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# A Moment of Grace in a Season of Pain

We can give second chances, and when we do, we can sometimes see that an enemy isn't an enemy at all.

By David French

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Earlier this week I witnessed a moment that brought tears to my eyes, exposed the immense amount of hurt that lies just beneath the surface of American life, and demonstrated the necessity of grace.

It involved my wife, Nancy. A local Christian college called Williamson College invited her to speak to students on the topic of "loving your enemies." The inspiration for the talk was a story she wrote for the *Washington Examiner* last December.

Nancy was slightly apprehensive before the speech. The last time she'd visited a local Christian college, a man rushed up to her after she had been honored in the college's chapel, got in her face, and yelled "F*** you and your husband. You're ruining America." It was unnerving.

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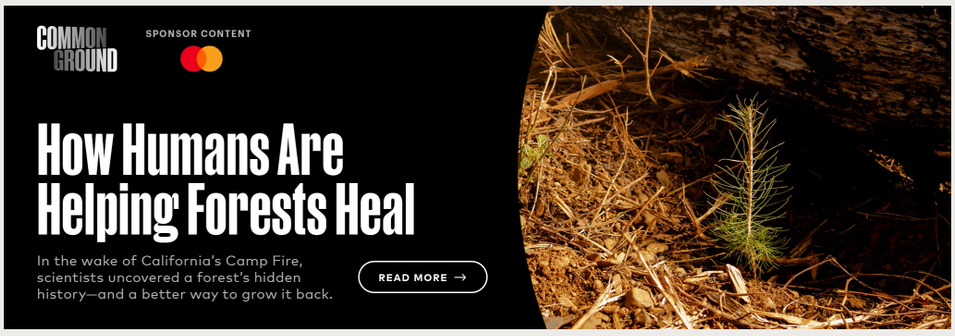


But this was supposed to be a feel-good speech about overcoming political differences. I'd urge you to read Nancy's essay. The story is remarkable. In 2016 both Nancy and I experienced a profound rupture with the political party we'd belonged to our entire adult lives. She grew up a young Republican in Henry County, Tennessee. She worked for Tennessee Republican Lamar

Alexander when he was a presidential contender.

She was a ghostwriter for Ann Romney, Sarah Palin, and a host of other Republicans. In 2006 we formed a volunteer group called Evangelicals for Mitt, which attempted to answer evangelical questions about Mitt Romney. In 2012 we were both Mitt Romney delegates to the Republican National Convention.

Then 2016 happened, and everything changed. While we were both Never Trump conservatives and rejected Donald Trump early in the presidential campaign cycle, nothing hit Nancy quite so hard as the combination of the *Access Hollywood* tape and the multiple, corroborated allegations of sexual assault and sexual harassment against Trump.

Nancy is a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. And after the *Access Hollywood* scandal, she told her story in *The Washington Post*. A Vacation Bible School teacher molested her when she was 12 years old. It turned out that the man was a serial abuser. Nancy's pastor later told her that 15 women in the congregation had complained about him. Yet nothing decisive was done.

He was never prosecuted. He was never truly punished. He left Nancy's church and later coached girls' basketball at a Kentucky high school.

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My wife came of age politically during Bill Clinton's administration, and she was repulsed by his sexual scandals. She was disgusted by the Democratic Party's defense not just of a serial philanderer but of a man who'd faced his own corroborated reports of sexual assault.

She'd thought the Republicans had a moral spine. After all, they'd impeached Clinton. The Southern Baptist Convention had passed a resolution in 1998 highlighting the importance of moral character in public officials.

Then came Donald Trump. Nancy choked on Republican hypocrisy. She choked on the Church's betrayal of its own professed values. Her essay ended with these two paragraphs:

> Here's the truth. The GOP once was alive but is now dead. It confuses me to hear the values preached from the podium but ignored in real life; it feels odd to just repurpose a political party into an extension of the Trump Empire without acknowledging the values which had so recently dwelled there.

> My party—which should've been a place of a certain set of values—now shelters an abuser. I'm thinking of this when the GOP presses against me and asks me to close my eyes just one more time.

The reaction was volcanic. Close friends were supportive, but even members of our own congregation were angry at her. An elder confronted her after services. And vile voices online claimed she had "seduced" her molester.

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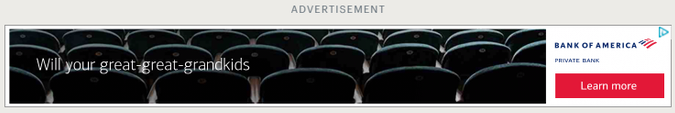


She stopped following people on Twitter who were cruel. She started following people who were kind. One of them was a woman named Kathy Kattenberg. But when she followed Kathy, she noticed something peculiar.

This person who was nice to Nancy went out of her way to constantly hector me online. She trolled me constantly. She hated my pro-life positions, and she hated my defense of religious liberty. She was relentless.

Early in the pandemic, Kathy was in distress. She tweeted that she was having trouble finding food. So Nancy reached out. It turns out that Kathy is disabled. She lives alone in New York, and she was struggling to get groceries delivered. Markets were out of basic goods. Delivery services were overwhelmed.

During 26 years of marriage, Nancy has kept exactly two New Year's resolutions: to always have mints and gum in her purse during church, and—this was much more important—to always respond to people in distress.

So Nancy activated. She worked with a pastor friend named Ray Ortlund and my former *National Review* colleague Kathryn Jean Lopez to find someone, anyone, who could shop for Kathy and find her groceries. It took time, but within a week, Kathy's apartment was overflowing with food, and a troll had become a friend.

