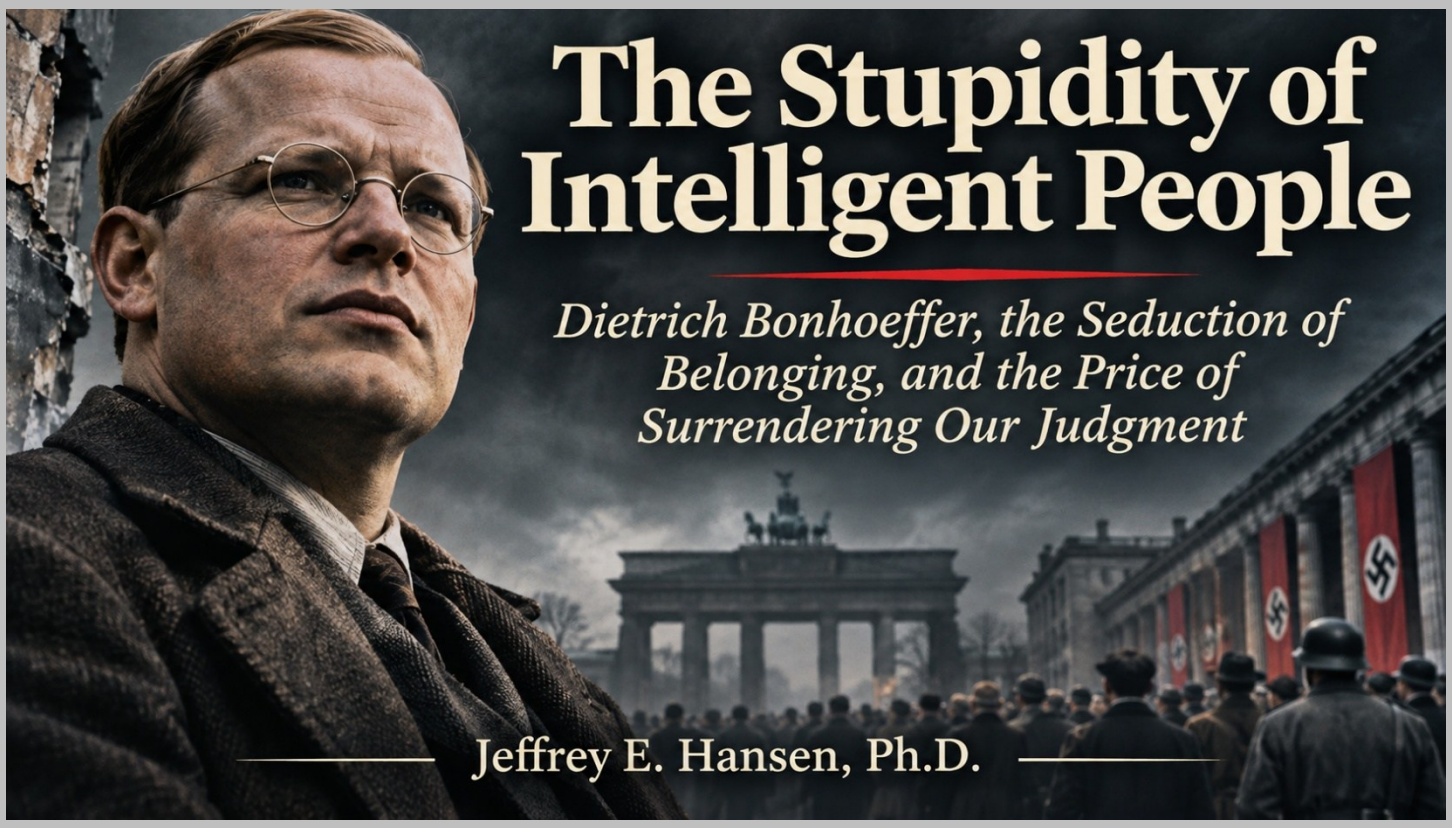


Remarkable IQ, and a Remarkable Refusal to Think

Some of the stupidest things I have ever heard have come from remarkably intelligent people. I say that as a psychologist who has spent more than four decades studying human behavior, not as someone who imagines himself immune to the same affliction. We can administer a Wechsler intelligence scale, celebrate a score of 125 or 130, and admire the mind that produced it. Impressive cognitive horsepower. But what happens when that same mind encounters an idea that threatens its politics, its friends, its moral standing, or its place in the tribe? Sometimes the engine stalls. Sometimes it accelerates straight into a wall.

I have become increasingly fascinated by the distinction between having the intellectual capacity to think and possessing the courage to do it. They are not the same thing. A person can reason beautifully about mathematics, medicine, or engineering while defending a political proposition with slogans, outrage, and astonishing indifference to contrary evidence. And when challenged, that person may not become more curious. He may become more certain, more combative, and more eager to silence the irritating individual who asked the question.

That is the terrain of this essay. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor murdered by the Nazis, gave the phenomenon a bracing name: stupidity. He was not administering an intelligence test. He was describing what happens when human beings surrender their judgment to power and belonging. His warning is worth revisiting, especially when we are congratulating ourselves on the righteousness of our own political tribe (Bonhoeffer, 2010).

The Friends I Used to Have

For much of my adult life, I enjoyed friendships with people whose political convictions differed substantially from mine. Some were progressive, some conservative, and some seemed blessedly uninterested in politics. It hardly mattered. We could disagree, laugh, exchange ideas, and go home still enjoying one another. I did not screen my friends for ideological purity, nor did I expect them to salute my convictions before they were welcome at my table.

Then, over the past several years, something began to change. In some progressive friendships, disagreement stopped being an invitation to conversation and became evidence of betrayal. I encountered people who spoke passionately about tolerance, diversity, free inquiry, and compassion, yet reacted to a challenge with anger that seemed wildly disproportionate to the question. Some conversations ended abruptly. Some friendships simply ended. There were moments when I felt shunned, not because I had mistreated anyone, but because I had refused to repeat the approved answer. The loss was not theoretical. These were people I cared about.



