

Love for a Twitter Troll: An MLK Day Response to Internet Racism

Sherard Edington
First Presbyterian Church, Lebanon, Tennessee

Last year, on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, a stunning exchange unfolded on the social media site Twitter. It began that morning with a posting by a person who pledged that day to be as racially offensive as possible. In his opening salvo he proclaimed, “In honor of MLK day today, I’m taking a vow to use the word *n**** as many times as possible and in the most inappropriate times.” As I quote from his postings, I have done my best to edit around his offensive language and horrific displays of racism. Even the name this person chose as his identifying handle is distasteful. I will refer to him as “the poster.”

Rarely do I wade into the septic surf of social media. I shy away from Twitter and Facebook. I shun Reddit and Tumblr. However, on the occasion that I do slog through those pestiferous waters and find myself facing an intentionally inflammatory statement such as the one made that MLK Day, I usually choose to ignore it. I move along and treat the online outburst like it’s a dead dog next to the highway. I hold my nose, avert my eyes, and step on the gas. There is nothing I can accomplish there.

On the internet, a person who posts an inflammatory statement is known as a troll—someone who, like a fisherman, “trolls” for a response. The standing rule on the internet is “Don’t feed the trolls” because by engaging them you just get hooked.

One soul that day did choose to engage this particular troll, but in a manner that I find inspiring. That person is Ijeoma Oluo—an African-American writer who lives in Seattle. On that MLK Day, Oluo fed the troll. If she had attacked the poster with spite and bile, I would have pinched my nose and stepped on the gas—nothing to write home about. Instead of responding with hate, she chose to shower this person with love.

Oluo’s initial rejoinder to the poster’s pledge to use the n-word was to offer a quotation from King himself: “Let no man pull you so low as to hate him. —Martin Luther King Jr.” To this, the poster responds with “Oh so you’re one of those *n**** lovers too?” Oluo then counters with another quote: “Hate destroys the hater... —Martin Luther King Jr.” Poster: “Your parents must have named you by putting every letter in a hat and randomly selecting 6 letters.” Oluo: “I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. —Martin Luther King Jr.”

This volley continues with the poster calling Oluo offensive names and spewing racist remarks. Oluo does not back down. The poster then turns his sights directly on Dr. King, but Oluo stands strong. She deflects the poster’s violent blows with a steady litany of Dr. King’s words: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that, and I’ve seen too much hate to want to hate, myself.”

Finally, late in the day, Oluo posts this prayer: “I wish you peace and love and freedom from the hatred that hurts your heart.” The poster asks who that quote belongs to, and Oluo answers that these are just her words to him. It is at this point that the poster wavers and admits that he is 14 years old and “just trolling.” Oluo says, “It seems sad that you would troll a movement so many died for.” She points out that

lynchings alone accounted for almost 5,000 deaths in the African-Americans' struggle for racial equality. She then adds, "I hope that one day the lives of black people will matter to you. Your life matters to me."

During their exchange Oluo mentions her son. The poster says, "He must have a really cool mom." Oluo replies that indeed he does have a cool mom. She asks the poster about his own mother, and he informs Oluo that his mother died a year and a half earlier. The conversation continues, and the poster talks about his mother's death and his subsequent depression. Toward the end, Oluo writes, "I wish you luck. And I hope you will try to refrain from hurting others while you try to heal." The poster replies, "You are so nice, and I'm so sorry."

We can't know if the poster is indeed male and 14 years old. We can't know if anything he said about himself is true. But that is not important. What matters is the spirit in which Oluo responded to his words. She did not attack him with anger—as was her due—but with an unstoppable outpouring of patience and love. In Luke's gospel we read Jesus' command: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also.... Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:27-31).

I cannot imagine a more perfect demonstration of Jesus' words or realization of Dr. King's dream than Ijeoma Oluo's grace-filled response that day.

Note

Go to goo.gl/WWhmR1 for the full transcript of the Twitter postings.