

Hermeneutic Ideals, Traumatic Realities – How Can We Cross the  
Divide to Meet One Another?

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In 2017, I published a paper in our San Francisco Jung Journal, entitled “Can We Have a Conversation? Against Totalization and Towards a Dialogical Hermeneutics.” Partly indebted to psychoanalyst Donna Orange’s book, “The Suffering Stranger: Hermeneutics for Everyday Clinical Practice,” I drew inspiration from hermeneutic philosophers, from Schleiermacher to Gadamer, as well as Jewish-Lithuanian philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas, seeking counsel on how to better connect across deepening divisions in America. I wondered what pains were seeking contact and what eruptions might ensue should we miss their call, as we unfortunately have? I also reflected on what Jungian and contemporary psychoanalysis might offer this endeavor, in terms of understanding and also praxis.

It’s three years later; clearly, our capacity to engage productively across the aisle, across our various tribes, has been limited. Rather than conversing, there has often been mocking or shouting. When we have tried to engage with the political other, perhaps a handful of times, it has often gone nowhere. We’re left demoralized and feeling such conversations to be futile. I hope that by the end of this presentation, we will have some more empirically-grounded hope in the possibilities emergent from hermeneutic engagement. We will examine the most unlikely of connections and transformations, with some better idea of what it takes to get there, as well as obstacles we face in even trying to doing so.

Looking back... Though far from symmetric, people on both sides have stoked fires of division in Trump’s America, with Trump both a symptom and catalyst of division. Our country and democracy are falling apart worse than I imagined three years ago. Only time will tell if this destruction paves way for something less structurally rotten – will this all be an alchemical *mortificatio* that precedes something

transformative, or not? As psychoanalysts, we strive to shine the light of consciousness into the ever-present dark, so let us reflect on our failures, in order to better address what in *our* shadow might contribute to this ever-widening gulf. In doing so, I hope we will discover and embody more constructive ways of approaching one another across the aisle, including the hateful other...

**Conversations...** the hermeneuts remind us that in engagement with one another we always start with misunderstanding, that arriving at mutual understanding is hard work, and that for authentic meeting to occur, we have to approach the other genuinely with the idea that they have something to say – all this with an openness on our part to being surprised and even changed. As North Indian Shaivite Tantrics have observed, the Divine can be found in shock and surprise. As clinicians, we know that when approached with sincere openness, the other registers this, which in turn slowly allows the development of trust and relatedness, along with the possibility of change.



*Image 1 Daryl Davis (pictured), who has helped over 200 people leave the KKK and other white power groups.*



*Image 2 Daryl Davis (right) and Scott Shepard (left), former Ku Klux Klan Grand Dragon.*



*Image 3 Daryl Davis with one of the 50 or so KKK robes that have been turned over to him by members who have resigned the organization.*