I tried to ask ordinary questions: What have you read on the subject? Have you listened carefully to someone who disagrees? What evidence might persuade you to reconsider? At times the answers were remarkably thin. There was tremendous confidence but precious little intellectual substance behind it. What startled me most was the fervor—the apparent conviction that the very act of questioning a cherished narrative was a moral offense. The conversation was no longer about whether a claim was true. It was about whether I belonged. That is a miserable foundation for friendship, and an even worse foundation for a free society.

A Pastor Who Refused to Surrender His Mind

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in 1906 in Breslau, in what was then Germany, and grew up in a highly educated family. His father, Karl, was a distinguished psychiatrist and neurologist; his mother, Paula, came from a family with strong theological and intellectual traditions. Dietrich was academically gifted, musically accomplished, and seriously engaged with questions of faith and responsibility. He earned his doctorate in theology at twenty-one. When his older brother Walter died in the First World War, the young Bonhoeffer also encountered, within his own family, the cost of national catastrophe.

When Hitler rose to power in 1933, Bonhoeffer perceived a danger deeper than a disagreeable politician. The Nazi regime was laying claim not merely to governmental authority but to the moral imagination of the German people. It sought obedience from institutions, including the church, that should have known better. Bonhoeffer challenged the regime's intrusion into Christian life, became associated with the Confessing Church, and later participated in resistance networks. Arrested in April 1943, he was eventually executed at Flossenbürg on April 9, 1945 (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.).



In late 1942, before his imprisonment, Bonhoeffer wrote "After Ten Years," a reflection on the moral wreckage of a decade under Nazism. A section commonly translated as "On Stupidity" explored a terrifying problem: why educated, seemingly decent people could become instruments of destructive power. He saw

stupidity not simply as an intellectual deficit but as a social and moral vulnerability, intensified when power captures the individual and replaces personal judgment with borrowed convictions (Bonhoeffer, 2010). It was a harsh word, and he meant to use it.

