

# JEFFERSON

EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## TRUTH IN LOVE

### Confronting Culture of Contempt

By Parris J. Baker  
May 2023

*Editor's note: Following is the third of a five-part series addressing a growing culture of incivility and contempt in the United States. The series will continue on Tuesday, May 23.*

A few years ago, Jezree Friend<sup>[1]</sup> suggested a book to me that he thought might help me make sense of America's toxic culture. For context, Jezree and I are very different: Jezree is white, and I am black; he is a Republican and I'm a Democrat; he was my student, and I was his instructor; and he lives in Millcreek, and I live in urban Erie. Although we agree in our Christianity (which is incredibly important), we differ on many other strata (political, economic, and social). That we are and remain good friends (no pun intended), given the social and toxic putrefaction present in American culture, is almost miraculous.

The book, "Love Your Enemies," written by Arthur Brooks,<sup>[2]</sup> a William Henry Bloomberg Professor of Management Practice at the Harvard Business School, suggests that America has become a culture of contempt. Contempt, according to Brooks (2019), seeks to exile, mock, shame, and permanently exclude individuals and groups from being in relationships (p. 22). The culture of contempt is very destructive, anti-democratic, morally reprehensible, and makes it nearly impossible for collaboration or partnership with individuals and groups with opposing viewpoints.

Elements of the culture of contempt are currently on grand display, almost every day, and at all levels of American society. Contentious conversations can be seen

and heard regularly at youth league ballgames, on national news outlets, and by our elected officials. Brooks (2019) submits that America has become a country inculcated to a culture of contempt. Incivility has progressively assimilated into the national nomenclature. Verbal volleys of denigrating terms like “animal,” “thug,” “idiot,” “bimbo,” “ugly,” and “loser” are heaved toward individuals or groups hostile to one another.

These terms are used to define or describe perceptions of a person or an entire group. Recent examples of this contemptible language can be found in descriptions of several players who competed in the 2023 NCAA Women’s Basketball Final and were directed at the current New York County district attorney.

The concept of democracy is an elusive construction, both to define, to apply consistently and uniformly, and most importantly, to enforce. Even though the United States has used democracy as a framework to construct social and political institutions, the equitable applications of democracy have eluded certain groups historically, such as African Americans, First Person Native Americans, and, most recently, individuals and groups who identify as gay, lesbian, or transgender. The composites of the democracy construct, such as justice choice and liberty, are dependent on their equitable application.

Democracy comes from the Greek term *demokratia*; *demos* meaning “the people” and *kratia* meaning “power or rule.” Most definitions of democracy include the belief that government is designed to serve the needs of people, to offer people choice, and to respect the choices of the people it governs. The idea of a democratic society is that the well-being of all the people is central to government and that its economic, political, military, and legal resources would be used to achieve that goal. Though incredibly difficult to accomplish, the identification of and provision for societal needs and the protection of the people is the work of the government. These responsibilities are entrusted to and executed by individuals, either elected or appointed to serve the people, who are believed to be morally and ethically upright. Decades of electing immoral politicians have called into question how we assess the morality of our leaders.

Tim Dixon, co-founder of More In Common,[3] asserts that the resilience and durability of our democracy is being tested, affronted, and weakened by the fatigue and enervation by seemingly unending cultural battles. He believes there is an “exhausted majority” of Americans who are mentally and emotionally tired of worrying about the future and fate of this nation. The principles of truth and justice, proposed to make our nation a more perfect union, are being compromised by broken people. Specious arguments centered on school shootings and gun control, voting rights, reproductive rights, and what constitutes an insurrection has contributed to the culture of contempt, the demise of our democracy, and the weakening of our nation.

April was Jazz Appreciation Month (JAM), so I thought using a jazz motif and metaphor when writing this piece would be appropriate to address the culture of contempt. Once banned in many parts of America and thought to be the devil's music, the root of sexually immoral behavior, and dangerous to developing fetuses, jazz, originally performed by and for African Americans, emerged as a respected American art form. What makes jazz unique is the element of improvisation.

Jazz improvisation is not a monologue. That's called practice. In live music, improvisation is a constructed dialogue between the musicians and among members of the audience. Improvisation is dependent on listening to the other musicians, therefore listening attentively is important. Improvisation happens best when each musician appreciates, trusts, and respects the talent of other musicians. Allowing each artist time and space for self-expression and artistic growth is essential. Contention between musicians restricts and constrains that expression and growth.

Risk-taking is an absolute requisite for jazz improvisators. When improvising, the jazz performer recognizes that comfort is an enemy to the process of dialectic exchange. Musicians learn to become comfortable in the difficult and discomfiting moments of soloing (different than siloing). Their risk-taking creates amazing experiences between musicians and for the audiences. Those who identify themselves as public servants or servant leaders can profit from learning the methods of jazz improvisation.

In the improvisation that occurs in our relationship (authentic relationships are always improvised and predictably unpredictable), I believe the reasons Jezree and I have remained friends can be found in the lyrics of contemporary Christian song, written by David Frazer and performed by Hezekiah Walker

I Need You to Survive[4]

I need you; you need me. We're all a part of God's body.  
Stand with me, agree with me. We're all a part of God's body.  
It is His will that every need be supplied. You are important to me; I need you to survive.

I pray for you; you pray for me. I love you; I need you to survive.  
I won't harm you with words from my mouth. I love you; I need you to survive  
(yes sir)  
It is His will that every need be supplied; you are important to me; I need you to survive.

*Now, try to solve this riddle (we'll answer it at the end of Part 4):*  
Our

knows  
Answer

- [1] Jezree Friend is the Assistant Vice President, External Affairs for the Manufacturer & Business Association. Recently named to 2022 Pennsylvania's "Forty under 40" most influential leaders.
- [2] Brooks, A. C. (2019). *Love your enemies: How decent people can save America from the culture of contempt*. First edition. New York, NY: Broadside Books.
- [3] Dixon, T. (2018). *Hidden Tribes: A Study in America's Polarized Landscape. More in Common*. <https://hiddentribes.us/about/>
- [4] I Need You to Survive. Composed by David G. Frazer © Gods Music Inc. (Lil Dave's Music), EMI Christian Music Publisher O/B/O LUV KI Music Publishing.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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