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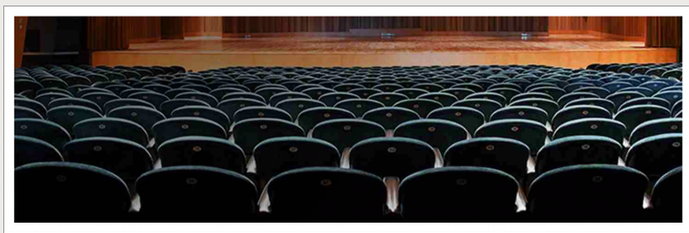


Kathy and Nancy are friends to this day, and I think that maybe (just maybe) Kathy has softened a bit toward me as well.

Nancy told that story Monday night in her speech at Williamson College, and she ended with an exhortation. Civility and tolerance, she said, were milquetoast compared with actual *love*. The lack of love is our nation's real problem. Incivility is a mere symptom. And when you love people who seem to be your enemies, she said, it turns out they might not be enemies at all.

I'm biased, but I thought it was a necessary message that was beautifully delivered. Plus, the crowd seemed to love her. She received sustained, enthusiastic applause. Then the questions came. A young man went first.

I had a hard time hearing what he said, but he sounded oddly aggressive. Nancy then leaned into the microphone and spoke directly to the questioner. "Sorry, did you just ask me if I love or merely tolerate the Vacation Bible School teacher who molested me as a kid?"

"Yes," he responded. That's exactly what he'd asked.

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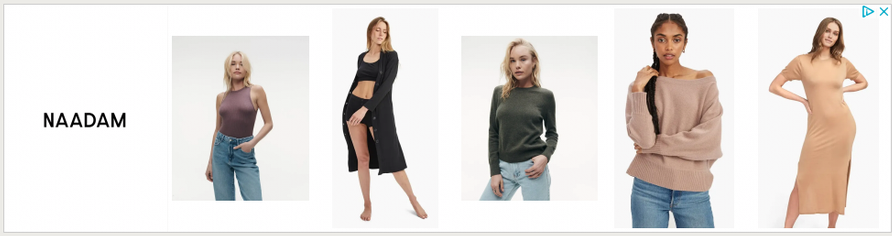


There was a gasp in the room. A number of women shouted out, "No!" and "You don't have to answer." Nancy absorbed the question like a physical blow. I could see her face change. She tried to speak, but words wouldn't come. Was that student *trying* to humiliate her?

Nancy tried to move on to the next question, but she couldn't continue. She handed the mic to her host and left the room. Immediately, three women followed her into the hallway. I left also, but by the time I got outside the room, Nancy and the three women were in the bathroom. I could hear the sound of crying, and it wasn't just Nancy in tears.

When she came out, she asked for advice. She was embarrassed that she'd left.

She told me that the women who were crying with her were also victims of abuse. I told her that if she could, she should return to the stage. At the moment, I told her the student was trying to hurt her, and it was important to not let the pain silence her.

I had no idea if that was good advice at the time. But Nancy decided to go back into the room. I knew it took every ounce of courage she had, because she'd just felt humiliated in front of the entire audience.

I didn't know what she was going to say. Everyone turned when she walked in the door. But before she could speak, the young man asked for the microphone again.

The audience was hushed, and they strained to hear what would happen next. However, this time his voice was different. He apologized. He said he hadn't meant to offend, and his question didn't come out right.

He paused for a moment. Then he revealed *he* was a victim of abuse, and *he* was struggling with how to read scripture that admonished Christians to love their enemies. He wasn't a troll at all. He was a hurting kid who had trouble expressing himself.

Nancy responded beautifully. She didn't just forgive him; she honored him. And she turned to the crowd and told them that there weren't just hurting people in this room; there were hurting people across the Church—victims of abuse at every level of Christian ministry. A moment that at first seemed profane and tainted by malice and cruelty turned sacred, enriched by love and compassion.

I'm sharing this story for three reasons. First, because it is profoundly sad that in that relatively small crowd, there were multiple women and at least one young man who were survivors of sex abuse. They're in every crowd. Christians can't look at abuse as something that happens in other places to other people. The survivors are all around us.

Second, it was moving to see the immediate bond between Nancy and the women who comforted her and wept with her. As one of the women told me, there is a verse in the 42nd Psalm that says "deep calls to deep." There is a beautiful and terrible fellowship that comes with suffering.

And third, we're so primed to see evil in others that we can miss their brokenness. In her Twitter persona, Nancy's new friend Kathy was an angry troll. In the offline world, she was alone and vulnerable. In his first question, a suffering young man seemed vicious. But he was uncertain. He didn't know how to ask what he wanted to ask, and the question came out wrong.

If Nancy had left—if she hadn't come back out on that stage and given the mic back to the person who'd just wounded her—we'd never know that truth. The telling of the story would be entirely different. We'd presume that he was malevolent. But in an act of grace, Nancy gave him a second chance, and everything changed.

I know there are evil people online. I know there are evil people who are cruel up close and in person. But sometimes what seems like cruelty is really loneliness, or confusion, or heartbreak. We define each other by our worst moments and withhold forgiveness.

But we should forgive. We must forgive. Otherwise this nation of broken people will keep breaking each other. Pain can look a lot like anger, and when we know that to be true, we can take risks. We can give second chances, and when we do, we can sometimes see that an enemy isn't an enemy at all, but another struggling person who needs healing and grace. There must be mercy in the public square.

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