace; the solution is dialogue. Mill had assumed there was dialogue in the marketplace, and his liberalism rejoices in the complexities, nuances, and even contradictions in dialogue. The marketplace of ideas thrives on complexity and it suffers under simplicity.

My liberalism was old-school. But modern liberalism challenged me, and I cannot ignore the severity of hatred modern liberalism identifies. My liberalism is my Dad's. It's progressive. And it's complicated.