



## **SCOPE VISITING SCHOLAR PRACTICING PREVENTION TIP APRIL 2013**

Jason A. Laker, Ph.D.

This month I have been thinking about politics or, more particularly, identity politics and the ways in which we discuss and deal with questions of who we are individually, or as geographic, virtual or identity communities. At the moment, social and news media are especially abuzz about legal proceedings and legislative debates on gun rights and marriage rights. There have also been some shocking incidents covered in the news cycles locally, domestically and internationally (including some on college campuses) relating to gender violence, freedom of speech, religious liberties, agency with our bodies, racism and other consequential and controversial topics associated with identities.

To be sure, these are important issues that hold implications for individuals, families, communities, nations and the world. They are deeply personal, sometimes for obvious reasons and other times for symbolic or even as yet unclear reasons. As such issues arise, we also produce and consume associated buttons, bracelets, ribbons, icons, viral memes and downloadable posters. Rachel Maddow and Rush Limbaugh see ratings spikes. Celebrities chime in, politicians and protesters hold rallies and we surround ourselves with philosophically compatible friends, in person or virtually, to declare our beliefs and make them “Facebook official.” We are, after all, social creatures.

It is certainly not a criticism or surprise that we—and our students—tend to spend more time listening to or hanging out with like-minded people. But, I wonder if we have gotten into the habit of immediately carving out reductionist corners, retreating to and staying in them. I wonder if we have taken mostly to lobbing missives and catch phrases at the other perceived corners with the fervent visceral belief that we—and our respective corners—are under constant attack.

When I went to college, I pursued a Broadcasting major with the intention of becoming a television personality (I contend that is still a possibility, but I digress). I will never forget the two lessons one of my professors emphasized in her lectures. This may sound hard to believe, but I swear it’s true. She said, *“Always remember that the audience is stupid”* and *“if it bleeds, it leads.”* The former encouraged very basic and non-technical writing, without nuance; the latter emphasized placement of the most violent or otherwise disturbing stories first, to draw in the audience. If you want to know why the media tends to portray issues in dualistic and overly simplistic ways, these lessons might answer the question.

Of course, there is the argument that we WANT the “skinny” or “bottom line” delivery, forcing it to be provided that way. I am not unsympathetic to this argument. After all, thinking deeply about something, mulling for a while and contemplating subtle shades of meaning can be time consuming and difficult. Sometimes just expressing the wish to spend more time thinking can elicit criticisms and accusations that we are intentionally stalling, that our solidarity or sympathies are questionable or that our ethical beliefs are hypocritical. Ironically, even people and communities with whom we closely identify can quickly become impatient and marginalizing.

This has become even more the case during my lifetime so far. Cable television became widely available when I was in middle school and the channels have proliferated exponentially. I completed college before email, Web, IM, texts, Facebook, Tumblr, Youtube or even affordable cell phones became commonplace. I

question the wisdom of comment sections of online media, wondering whether they actually constrain the engagement they purport to invite. To me, this is not unlike the stories of people flipping off a fellow driver only to be mortified with shame to find out it is their neighbor.

I will refrain from waxing nostalgic, bemoaning the fate of the Digital Native. Suffice it to say that these days there are far more windshields to hide behind, or perhaps more accurately to lull us into psychological distance from each other. This leads me to this month's Practicing Prevention Tip, which is connected to something about humans that actually hasn't changed. We continue to be curious and social creatures who have a deep need to know and be known by our fellow human beings. I would argue that most (not all) identity politics become hurtful—and hateful—due to this unmet need.

This month, I would like to challenge each of us to make an intentional commitment to deep listening and focused attention to others, and to ourselves. There are many ways to weave this practice into daily life. For example, invite others (colleagues, students, fellow passengers, protesters, etc.) to share their experiences of the issues that animate them. How did the person giving out leaflets or preaching in the Quad first come to this effort? For the student in your office or at the cafeteria table, when in their lives have they really cared about something, and what was that like for them? When talking with someone about a social identity (e.g. race, class, gender, sexual identity, ability, age, etc.), take a moment to ask about intersections with other aspects of their identity.

The next time you are a witness to or participant in a conversation about apathy in the school or community, go make a personal invitation to someone to become involved, ideally citing an asset or talent that you noticed in them. Ready for something harder? Take your irritating colleague bowling and have your first laugh together. For the truly advanced, for every physical urge to check Facebook or your Smartphone, spend three minutes looking directly at, and listening to, someone who is actually nearby. It will feel scary simply because it has become so unusual. Our identities become clearer, our humanity becomes richer, when we listen and when feel heard. For the finale, take yourself out to lunch, coffee or tea or for a walk, and think about whether your wish for something to become legal or illegal is really ambitious enough, or whether you have been lulled into psychological distance from other people of conscience, or even from yourself?

*Jason Laker is a tenured, Full Professor in the Department of Counselor Education within the Lurie College of Education and a Salzburg Fellow at San José State University in California. Dr. Laker currently serves as the 2013 Inaugural Visiting Scholar for SCOPE.*

For more information about Dr. Laker and his role as Visiting Scholar with SCOPE, please visit <http://wearescope.org/resources/visiting-scholar/>.

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