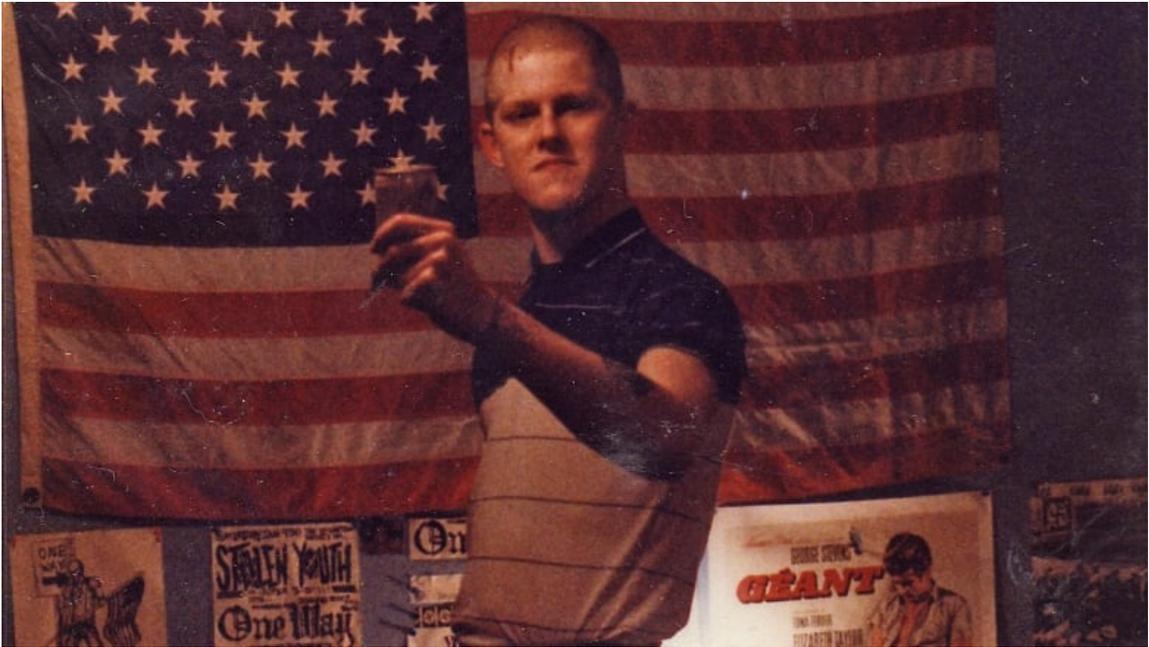
We live in a world of technologies that can give us an illusion of connection yet leave us more asunder, overwhelming us with dense social networks running at hyperkinetic rhythms, without the co-regulation & connection that face-to-face contact can facilitate, especially with regular meetings across longer arcs of time. The comments sections on Facebook and in response to online news can constellate groupthink on overdrive, with personal and collective complexes exploding and consuming left and right, spreading like wildfire, burning relational bridges, potential or actual. While technology can connect – look at us here today – clearly, technology and media also play a role in creating and sustaining division.

As much as I think about conversations, I sometimes find myself strained to have them outside clinical work and with those closest to me, as I'm often saturated with all that presses on me and now more than ever, we're all further estranged from one another due to COVID. Of course, realities of modern life are part of what Jungian analysis meets, offering a different rhythm and tempo in response, a space for contemplation and inner life to be met and cultivated.

Whether we reflect on the slow process of psychoanalysis, or as we shall soon visit, the example of those such as Daryl Davis, a black man who has helped 200 people leave the KKK and other white power movements, we are reminded of the magnitude of the effort; the patience and restraint required, the challenge in finding one's bearing in midst of affective storms, within and without, in order to slow down and listen and also challenge reflectively in effective, truly transformative ways...

Moving forward, Emmanuel Lévinas enriches what the hermeneutic philosophers offer us, warning us of what he termed **Totalization**, a process in which we reduce the complex, nuanced mystery of the other to some known (e.g., “the radical left,” Karen(s),

“white people,” and so on). When totalized, people feel misunderstood, defensiveness and polarization typically escalate; meanwhile, hope for conversation fades... There is a violence that emerges when we are unable to aspire towards the ineffable fullness of the sufferer in front of us, who, ultimately, presses for our compassionate concern.



*Image 4 Arno Michaelis as a white supremacist, founding member of Northern Hammerskins (later Hammerskin Nation), the most violent and well-organized neo-Nazi group in the United States. Subsequently, a founder of Serve 2 Unite and Life After Hate.*

As Arno Michaelis, founder and former white supremacist member of America’s largest racist skinhead organization shares, “The way to address implicit bias is to practice seeing the divine in every individual human, to see them as individuals rather than political abstractions... Far too many human beings of all backgrounds and political beliefs see kindness as weakness, as if it’s capitulation... when really it is a weapon. And one of the most powerful weapons against hate that we have.”