Germany, Memory, and the Signs Nobody Wanted

I lived in Germany for six years. I know something of the people, their history, and their immense contributions to philosophy, theology, science, music, and medicine. The Germans I knew were often proud, disciplined, and intellectually serious. That is what makes the catastrophe of the Third Reich so haunting. The question is not how an ignorant civilization could be deceived. It is how an extraordinarily accomplished civilization could participate in, accommodate, or look away from organized barbarism. Brilliance did not save it from moral collapse.

I have visited Dachau in Germany and Mauthausen in Austria. At those places the abstract language of ideology gives way to the terrible reality of what human beings did to other human beings. I also remember the small, inconspicuous directional signs. I wondered whether the size of the signage was inversely proportional to the magnitude of the shame. The thought lodged in my mind because places of unspeakable suffering ought not to be difficult to find. They ought to confront us, inconvenience us, and refuse to be pushed to the margins of memory.



That impression has a historical foundation. Historian Harold Marcuse documented that in 1955 a Dachau official attempted to have the crematorium demolished; when that effort failed, directional signs toward the former camp were removed. In other words, the impulse to hide an uncomfortable piece of history was not merely something I imagined while driving through town (Marcuse, 2001). Communities are not monoliths, and later efforts to preserve remembrance matter. But the earlier impulse to make the place less visible is revealing enough. When the truth threatens a cherished identity, human beings sometimes try to take down the signs. The truth, however, remains exactly where it happened.

Fromm, Asch, Milgram—and the Comfort of the Crowd

Another German thinker helps explain the psychological machinery behind this surrender. Erich Fromm, a Jewish-born social psychologist and psychoanalyst who escaped Nazi Germany, published Escape from Freedom in 1941. He proposed that freedom can become frightening because it carries responsibility, uncertainty, and the possibility of isolation. The authority that tells us what to think may also relieve us of the discomfort of standing alone. Submission, in that sense, can feel less like imprisonment than belonging (Fromm, 1941).

Later, Solomon Asch demonstrated how social pressure could lead people to give plainly incorrect answers to simple perceptual questions rather than stand apart from a group. Stanley Milgram showed how far ordinary people might go when an apparently legitimate authority instructed them to act against their discomfort (Asch, 1956; Milgram, 1963). These experiments are not replicas of Nazi Germany, and they do not explain every political disagreement. They illuminate something more basic: human beings are profoundly social creatures, and the desire to belong can compete fiercely with what our own eyes and conscience tell us.

Modern work on identity-protective cognition adds another piece. People do not always evaluate evidence as disinterested investigators. Sometimes they defend the conclusions that preserve their standing within a valued community (Kahan et al., 2007). This is why a person can sound wonderfully analytical when discussing someone else's ideology and become strangely incurious when discussing his own. Intelligence supplies the tools for reasoning; it can also supply cleverer justifications for a conclusion that was emotionally settled before the evidence arrived.



The Blue Wave and the Trouble with Moral Certainty

The sweeping Democratic victories in the November 2026 midterm elections have returned these concerns to the front of my mind. The election was a genuine political upheaval, one that deserves to be understood in terms of voters' grievances, priorities, and judgments (Associated Press, 2026). But electoral momentum also reminds me how quickly people transform political belonging into moral certainty. A landslide can convince a movement that it has not simply won an election but acquired a monopoly on virtue. It has not.

My own experience has left me particularly troubled by a strain of contemporary progressivism in which disagreement can be met with social exclusion, denunciation, or a refusal even to entertain the question. I am struck by the contradiction when people proclaim their devotion to intellectual diversity but treat a dissenting argument as proof of bad character. If a position cannot withstand a sincere question without its defenders reaching for ridicule, ostracism, or rage, then something other than confident reasoning is in charge. I am not impressed by indignation masquerading as an argument.

