

I am sure you are all well aware of the attempted assassination of Representative Giffords and the mass murder of some of her constituents.

It is not surprising this happened in Arizona, a state that has become ground zero for anger, hatred, and a disdain for the public sphere and democratic civic life. But, unfortunately, Arizona is but a signal example of where much of the rest of the country is headed. In my view, it is best to stand and oppose the erosion of our social contract at ground zero, as well as everywhere else in the country.

The current state of our country is, in my view, due to a variety of interconnected factors. Much of our media, businesses, and politics prefer spin and deceit to truth. We pursue short term gain and profit over long term goals. Many Americans believe the world is the way they desire it to be—or, at least, that it should be—just because they desire it to be that way. Many of us no longer believe we have any obligation to others as fellow citizens or even fellow human beings. The term “social justice” is viewed by people like Glen Beck as a “Communist/ Fascist” idea.

It is a regular conceit of our media that the vitriol and violence-laden speech from our politicians, media, and citizens comes from “both sides”. But this is, as we all know, simply a lie. Right wing extremists on radio, television, and in politics continuously demonize others as traitors and call for action against such “traitors” in violence laden terms. No such rhetoric has been heard from the “other” side. In fact, today’s Sarah Palin, Glen Beck, and Rush Limbaugh fed right wingers do not even deserve the name of conservatives or Republicans as these terms were understood by people like Dwight Eisenhower, Sandra Day O’Connor, or even Barry Goldwater.

It is easy for us academics to feel we have no real recourse in the face of large social transformations. But the sad fact is that we helped bring them on. While there is no parity between the right and left in terms of today’s hatred and violence, academics, many of whom are liberal, are not innocent. We have consistently refused a role—and indeed an obligation—to communicate beyond our specialties in an attempt to influence the larger course of our society. Academic knowledge has, thus, often had little real impact, even decades after it was developed.

However, there is a larger problem in my opinion. Many left wing academics have shared with today’s right wing a disdain for simple empirical realities. They have shared a view that there is no truth and that claims to truth are, in reality, the postures of power or desire. The right wing has sought to shut down multiple perspectives in an attempt to dictate their own ideology as “truth”. Many academic “postmodernists” have sought to keep all perspectives always open in an attempt to undermine any “single truth” in the name of their ideology.

However, in my own view, the most basic claim that science or, indeed, academics, can make is this: The world bites back. People and societies who confuse spin and ideology for truth always, in the end, get bitten by the world, which often refuses to dance to the tune of human spin, ideology, and lies. Truth is not some “master narrative”. It is a simple human convention, in the final analysis, to abandon claims when the world makes it manifestly clear they are dangerous. That is exactly why we do not put our hands in the fire. Of course, some “hard core facts” can, in the long run, turn out to be false, as we get more evidence. Nonetheless, rational, moral, and sane humans agree that, by and large, it is best, in general, to “go with” hard core facts, since in the vast majority of cases humans who regularly ignore them have been victims of the Darwinian lottery.

People who believe in truth in this sense, also believe in the moral standing of giving evidence for one’s claims, rather than statements of desire, self-interest, or ideology. Furthermore, democratic citizens see giving evidence and empirical arguments for their views as the foundation of democracy and the very thing that historically brought down authoritarian regimes and ensured the end of slavery and many other human ills.

I never thought I would live long enough to see the day when the simple act of giving evidence and engaging in argument, rather than violence, spin, and public relations, is a matter of moral, political, and social survival. But it is. Though many academics have themselves battered this simple act in the favor of their own political spin and careerism, it is an act that is becoming extremely rare in our public life. Recent research even shows that people respond only emotionally and not with reason to arguments about politics and society. It is rarer and rarer that Americans hear contrasting views and realize what the arguments actually are for and against their desires, self-interest, or the propaganda they have immersed themselves in today’s media and political life.

Academics are the people who should stand for evidence, argument, and a healthy respect for the world when it speaks back. Such a “form of life” was, perhaps, in the past, too mundane to be of much wide impact in a healthy society. But today, it is a moral stance, a stance that many, including some trendy academics, disdain.

In my view, we have reached the moment when it may be that only academics—long disdained as specialist pin heads—can save us. But not by “business as usual”. It is time to profess the truth. The earth is not less than 10,000 years old. Humans and dinosaurs were never on the earth together. Obama was born in the United States. Public health care, whether it is a good or bad idea, is not a Socialist, Fascist, or Communist idea as these terms have been understood for decades. Not all—not even most—illegal immigrants are drug mules. Nothing in the New Testament remotely supports the claim that Christianity is about getting rich. Liberals are not traitors

because they are liberals. Government is neither good nor bad, rather good government is good and bad government is bad and we should debate which is which.

The man who attempted to assassinate Representative Giffords believes that the government is trying to control us through controlling grammar. Of course, conspiracy theories about government of any form being evil are now a dime a dozen on the right. But this insane man is right in one way about the importance of grammar, or, at least, language. Any society that stops trying to shape its words on a curve to truth in the sense of respecting the world, and seeks only to shape language for greed, deception, and self-interest will, in the end, hear and hear powerfully from that world. Let us hope, as well, that it will hear from us.