*Image 5 Kindness and compassion as a “weapon against hate”*



*Image 6 Pardeep Singh Kaleka, whose father Satwant Singh Kaleka was killed by a white supremacist from Hammerskin Nation*



*Image 7 Arno Michaelis, with his daughter. A single father, who feared going to prison like most of his peers had. Now he is uncle Arno to Pardeep's children. Pardeep uncle to his daughter. What can we learn from this?*

From what Michaelis has shared, he experienced a series of compassionate events that chiseled away at his own hate. A black man offered him a sandwich when he was hungry... a black cashier at McDonalds greeted him with a warm smile, even after registering the swastika tattooed onto his hand, said "You're a better person than that, I know that's not who you are." He felt powerless against the compassion. Now he's left

the organization and has become an anti-hate activist. There is good on both sides,<sup>1</sup> though sometimes it's buried in something vile and even dangerous. We have to be able to see it. It is in the progressive shadow that we often don't allow this space. *Why not?*



*Image 8 Arno Michaelis and Pardeep Singh Kaleka. Now they work together to combat hatred, under their organization, "Serve to Unite"*

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<sup>1</sup> I think of the critique that Trump received after Charlottesville, when he spoke of "Very fine people on both sides." There wasn't a necessary, clear condemnation first. As well, he had exploited hate, exacerbated polarization and galvanized white supremacist movements, hate crimes and organizations. Without genuine acknowledgement of the destructive shadow first, he deserves the condemnation he received for this statement. Yet, perhaps there was also some truth buried in these words. The former members of hate groups discussed in this paper demonstrate this; they certainly weren't "fine" at moments, but they did have good in them. If we aren't mindful of our own language and attitudes, how we hold things, we can lose potential space for possible redemption in the hateful other, as well as healing in the larger social fabric. What hope do we have then of healing our divisions and reaching the 74 million people who voted for Trump, who are still out there?



*Image 9 Arno Michaelis and Pardeep Singh Kaleka, involved with Serve 2 Unite.*



*Figure 10 Arno Michaelis and Pardeep Singh Kaleka. They eventually received a \$750K grant from the Department of Homeland Security. This was the first non-profit in North America dedicated to supporting individuals in leaving the violent far-right.*

We are invited to approach the suffering stranger with a spiritual, loving openness that is a difficult, ethical responsibility for us – yet one we often decline...

Sometimes, this is due to our own traumatic experiences, with resultant fear, distrust and other self-protective responses. We also fear legitimizing the hateful other, concerned that by giving space to their voice, further hurt and destruction will ensue. This brings to mind the patient who doesn't want to talk of their trauma, fearing that by giving it voice, there will be unleashed more negative feeling than can be borne, that by giving space, destruction will again ensue. Yet we know, in both types of cases, what happens when there is no safe space for expression and transformative engagement –

destructive forces erupt unconsciously leaving various forms of wreckage. Giving space to trauma is often agonizing, but when mediated well enough – with a dynamic rhythm between expression and regulating containment – the ultimate effect is the opposite of what was feared, there is *healing*... It can be similar with talking across the aisle, including with the hateful other, but we struggle to envision, much less create such safe spaces for expression.

As well, sometimes we become wedded to ideas, positions and movements that can give us cohesion, but when held rigidly, can sidestep bearing the confusion and difficulties inherent to the slower and more difficult work of genuinely meeting one another. We become entrenched in our particular tribalisms and attribute the source of trouble onto some other group, such that degrees of truth become inflated into monolithic and reified positions. This can leave us foreclosing our analyses, as well as totalizing one another, leaving us impoverished and crippling progress towards transformations we strive for. I think of Bion's work around Truth and Lies here. As local Jungian Analyst Barbara Sullivan writes, [Bion] "is trying to explore a fundamental paradox of the human condition: we need to face into the truth in order to be related and therefore in order to grow but we have to lie to ourselves both to titrate emotional pain... and to maintain our stability as ongoing, familiar selves in a reliable world."<sup>2</sup>

As analysts, what might we offer the collective, in addition to our direct clinical work? In our sessions, we're often reserved, patient, reflecting on what is invoked in us by the other, pausing and taking inner counsel before responding. Our patients can become intensely hateful at times, for instance, in midst of negative transferences, such

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, the lie that the violent white supremacist is pure bad/evil. It is easier to bear this than a more complex reality in which they may have committed heinous acts, yet *also* be survivors of heinous acts who are capable of redemption

that it becomes difficult to access necessary therapeutic love and concern. We know there is always a backstory that makes the anger, often displaced and projected, more understandable. We persevere, working hard to reach our patients, surviving the storm for their sakes. Hopefully, our personal analysis<sup>3</sup> allows us to better discern between various layers of our own emotional response, including personal and cultural complexes born of trauma.