What disturbs me is the contradiction: a movement that prides itself on questioning entrenched power can become remarkably impatient when someone questions its own slogans, institutions, or heroes. The moment sincere inquiry is treated as disloyalty, independent thought has become a liability. That is not enlightenment. It is intellectual surrender dressed up as virtue.

When Oversight Becomes a Warning Shot

The blue wave was scarcely over before a different kind of political theater began. California Representative Robert Garcia, preparing to lead House Oversight, delivered a two-word message to Trump allies: "LAWYER UP." He followed it with preservation demands directed at prominent people around the president. Senator Elissa Slotkin spoke of pursuing "signature cases" beyond Trump and making young people think twice about serving in his administration, while later stressing that her concern was unlawful conduct. Senator Richard Blumenthal sought information from donors to Trump's White House ballroom, citing possible conflicts of interest. The allegations and legal theories differ, but the spectacle raises one question that should transcend party: are investigators beginning with evidence of wrongdoing, or with a list of people they would very much like to bring down? (McDaniel, 2026; Reuters, 2026; CNN, 2026; Blumenthal, 2026).

And then came the familiar chant: impeachment, impeachment, impeachment. Representative Al Green pressed for renewed efforts against Trump; House Democratic leader Hakeem Jeffries publicly supported impeaching Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth; Representative Ted Lieu raised possible proceedings against other senior officials. Impeachment is a constitutional instrument,

not a swear word. But it is not supposed to be a standing ovation for political revenge, either. The public deserves allegations, evidence, and due process—not a rolling enemies list announced with a grin (ABC News, 2026; Rodriguez-Aparicio, 2026a, 2026b).



Here is the line I refuse to blur: investigate misconduct, prosecute proven crimes, and remove officials when the law and evidence warrant it. But if the object becomes punishing someone for serving the wrong president, donating to the wrong cause, or belonging to the wrong political camp, the process itself becomes a weapon. Subpoenas, legal bills, damaged reputations, threatened careers, and years of uncertainty can ruin a life long before a court ever rules. It is possible to say "we are saving democracy" while adopting habits that make a mockery of its protections. Democracy is not the privilege of having your side hold the gavel. It is the discipline of protecting your adversary from arbitrary power.

That is why my years in Germany still haunt this question. Nazi Germany did not begin with crematoria; it began with the corrosion of institutions, the degradation of disfavored people, and the steady normalization of obedience over conscience. Modern congressional oversight is not Nazi persecution, but history offers a warning about what happens when political opponents cease to be fellow citizens and become enemies to be crushed. To the people who endlessly call their opponents fascists while cheering coercive treatment of political adversaries: perhaps you ought to look carefully in the mirror before reaching for the label again.

Bonhoeffer's "stupidity" becomes dangerous when citizens cheer without asking what evidence exists, what limits constrain power, or whether they would approve the same tactics in the hands of their enemies. They do not have to write the subpoenas or bring the charges. They only have to applaud. Useful idiots to the cause can become dangerous idiots to the republic when they trade judgment for tribal satisfaction. Wake up! The freedoms we casually surrender for the pleasure of hurting an opponent do not magically return when the next election changes the uniform.

The Convenient Blindness of Political Loyalty

Now consider the extraordinary spectacle surrounding President Joe Biden's final years in office. For months, Americans watched public appearances that raised serious questions about his stamina, communication, and ability to perform the demanding duties of the presidency. When Special Counsel Robert Hur issued his report in February 2024, he described significant limitations in Biden's memory during interviews. Biden's attorneys disputed those characterizations, and Hur did not recommend criminal charges. But the questions did not simply evaporate because White House defenders objected to the wording. The June 27, 2024, presidential debate intensified the public's concerns, and Biden withdrew from the presidential race the following month (Hur, 2024; CNN, 2024).

