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Let's Stop Glorifying Tribalism—It Doesn't Serve Us Well

By Michele Gregoire Gill
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(Photo by Brendan Church at Unsplash)

Yet again, one of my Facebook groups has erupted into an often mean-spirited debate about whether someone *really* is (fill in the blank).

For instance, a chronic fatigue group has become sharply divided since one of its key members is now “cured,” so many are saying she never really had CF in the first place. And Facebook posters are arguing over who belongs to their community. Over and over I see this dynamic, where members are suddenly kicked out of—or shamed into—leaving

a group (online or in real life) due to not being a true believer/member/victim of that group.

And the exclusion happens in so many diverse contexts: vegans who include honey in a recipe, weightlifters who use machines instead of barbells, feminists who exclude trans women from their concerns, natural health advocates who support vaccinations, religious groups in support or opposition of gay marriage, partisan voters who speak out for or against current immigration policy. It seems tolerance for differences seems to be at an all-time low.

Well, I am calling for the end of purity culture. Be your real self, even if—especially if—it doesn't fit into a nice box. Especially if it makes members of your group angry.

Stop hiding, you pro-choice evangelicals, you pro-environment, pro-peace conservatives, you sometimes vegans who love hot dogs and sneak cheese on weekends. Olly olly oxen free! I am calling you out, my religious conservative gay friends, you Christian yoga lovers, you literary writers who feast on paranormal romance when no one is looking.

Where are you, my feminist friends who secretly love when a man opens the door for you? Admit that you are conflicted about repealing Roe v. Wade, you sidewalk counselors. True believers, admit doubt. Patriots, admit that sometimes those leading the way are wrong.

Let me start by disarming myself of my own protections...let me tell you of my lack of purity. I am a health food nut who loves Cheetos, a deeply conservative Catholic who leans liberal Democrat, a tenured university professor with a cross tattooed on my wrist. I am a Christian who retreats at Hindu ashrams, a serious academic who likes wearing makeup, and a rabid feminist who defers often to my husband. I am an ambitious, restless career woman who consistently chooses family over professional accolades. I love the new Star Wars movies over the original trilogy, for goodness sakes—how much less pure can I be?

The world is not black and white. It is brightly colored, red-blue-yellow-green-aqua-magenta-turquoise.

The world is not black and white. It is brightly colored, red-blue-yellow-green-aqua-magenta-turquoise. Why pretend it's less beautifully complex than it is? We have become a reductionist society with all kinds of rules for who gets included and who doesn't, and we cannot talk to each other anymore without the risk of being alienated, outcast, exiled from our beloved groups, so we hide and we pretend we fit in perfectly, we agree 100 percent with the party line.

And that may be true for some of us, but not for all of us. And our pretending doesn't serve us, doesn't serve us our communities, or our country, or our world at all.

So speak out, dear pro-choice friends, and admit when you disagree with the extremes in the liberal party line. And those of you publicly pro-gun in all cases, confess that you secretly support firearm-purchase limits, even if your friends mock you.

Let us work to break exclusivity barriers, purity culture, definitions that limit and exclude, that make us “better than” another group.

Oh, internet! Oh, social media! Stop glorifying tribalism. Let us stop hating each other. Let’s learn to love in nuance and shades—not of gray—but of the glorious rainbow.

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