We clinicians have deep experience as hermeneuts. Yet, outside the frame and *temenos* that holds the clinical work, it becomes harder to access these modes of relating as we are also vulnerable, struggling humans trying to contain ourselves in the midst of a variety of anxieties, susceptible to all the same polarizing and dissociative forces as the rest of our brothers and sisters across the world.

Perhaps we also carry unique liabilities... exquisite empathy that might cause us to feel more for the sufferer in front of us – in terms of particular oppressed groups closer to home – versus the sufferer across the line who threatens us and the groups we care for with his actions. We potentially identify with groups we find in need of protection and can find it harder to hold back totalization of groups threatening those we serve and ally with. Even if we have more nuanced or even dissenting views, we're often silent, as we have a desire to belong and we fear being shamed; who wants to be perceived as on the wrong side of things, or to experience the wrath of call-out culture, that can ruin relationships and livelihoods...

So-called “white” people, police and correctional settings are often totalized by progressives. This can unnecessarily alienate. While I'm heartbroken by sometimes

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<sup>3</sup> The original audience of this paper were analysts and other individuals who have been in psychoanalytic processes themselves, often multiple sessions a week over several years. In fact, this personal work is a prerequisite to becoming a psychoanalyst.

murderous police brutality, having worked with family members of victims, as well as other clearly broken and racist aspects of the criminal justice system, the vantage point from within reveals more nuance.

Of course, I hear stories that coincide with events that lead to justified anger and which rightfully energize our desire for reform. Yet, some patients also tell me jail saved their lives and that their incarceration feels a Divine intervention. We talk of the need for treatment versus incarceration, yet community mental health providers are aware of many who refuse treatment even when offered. In the correctional setting, at its best, new windows of intervention open for the captive and ambivalent potential patient. Perhaps at first, all they want is something to sleep or to reduce nightmares from bloodshed they've witnessed on the streets. Over time, I've been able to engage many such patients in meaningful, psychotherapeutic treatment – often their first such engagement. Likewise, some patients won't engage substance abuse treatment voluntarily, even when offered treatment versus custody. When therapists can support patients, during this period of forced institutional sobriety, in understanding their natural psychological rebellion towards something that feels forced, more conscious choice can occur. As a captive audience, there are novel possibilities for intervention that are difficult to understand for outsiders to these systems.

Being able to speak from experience of the light and shadow in such systems is more real and allows engagement with those across the aisle who work in these systems, or whose lives overlap with such systems. It requires some of us to work from inside, to understand what it is and incorporate this into our activism. In general, if we better hold nuance in our discourse, we can prevent alienation of those who could be more aligned with just causes and political choices, and perhaps could even become allies. This has

certainly been my experience working as a psychiatrist-analyst in the county jail, seeing slow transformations across time in aspects of the system and in the individuals who are not only constituted by, but also constitute such systems.

Some – though not all – of my patients have done terrible things. Sex trafficking, murder, domestic violence, pedophilic acts, brutal gang initiations, mass killings as child soldiers in some part of the world they’ve since fled... Many of them are haunted, hungry for a relational home to come to terms with what they’ve done, to thaw out their numbness and live more fruitfully. They are often totalized by many, including myself. I’m often struck by the contrast between the image I initially construct reading charges in some prominent case that makes the news, and the suffering stranger in front of me as a patient.

When I try to share from these experiences, working as an analyst psychiatrist in the county jail, with my progressive, activist friends, there often isn’t much receptivity – at these times, it seems to push against narratives that give cohesion, containment vessels for outrage in wake of the terrible events that saturate us in our daily, online news and social media consumption.

It is hard to reconcile truth and so much easier to totalize (lies), obviating responsibility for the more difficult task of *working* (Bion). Limit setting and consequence is necessary for the various transgressions named, but we also are invited to temper and minister this with loving concern. That is our challenge. It also serves our own goals if we succeed in turning the other from hate, the way someone like Daryl Davis has.

