

A Closed Mind

When I first arrived at Duke, I was convinced I was right. Not about everything, but what I considered to be the most important things, the *moral* things. I was convinced that when Martin Luther King Jr. spoke about the long arc of justice, it paralleled to my own life. Though the moral conclusions I had arrived at were not the ones I had grown up believing, the fact that I had transcended them allowed me the liberty to evangelize to others. I viewed this personal renaissance of ideas the same way my Public Policy professor viewed her course; if only someone could explain the ideas well enough, all intelligent, rational people could agree on them. One of us turned out to be right.

It was well into my second year at Duke when I realized I hadn't been right. Instead, I had just been righteous. The difference between the two words; tucked away in the gap of the e and soft s, ended up completely changing the way I approached my education, my worldview, and the people around me.

I can trace the rigid beginnings of my moral views to when I was fifteen. I grew up in India and I was fortunate enough to go to an incredibly diverse high school, one that afforded me the ability to meet and think alongside people from different cultural backgrounds. I had endless late night discussions on my values, ranging from feminism (where everyone was a feminist) to civil liberty (where everyone agreed absolute liberty was essential). I assumed because we looked and talked differently from one another, we represented the full length of the moral spectrum. I failed to see this consensus as a worrying lack of intellectual diversity, and instead,

used it as a stand-in for discussion. When I encountered people who didn't agree with me, I wrote them off arrogantly, as people who hadn't thought as deeply or rationally about these issues as I had.

When I arrived at Duke, the rationality and intelligence test I had formulated no longer held up. I was surprised, even hurt, each time someone I considered intelligent and even more importantly, a friend, claimed that military intervention or free markets were necessary, espousing a view I thought of as regressive. I began to occupy a "higher" moral ground that became a retreat from things I didn't know. Before college, I had easily used heuristics to frame people: liberals as broad minded, progressive individuals; conservatives as close minded people cut off from reason.

At college, I was forced to untangle this false dichotomy. I couldn't write off my peers - people who I sat next to in class and who were intelligent in every way I had previously defined intelligence - as irrational. When my peers argued intelligently against my beliefs, I experienced cracks in the moral foundation I had previously assumed concrete. I began to realize that the people I thought of as "on my side" didn't have exclusive control over good ideas.

My moral high ground dissolved completely when I became best friends with someone who I had established as the antithesis of myself: a born and raised religious, conservative Republican. As our friendship grew, and I became more candid and vulnerable in it, I could no longer picture the caricature I had once envisioned in my head of "the other side".

Only through our friendship, born out of an education that had placed us both in the same environment, did I realize that I had become a twisted mirror to the conservative caricature I built in my head and detested. I discovered that “close minded liberal” was a category of people. Even worse, I belonged in it.

Talking to a conservative challenged me, forcing me to reason better and to hold myself to a higher standard. I haven't changed any of my political or moral views since I've come to Duke. Instead, by talking to someone so different from me, I have refined them, becoming a better version of the seventeen year old who stepped onto Duke's campus. I'm trying to force myself to give people's opinions the same introspection and respect that I would allocate to mine.

My new hope when I enter conversation is no longer to convert anyone or to presume they fit into a preconceived basket in my head. Instead, I intend to come out of the conversation a better version of myself, because I understand now that listening to viewpoints I disagree with serves to strengthen my own thinking. I try to no longer presume, but I hope that the other person enters the conversation with the same open mind.