

Comedian Eric Lyden Challenges The Easily Offended And Gets Even Them Laughing

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Comedy & Sensitivity

December 22, 2016

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I had the pleasure of watching comedian Eric Lyden perform this week. In the context of his show he dealt with sensitive topics of political correctness in humorous ways and so effectively challenged the intellectual foundation for political correctness and the feelings behind political correctness. It is not often that both of those things are so easily done.

He also challenged the idea of feeling offended, which was especially interesting in this context, because it was almost like he was doing the work of a salesman delivering a sales pitch and countering the objections of his customer. He knew what he was saying was going to be called offensive and he was undermining the high and mighty insistence of anyone to feel offended.

As I've written before in these pages, the term "I'm offended" appears to be unique to America in intellectual discourse. That was an observation from an Austrian friend of mine who is the most voracious consumer of world media I've ever met. Of course "I'm offended" might have its place outside of intellectual discussion. There are feelings involved in that expression of saying "I'm offended" and it's valuable to express feelings.

This Austrian friend of mine always found it so curious that only in America where two sides were communicating back and forth in intellectual discourse, sharing truths, observations, and opinions – truly

engaging in the difficult work of two minds attacking a problem – only in America was it considered acceptable for one party to say “I’m offended” and all discussion would come to an end.

In that situation, instead of making fun of the allegedly “offended” party for being so weak as to actually express that concept in an intellectual discussion, observers might actually rush to the defense of the person in the intellectual discussion who claimed offense. This happens in discussions in American media, in academic settings, and on debate stages. It happens in large, high level settings culture-wide and in one-on-one discussions. Its impact on American intellectual discourse is stunting and silencing, the opposite of what intellectual discourse requires.

As Lyden went through his 40 minute skit, it was obvious that he was an antidote to this practice.

As anyone familiar with comedic performances knows, it’s difficult to cherry-pick quotes from a performer who has spent ten or twenty minutes preparing a crowd for a joke, because what was said in the midst of laughter risks becoming little more than a quote. A piece of a comedic act though is more than a quote, it is a piece of a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Lyden offered potent opinions on political and social theory like “Wouldn’t it be great if the people who should suffer from low self esteem actually did,” or “At the end of the day I think a lot of people have a very high opinion of their opinion,” were hard to disagree with observations dropped in between slightly uncomfortable jokes. This isn’t a usual way for such statements undermining political correctness to be made. The societal insistence toward political correctness is so often taken with such seriousness and treated as intellectually valid rather than ridiculed with an idiotic utterance of the mouth. An idiotic utterance of the mouth is exactly the response “I’m offended” or insinuations of political correctness deserve. And that’s one more little gem that came from Lyden’s performance.

Over and over again Lyden made the most idiotic sound, one that he described as having no comeback. That’s exactly the sound that “I’m offended” deserves said to it when said in the context of an intellectual discussion. That’s an intellectual weapon from childhood – a really dumb sound – that most thinking adults have dispensed with by the age of maturity, but one that Lyden has cleverly maintained. When truly idiotic things have been said to you, a really dumb sound is all that person deserves. I believe, after watching Lyden, a really dumb sound is an important quality every adult should cultivate so as to be able to respond as effectively as possible to the idiocy of a social justice warrior with equally inane utterances of idiocy such as “I’m offended” or demands of political correctness. Sometimes one finds a need to fight fire with fire. Perhaps the fire of idiocy real should be fought with the fire of an idiotic utterance. “Uhhhhduhhhhduhhduhhduhhffffduhhff,” is approximately how Lyden’s utterance sounded.

Lyden furthermore in the context of his performance did an excellent job defining the term “racist” as a very small group of people, rather than some amorphous unclear word to describe anyone who talks about anything uncomfortable. In what sounds a little silly to anyone used to the common American vernacular, Lyden says “I’m the opposite of a racist. I hate people like me.” The reason it is silly is that a straight white male is generally not permitted to define racism in America, let alone discuss the topic. Yet his deadpan statement was so effective at engaging the topic and pointing the culture of silliness surrounding it.

This is all fruitful ground for society to have discussed. The lack of discussion on exactly these topics has been stifling for Western culture.

Lyden’s sketch was initially responded to by many in the office looking at each other trying to figure out if it was okay to laugh. It ultimately felt like a victory for truth when the uptight people sitting around me started to

loosen up and laugh at themselves a little. Lyden had clearly run around their defenses and had many of the easily offended and uptight people in the room laughing by the time his sketch was over.

Brilliantly devised, so humorously presented, and so timely and pertinent, Lyden's performance was excellent.