Then came Jake Tapper and Alex Thompson's Original Sin (2025), an extensive account of how aides and allies managed perceptions of Biden's functioning and reelection candidacy. Their reporting forced an uncomfortable question into the open: how many people knew there were serious concerns behind the reassuring public statements, and how many preferred the party's electoral prospects to an honest reckoning? The crucial issue is not whether every public stumble proved incapacity. It is whether the people responsible for informing voters were candid about information they possessed. A democracy depends upon voters being allowed to judge their leaders with something approaching an honest picture.

The autopen controversy sharpened the issue. In October 2025, the Republican majority staff of the House Oversight Committee alleged serious failures of documentation and authorization surrounding presidential decisions, including pardons and other actions. The Democratic minority produced a competing account arguing that witnesses had not substantiated claims of decisions made without Biden's authorization. Using an autopen is not, by itself, evidence of illegality. And March 2026 reporting about the status of a Justice Department inquiry was conflicting. These distinctions are part of the record, not an excuse to avoid asking the obvious questions: Who approved consequential decisions, how was that approval documented, and were the American people given an honest account of the president's participation? (House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform Majority Staff, 2025; House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform Democratic Staff, 2025; CBS News, 2026; CNN, 2026).

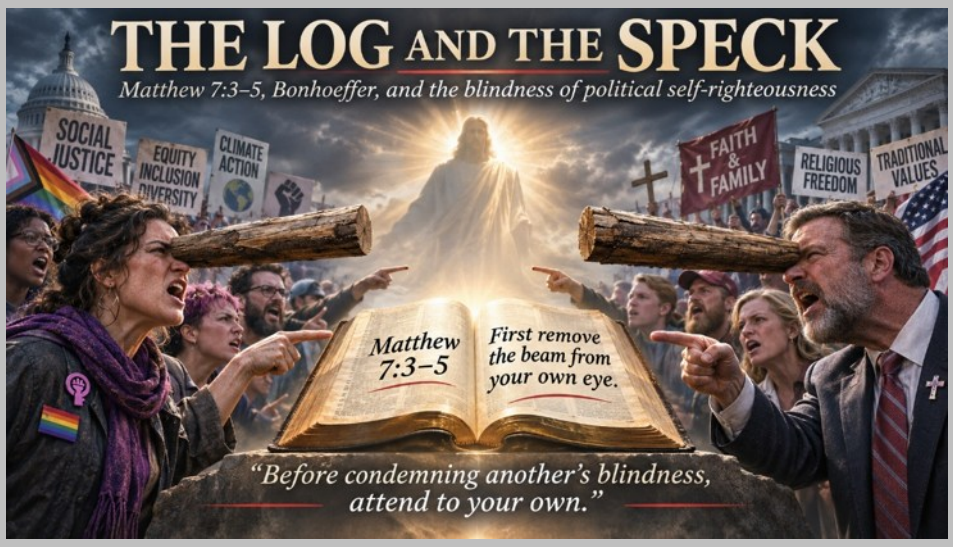
And here is the hypocrisy that drives me up the wall. Some political voices demanding relentless scrutiny of Trump officials treated serious questions about Biden's functioning as partisan mischief. The standard cannot be "investigate them, protect us." It must be the same standard for whoever occupies the White House. If a party can barely bring itself to examine its own administration while drawing up investigative battle plans for the next one, its devotion to accountability starts looking suspiciously like devotion to power.



The Log in Our Own Eye

Jesus put this problem with a clarity that ought to embarrass all of us. In Matthew 7:3–5, He asks why we are so preoccupied with the speck in our brother's eye while ignoring the beam in our own. His command is not to abandon judgment but to begin with honest self-examination. Before condemning another person's blindness, attend to your own. The passage is almost painfully suited to modern politics: people rage over their opponents' failures while treating equivalent behavior among allies as a misunderstanding, a necessary tactic, or none of anyone else's business.