In terms of “white,” in my 2017 paper, I reflect on the danger of using this unfounded construct, arguing that it is part of a racist system which sustains a divisive

way of thinking and acting. That in addition to a fulcrum that galvanizes action, this can also become part of a system of divide and conquer that sustains the racist structure. One can speak of racism against blacks, without having to speak reductively of “whites,” “Karens” and so on. Let us remember what the great James Baldwin said, speaking of the mixing together of very different people - Irish, English, German, Italian, French, Swiss, Polish, Jewish and Indians:

“The crisis... in the white community is remarkable—and terrifying—because there is, in fact, no white community. This may seem an enormous statement—and it is...

It bears terrifying witness to what happened to everyone who got here, and paid the price of the ticket. The price was to become “white.” No one was white before he/she came to America.”

The erasure of rich, complex cultural and mythological roots continues to have a “terrible price,” it has consequence... I wonder about this when I reflect on what might be seeking contact in those that join “white power” movements. Might we gain more by letting go, or at least softening in our use of “white,” and opening into the shades, as we fight against the devastating violence of racism.



*Image 11 Christian Picciolini, former white supremacist and co-founder of Life After Hate.*

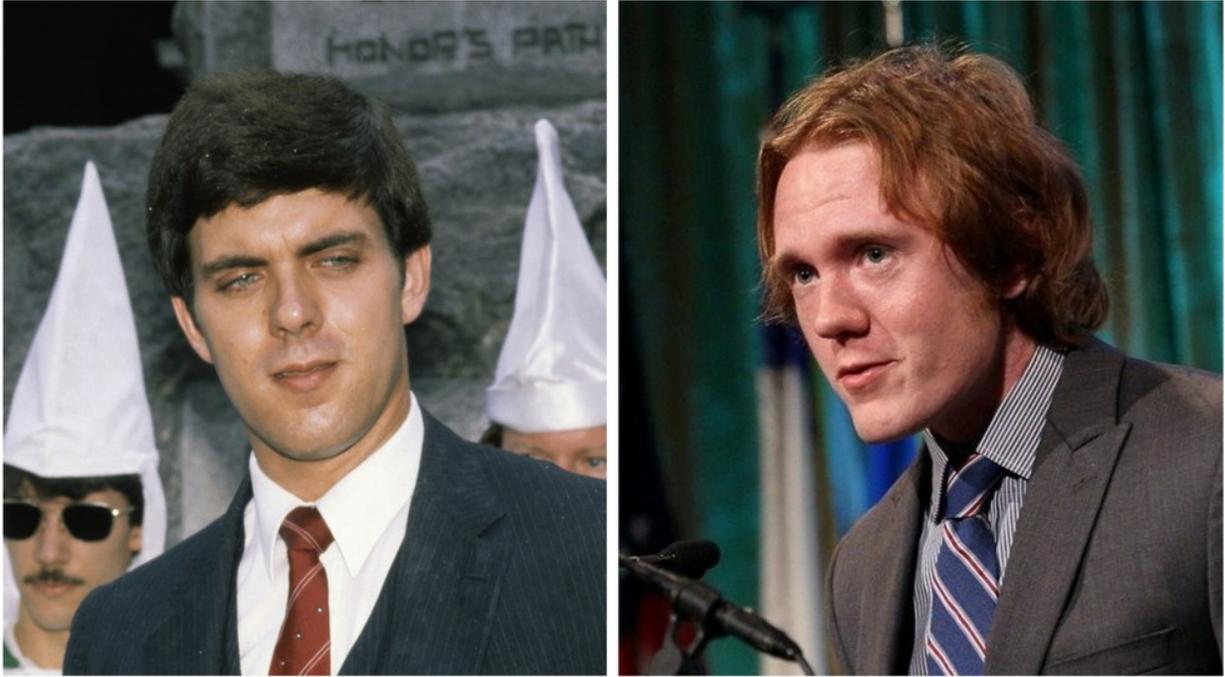
In researching who is drawn to white supremacy, I found an interview with former white supremacist, Christian Picciolini. He now runs an anti-hate organization that uses outreach and intervention strategies to help young men leave racist groups. He's shared that he was searching for a sense of family, as well as identity and purpose. One turning point came at a time he had opened a record store aimed at selling racist music... As they innocently wandered into his record store, he unexpectedly experienced *conversations* with those towards whom he espoused hate but was now truly meeting – Jewish, gay, black people. One was a black teenager, who also had a mother diagnosed with breast cancer, a mutual suffering which bonded them, opening a *relationship* that shattered his totalizations.

