

Empathy for the demagogue

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On July 12, Donald Trump was a demagogue, a felon, a public figure with an immense capacity for dishonesty and vengeful grievance, and a former president whose administration sowed graft and cruelty and chaos with abandon. On July 13,

he was a frightened and physically wounded human being who narrowly evaded death at an assassin's hand. Even as he raised his fist in defiance, his vulnerability was palpable.

In the days since the shooting at a campaign event outside Pittsburgh—which killed one audience member and critically injured two others—Trump has continued to be all the things he was before. The threat he poses to democracy remains as real as ever.

In his email newsletter, journalist Anand Giridharadas criticizes Democratic politicians for their “unity statements” following the assassination attempt. “There will be no jabs” in such statements, he writes, “no stridency, maybe not even any truth.” After all, “we can't all get along if we're busy pointing over there and yelling, ‘That man is an existential threat to democracy!’ It's mean.” Giridharadas is clear that it is essential to reject political violence in no uncertain terms. But “it is possible to wish a man a speedy recovery” while also “insist[ing] on the urgency of doing every peaceful thing humanly possible to prevent him from driving the country even further down this road.”

Doing two things at once—rejecting violence against a human being while refusing to see him through rose-colored glasses—is conceptually simple, even banal. In practice it can be pretty complicated. While Giridharadas's critique is aimed at elected officials, the broader struggle goes far deeper than political optics. It is critical to retain our basic empathy for the vulnerable human we saw at that Pennsylvania rally. This empathy, this recognition of humanity, matters for our own psychological and spiritual well-being—for our souls. But it's just as critical to refuse to normalize Trump's reckless use of power, his evident lack of principle, the way he dominates and abuses others. It can be difficult to do both things, but it's necessary.

And from a Christian perspective the two are related, not opposed. The human brokenness Trump daily displays is staggering. Can we offer him our empathy, not because he's somehow earned special access to it—he manifestly has not—but because he's a broken human who badly needs grace? Can we genuinely wish him wholeness and healing precisely because he is so dangerous, so unfit to lead? Can we desire the good for a fellow human so clearly in want of it?

After the shooting, some Democratic officials called for a general toning down of political rhetoric. Giridharadas quotes Rep. Jared Golden of Maine, who spoke

against “hyperbolic threats about the stakes of this election.” It’s incumbent on leaders to speak with care, to eschew incitement to violence, and to condemn it when it erupts anyway. But in a democracy, the possibility of violence isn’t a reason not to speak the truth. It can’t be. The logical endpoint of such an argument is the end of all conflictual political speech, all difficult truth telling—which is to say, of democracy itself.

It is good for our empathy to be stirred by human vulnerability, even that of someone responsible for so much harm. It is not at all good to let this empathy spur us to treat Donald Trump more like an ordinary, decent, respectable political leader. He wasn’t one before he got shot, and he isn’t one now.