And to the hard-left guardians of the political moral high ground, I realize a Bible verse may not hold much persuasive power. But here is the question anyway: when a political ideology becomes your highest moral authority, who is left to correct it? If your tribe determines what is righteous, dissent becomes heresy, disagreement becomes sin, and questioning the leadership becomes grounds for excommunication. The log in your own eye is so much easier to ignore when everyone around you is shouting about the speck in somebody else's. That would be funny if the stakes were not so damn serious. And to my fellow Christians on the right: Christ did not append a partisan exemption to His warning.

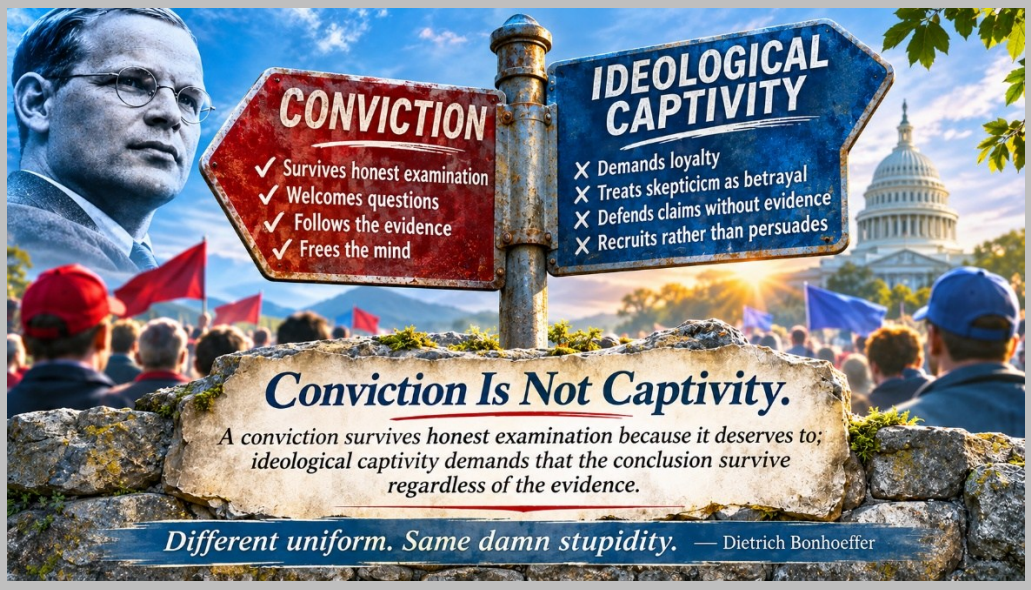


Different Uniform, Same Stupidity

There is another uncomfortable truth. I see many conservatives exercising the sort of skeptical inquiry I have too often missed in some progressive circles. Yet when the far right descends into conspiracy, personality worship, and the reflexive defense of whatever its champions say next, the mechanism is painfully familiar. I have watched people defend claims they would ridicule if they came from the political left. Evidence becomes optional, loyalty becomes compulsory, and skepticism is treated as betrayal. Different uniform. Same stupidity.

I have written elsewhere about my frustration with right-wing personalities who traffic in insinuation, extravagant certainty, and theatrical outrage. The label on the jersey does not rescue the player from bad thinking. Neither a red hat nor a blue banner confers intellectual independence. Indeed, the most dangerous moment may arrive when we become certain that we are the only people in the room immune to propaganda. Once that happens, we are already making ourselves available for recruitment.

Conviction is not captivity. A conviction survives honest examination because it deserves to; ideological captivity demands that the conclusion survive regardless of the evidence. One asks questions. The other punishes questioners. Bonhoeffer was watching the awful destination of judgment surrendered to power. We have no excuse to ignore the road signs simply because we dislike the historical warning.

