Opinion
Editorial



Nick Sandmann, a junior at Covington Catholic High School in Park Hills, Ky., and others students from the school stand in front of Native American Vietnam veteran Nathan Phillips Jan. 18 near the Lincoln Memorial in Washington in this still image from video. An exchange between the students and Phillips Jan. 18 was vilified on social media the following day, but the immediate accusations the students showed racist behavior were stepped back as more details of the entire situation emerged. (CNS photo/Social media via Reuters/Kaya Taitano)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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To twitter. It once was but an intransitive verb that meant, according to Webster's, "to utter successive chirping noises" or "to talk in a chattering fashion." As a noun, it meant "a small tremulous intermittent sound" or a "light silly laugh."

Once upon a time, it was an onomatopoeic rendering of sounds of rather little consequence that, as quickly as one could say twitter, disappeared, swept away by the thinnest air.

Maybe we'd be best served by returning to those definitions as a way of understanding the twitter and tweets of social media that today can send the political and religious universes spinning out of orbit for days over an encounter in front of the Lincoln Memorial between a 16-year-old, MAGA hat-wearing, Catholic school kid in Washington for the Right to Life March and Nathan Phillips, a Native American who was attending the Indigenous Peoples March. The scene of the face-off between the drumming Phillips and the slightly smiling student went viral.

There was sound in that scene. And silence. After minutes upon minutes of video from multiple angles were layered onto the original, what the silence and the sound meant then and might mean now is still inconclusive.

Was the sound, in this case, of consequence? Or was it of the sort that should have rapidly dissipated? Was this encounter one of intent? Was it symbolic? Was it teenage arrogance? Ignorance? Curiosity? A mix? Was it misunderstanding on Phillips' part? Or a wish for an encounter based on presumptions of what the Trump hat might imply? Or was it a sincere wish to calm things, to have some manner of dialogue? Were the other extreme antagonists at the scene, the Black Israelites, integral or a sideshow to the scene that went viral?

Just what was in the minds of the two, who met after a fashion, but not really, who each likely knew nothing of the other. What would have been a reasonable expectation of this odd encounter — the MAGA hat-wearing kid and this native American beating a drum and intoning a chant?

The twitterverse is certainly of some value for the dissemination of information. But otherwise in that world there is not only no space for meaningful quiet — and certainly not for questions — there is, moreover, an antipathy toward such luxury. The world of instant reaction, instant judgment doesn't tolerate introspection.

It is a world of ceaseless stimulation, an endless showering of nerve-jangling bomblets that leads to a kind of addictive enervation.

We've seen its corrosive effects on the national level with a president who has degraded political discourse to the level of daily-governance-by-tweet. In this world insults flourish, truth becomes an accident.

In the incident at the memorial, the Native American left the scene, he said in subsequent interviews, with wishes for a more congenial world and for a meeting with the boy.

The youth, whose family had the means to hire a high-profile PR firm, appeared on national television with a finely scripted version of things, a tale of noble intent. He stated his wish, too, to meet with Phillips.

All around lay the detritus of the viral video. Apologies by church officials; assurances of an investigation, even the possibility of expulsions from the Catholic school; a bishop pronouncing on MAGA hats and their incongruity with Catholic teaching; a resolve by Catholic teachers to use the incident as teachable moment, apparently to get across the lesson in respect for basic humanity that had somehow not yet caught on.

But enough. There are tweets to be posted and twitter feeds to be checked and outrages that are nearing expiration.

Tweet.

Advertisement

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