

THE BYSTANDER



One of "Them."

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(My apologies for paraphrasing Martin Neimoller, the German pastor credited for the poem that repeats, "I did not speak out because I was not one of them." In the last line he says, "Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me." I modified his words to fit many of us today, quoting my hypothetical alter-ego as the author of these words.)

I was outraged at our 2004 invasion of Iraq and went to a protest downtown; but the plaza was full of dancing, chanting tie-dyed barefoot hippies banging on drums in a circle, so I left because I didn't fit in with them.

I support a woman's right to an abortion as defined by the 1973 US Supreme Court Case Roe vs. Wade; but when I went to a pro-choice demonstration, women were carrying big cardboard scissors suggesting that men get vasectomies. I didn't want to be accused of being a male-bashing Feminazi, so I walked away.

Because I think we need a government-sponsored medical insurance system, I joined a lobbying group. But when they endorsed "Medicare for All," I snuck out the back door because I didn't want to be the least liberal person in a roomful of liberals.

When it was proposed to allow same-sex couples to marry, I supported the legislation; but when I went to a meeting for it, there were a lot of homosexuals in attendance, and I wasn't sure if I belonged there since I was not one of them--- so I didn't stay.

I think taxes should be higher for those who earn millions of dollars per year; but I didn't donate to a candidate I respected because her term "Wealth Tax" turned me off.

I believe that the Earth should be protected, rather than used as a source of capital for corporations that contaminate the environment. At an anti-pollution rally I went to, some of the people arrived in cars with worse gas mileage than mine does. That seemed hypocritical, so I drove away.

I believe what climate experts tell us about global warming; but I do not want a teenager from Sweden speaking on my behalf, so I didn't call my Congressman to demand he vote for alternative energy legislation.

I believe in the strict interpretation of separation of church and state; but when I found myself surrounded by atheists and Wiccans picketing the Senate, I did not want to be seen with them, so I left.

I am disgusted by the racism in this country and am repulsed by videos of African Americans being disrespected and brutalized by both police and private citizens. But I didn't like the title of the organization, "Black Lives Matter," so I didn't participate in any of their events. And I

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convinced myself that staying home was prudent, since a few people started looting and burning. My neighbor used the example of those unlawful acts to deny America's underlying history of discrimination; so I pretended I had to answer my phone, rather than to argue with her.

In the meantime, our new president did everything I disagreed with. He lowered taxes for the rich; threw out protections for the environment; called climate change a hoax and called a pandemic a hoax; repealed a law that helps people buy health insurance; spread putrid lies while accusing newspapers of creating "fake news;" supported a ban on abortion and punishment for women who seek one; invented a national emergency to build a concrete wall; insulted and alienated our allies; threatened to "bomb the hell out of Iran," bombed the hell out of Afghanistan; and started a trade war.

I wanted to stand up to this political force, but folks like me had kept silent because we didn't like the looks, actions, and words of people we actually agreed with. Those who had marched, rallied, protested, picketed, demonstrated and debated, were accused of being radicals, socialists, haters, enemies, elites, traitors, and anti-American. The president came after them with tear gas, soldiers, and a Bible, and then promised to come after them again with "vicious dogs and ominous weapons." He told the state governors that to handle protesters, "put them in jail for 10 years."

Then someone called me a "far-left agitator" because of something I said about that president, and there's nothing like a little name-calling to make a person want to choose up sides. That's when I knew I had to join the people in the plazas, on the streets, at the Capitol Building, the White House, and Police Departments, gathering in front of statues and monuments, organizing boycotts, and kneeling in public.

It made me realize that now is the time for us to speak out, because we have become one of "Them." And because then, if they come for you and me --- there will still be millions left to speak for us.