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WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF CIVIL DISCOURSE AND FREE SPEECH?

I've got some strong opinions of my own. And without my freedom of speech, I wouldn't be able to share those opinions without fear of retaliation. But I think we sometimes become so obsessed with our own ability to speak that we forget to or even refuse to listen to others as part of a civil discourse.

I have a story to share. It's not a nice story, but it's worth considering.

While providing resources to some people in need during a routine event, I overheard a white woman having a polite discussion with someone over her distaste of black men. "If a black guy came around here, I'd f***ing run!" she exclaimed, almost in glee. Walking over to her, I mentioned that race is not an indicator of how one acts and perhaps she should consider that when making inferences about another person. With deadpan sarcasm, she replied, "Oh sorry, I was raped by a black man last night."

How do you respond to that? I can tell you how I responded: I was stunned silent. What I should have done is asked her if she wanted to seek medical attention or needed a rape kit; this wasn't the first time I've met someone who had been sexually assaulted. But I was overwhelmed by the social issues that all intersected at this event, of socioeconomic class, of sexual assault, of racial profiling, that I needed a moment to process what

I just heard. I'm embarrassed to recall that event, because it demonstrated how unprepared I was to handle the depth and nuance of discrimination and violence regarding all these issues. I had studied poverty, racism, sexism, each extensively, yet when they all merged to a single convergent point, I could do nothing.

I think about that moment often. It's a moment that drives my advocacy. For though I take pride in my ability to speak my mind, not everyone has the privilege of being heard. One's participation in civil discourse is proportional to their socioeconomic standing, and the stories of the impoverished, of those I've befriended and regularly talk to, are reduced to ash by the power of their oppressors. Novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie once said that "Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person but make it the definitive story of that person." I've heard enough of the singular story of my friends being inhuman, uncouth, and undeserving of the luxuries so many of us take for granted.

So I've made it my responsibility to participate in the general civil discourse, to embody free speech on behalf of my friends whose stories they want shared. That includes the woman who, given her traumatic experience, feels justified in her contempt of black men. For I may not agree with what you have to say, but I will fight for your right to not only say it, but also to be heard.