In terms of this type of contact, Picciolini had this to say:

*“I would certainly never put the burden on people of color to make that happen, nor would I encourage people who are traditionally victims of racist violence to make that leap. But I can tell you that receiving compassion from the people that we least deserve it from — at times maybe when we least deserve it — is often the most powerful thing. In fact, it might be the only thing I’ve ever seen truly break hate...”*

For the Jungians among us, isn’t part of what differentiates our approach that we look at the purpose or meaning in the pathology or symptom? This overlaps with the hermeneutic principle that the other has something they are trying to express. When the expression comes out in a violent, hurtful and especially murderous way, this typically becomes noise that drowns out our willingness to see or hear anything meaningful buried within. Certainly, our own wounding at the hands of racism, homophobia, misogyny and so on, both empowers us, serving as vital energy in our own activism, and also turns up the gain on the noise. Or we could say, in traumatized, paranoid-schizoid states of consciousness, we struggle to trust and be open to the other and are more inclined to see things in binaries, in black and white, such that we totalize the other and close space for the relatedness we need to heal.

It’s understandable to struggle to feel concern towards those that espouse so much hatred to principles and people we hold dear. Yet, in Totalizing we contribute to an emotional field that breeds division and undermines the very projects we strive to enact through our activism. We miss this in the cohesion we experience when caught in the grip of a fight-flight basic assumption, where we evacuate much of the bad onto the other and feel good about organizing within our own tribalism.



*Image 12 Derek Black and his father Don Black. Former KKK Grand Wizard and founder of Stormfront.*



*Image 13 Derek Black, son of Don Black who started Stormfront and godson to David Duke.*



*Image 14 Derek Black, Matthew Stevenson (an orthodox Jew) and some of the Jewish students who befriended him, having Shabbat dinner.*

In ways that are resonant with our own hermeneutic, clinical work, we have something to learn from individuals such as Daryl Davis, Pardeep Singh Kaleka and Arno Michaelis and others such as Matthew Stevenson, an orthodox Jew who alongside other Jewish students, befriended Derek Black, son of the former KKK Grand Wizard. The latter were ostracized from their own befuddled friends, yet through interrogating their own totalizations and accessing enough openness to invite Derek to Shabbat dinners, relationships formed and Derek was able to be challenged – and changed – by people who meant something to him. This led to yet another redemption, launching Derek Black (and his Jewish friends) into the world in a manner that is effective anti-racism.

I hope some of this invites us into self-inquiry and inspires us, as many of us are fatigued in trying to converse with the political other, now more than ever. More often than not, it hasn't gone well. The country is burning and we are worried, scared, fatigued, and angry. Perhaps we are closed at a time that we need to be open the most. Even for those of us trained and experienced in these matters, it's hard to stay in touch with the type of long-haul process required in order to make contact across seemingly insurmountable divides.

