



Staying Grounded in Tumultuous Times

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For years I have referred to myself as a peace-loving hippie-type pacifist who believes that violence is never the answer to humanity's problems. In case I need to be clear, it was never the best choice to begin with and is often the catalyst for causing the problem that is being responded to. Violence not only harms the victims—it harms those reporting on it and witnessing it through secondary trauma and normalization. I am what is referred to as a Highly Sensitive Person (HSP), a term coined by psychologist Elaine Aron. HSPs are people who somehow feel most stimuli to a greater degree than typical people. We might have something called sensory-processing sensitivity, which makes us more reactive to loud sounds, bright bursts of light, and other events that typical people do not react to with the same level of fear, startle, or reactivity. We often cannot endure violent depictions in film or bear witness to the atrocities that humans inflict on each other.

It is not really a diagnosis but rather a way of moving through and sensing in this world that can stand out against more typically-sensing people. HSP could be defined as a personality type. I startle easily and cannot tolerate some noises (especially if they are loud and sudden, but I love loud music while cruising down the interstate with the windows open). I cannot stand war movies or footage, and I really do not watch the news because of the casual displays of violence (I am reminded of Don Henley's lyrics from 1983's "Dirty Laundry": "she can tell you about the plane crash with a gleam in her eye / It's interesting when people die, give us dirty laundry"). In order to stay informed about what is occurring internationally, I usually read the news rather than receive it through other media. This enables me to be selective and protect myself from some of the harsher images and violence that are de rigeur of contemporary

newscasting.

For example, the recent assassination attempt of presidential candidate Donald Trump at a political rally really left me struggling for multiple reasons. I had to balance my need to be informed about current events with my tolerance for consuming violent content and my distaste for the rhetoric around Christian nationalism and conspiracy. I think this is a position that many of my progressive contemporaries find ourselves in. I immediately felt fear and sadness because humanity once again turned to violence to solve conflict. I also worried about how those who intentionally author fake news to create confusion and turmoil would be presenting numerous versions of what happened, how, and why. Lastly, knowing that this event and the coverage of it would dominate the news left me feeling like I would need to withdraw some for self-preservation from the onslaught of violence and theorizing.

When I taught college courses, one of the things I worked with students on was critical thinking, especially about the words used by writers to attempt to sway people's opinions. Writing in an unbiased way is difficult if one is passionate about the topic because presenting factual information can be challenging when one is focused on persuading people to adopt a specific mindset or worldview. It is somewhat like a sales job as the writer attempts to coax the reader to buy into a particular viewpoint. Certainly, distinguishing what is accurate and true from what is opinion and fiction is a real challenge. One tool I use to help me determine the "truthiness" of anything I read is All Sides media bias ratings (<https://www.allsides.com/media-bias/ratings>). By choosing news outlets that have been awarded a "C" for "center" from All Sides, I can have a greater degree of certainty that I am consuming news that is likely to be less biased by the viewpoints of the author, editor, or publisher of the piece. While I cannot control the amount of violently descriptive language or images they use, I can at least rest assured in the knowledge that I am being accurately informed and less influenced by the manipulations of the news media that seeks to exploit a newsworthy event for political outcomes. I encourage you to carefully consume what is being reported, and seek information from credible news sources and in doses that allow you to continue to have hope, follow Jesus, and be love in tumultuous times.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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