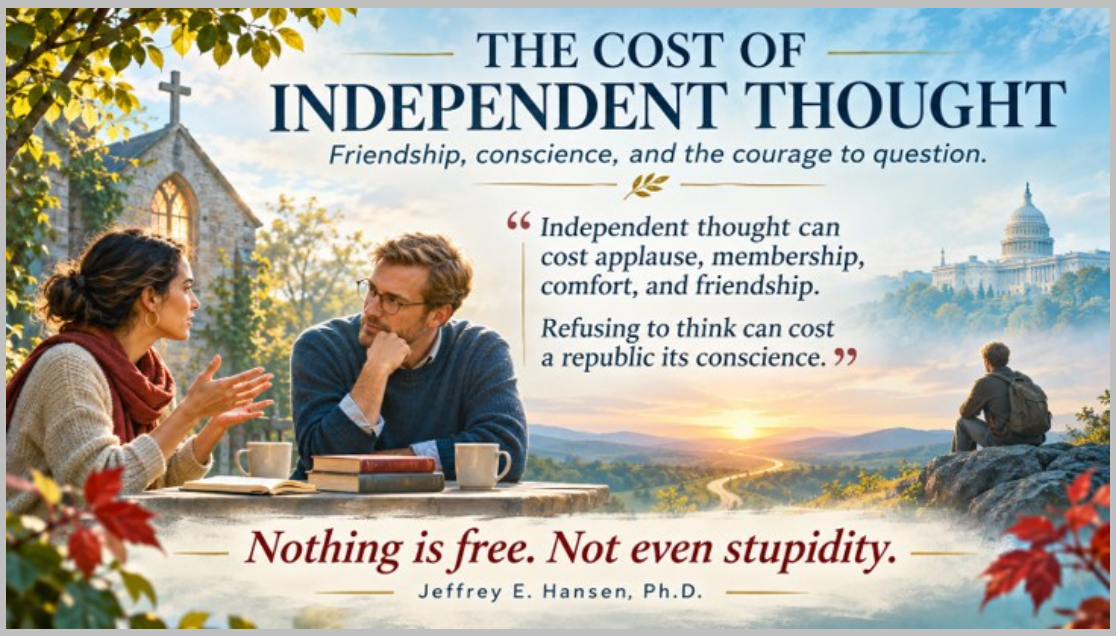


What Does It Cost to Keep Thinking?

The cost of independent thinking is rarely just intellectual. It can involve friendships, professional opportunities, reputation, and belonging. This is what has hurt me most. I did not mind that friends disagreed with me. I minded discovering that some no longer seemed willing to remain friends with someone who disagreed. We had traded the wonderfully human experience of conversation for the chilly ritual of checking each other's ideological credentials. And then we wondered why the country felt so lonely and angry.

As a Christian, I find Bonhoeffer especially demanding because he did not separate ideas from responsibility. Faith was not a license to turn off the mind. It was a summons to tell the truth and bear the consequences. Jesus repeatedly confronted people whose command of religious language exceeded their willingness to recognize what stood before them. Knowledge, certainty, and allegiance are not the same as wisdom. That warning has an uncomfortable habit of finding its way back to me whenever I am tempted to celebrate my own rightness a little too enthusiastically.

I do not want a society where everyone agrees with me. Frankly, I would find it boring, and it would probably be in trouble by lunchtime. I want one where friends can disagree without becoming enemies, where questions are welcomed rather than punished, and where no party mistakes winning an election for earning the right to destroy its opponents. Independent thought can cost applause, membership, comfort, and friendship. Refusing to think can cost a republic its conscience. We had better wake the hell up before the invoice arrives.



The great danger is not that stupid people lack the intelligence to recognize truth. It is that intelligent people may possess every capacity needed to recognize it and still prefer the safety of the crowd. Bonhoeffer saw what could happen when that bargain became a national habit. We ought to have enough humility to ask whether we are making smaller versions of the same bargain today. The question is not simply whether the other tribe has stopped thinking. The question is whether I have. Because nothing is free. Not even stupidity.

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