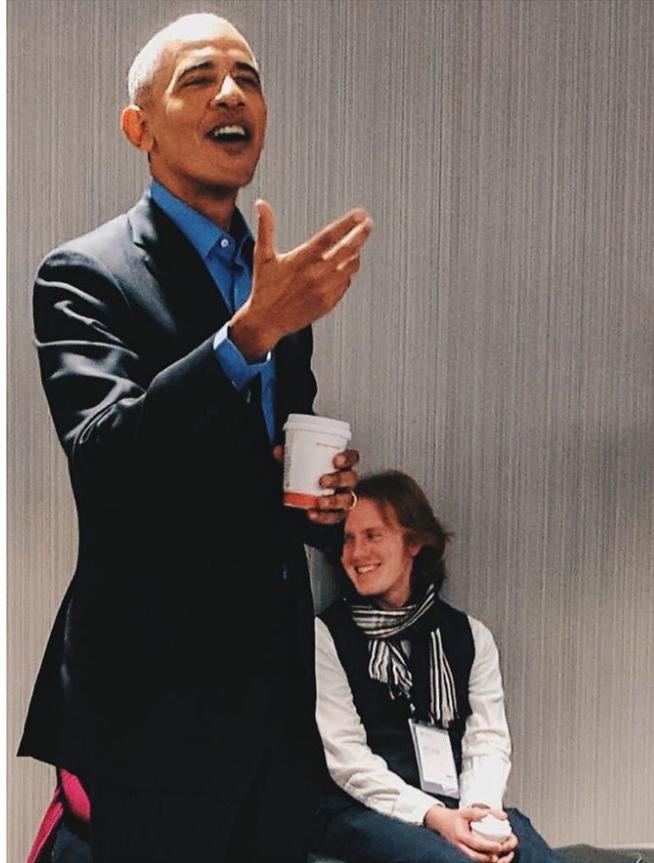
We will conclude with the example of Daryl Davis, another brave soul who held his positions, but also related across seemingly un-crossable chasms, with dramatic outcomes. Let's watch the video together to bring these words to new life:



As Conor Friedersdorf notes in his 2015 piece in the Atlantic – “The Audacity of Talking about Race with the Ku Klux Klan. Can Conversation help end bigotry?”:

“What Davis did makes a lot of people uneasy even when they fully grasp his intentions. I'm a relatively radical proponent of public discourse who respects his motives... and his results ... and it still makes me uneasy. But one needn't agree with the decision to engage literal Klansmen (or minimize the good work done by the NAACP) to conclude that if conversation has changed the minds of multiple leaders of what is arguably the most hateful group in American history, it could probably do... good in... less-extreme cases... I have some disagreements with Davis. This isn't the place for them. He should have us convinced, beyond... doubt, that conversation has a place in the anti-racism tool kit. [He's certainly] struck more blows against racism than I ever have.”

So, am I arguing for each of us to outreach the local KKK, neo-Nazis, or Trump supporters? Of course not. I do think it's a less ridiculous idea than it sounds and people such as Daryl Davis, Arno Michaelis, Pardeep Singh Kaleka, Christian Picciolini, Derek Black, Matthew Stevenson prove what can come of this. Less ambitiously, we can all be mindful of how we hold the political, even hateful other. How we hold and converse about the other matters, even in their absence. When we totalize, this radiates outward and contributes to a polarizing field, leaving us with chasms too large to bridge, in order for substantial healing and transformation to occur. In contrast, as hermeneutically-minded individuals, we see through the dark, toxic veneer that the other has something they seek to express. We realize that by making contact with this, by thoughtfully challenging anything less than this, we contribute to the healing we are so desperate for and which in turn is in our reach.



*Image 15 Derek Black and President Obama.*

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## **Additional Resources**

### **Organizations:**

<https://www.giftofourwounds.com/serve2unite>

<https://www.lifeafterhate.org/about-us-page>

### **Articles:**

<https://www.deseret.com/indepth/2020/7/13/21292134/racism-prejudice-white-supremacist-daryl-davis-conversion-change-conversation> (good video)

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/thenational/white-supremacist-sikh-friendship-fighting-hate-1.5107715> (good video)

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/03/the-audacity-of-talking-about-race-with-the-klu-klux-klan/388733/>

<https://www.npr.org/2018/09/24/651052970/how-a-rising-star-of-white-nationalism-broke-free-from-the-movement>

<https://www.vice.com/en/article/3ked5w/i-saved-my-schools-notorious-racist-from-white-nationalism>

### **Film:**

“Accidental Courtesy – Daryl Davis, Race and America:”

<https://accidentalcourtesy.com>

“Healing From Hate – Battle for the Soul of a Nation:”

<https://www.healingfromhatefilm.com>