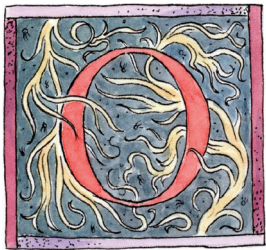


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The Culture of the Canceled



ON MONDAY, May 23, 2022, I went to bed around 11 P.M. and slept more soundly than I had in nearly two years. My easy rest may seem surprising. That day, Princeton University had fired me, a decision I learned in the late afternoon when a reporter for the *New York Times* called my wife to ask for comment. (In a move that was either inept or malicious, Princeton had sent the official letter of dismissal to someone else's email address. I never received an apology.) I then spent the evening juggling calls, meeting with a senior who was graduating the next day and his father, and writing a piece for the *Wall Street Journal*.

But, yes, I slept well. Finally I was well and truly canceled—free of the institution to which I had given my entire professional life, but most of whose administrators, rank-and-file employees, students, and alumni had turned on me from one day to the next in July 2020. I was done with them, and now they had announced, unambiguously, that they were done with me. It was a relief.

Don't misunderstand me: Cancellation is awful. I wouldn't wish on anyone the psychological, professional, and financial consequences of losing your friends, livelihood, and trust in the operations of the universe. Here are some ways in which my life changed, just like that, over two years ago. Colleagues who used to laugh with me every day no longer acknowledged my existence. Students who had previously asked for my attention around the clock removed me from the acknowledgments of their work. Professors across the country issued calls for right-minded people to stop citing my publications and for academic journals and presses to refuse to publish anything I might write, effectively obliterating my career. Is it a surprise that I had trouble sleeping when the husband of a psychologist I had been encouraged to see took to social media to denounce me?



The awfulness, of course, is the point.

Visibly ruining the life of one person pretty much guarantees that hundreds more will be reluctant to stick their head above the parapet. Among the braver cowards are those who wrote that they supported me but could not say so publicly because, alas, that might place them next in line for execution.

So how, then, to encourage people to speak up? I'm here to tell you that being canceled isn't *all* bad. Indeed, some of what happened to me is really quite good. Every situation is different, and I make no promises. But if what befell me were to befall you, I like to imagine that happiness would overtake the inevitable grief.

What is the greatest gift of cancellation? The answer is something my friend and adviser Professor Robert George has repeated to me many times these past years: The canceled are blessed with the knowledge of who their friends are. I used to believe I had lots of friends, plus lots of friendly acquaintances. I was wrong, and learning the truth was a huge blow. But over the past two years I have gained more friends than I lost—and these are real friends.

We do all the things together that friends do, including lifting one another's spirits when there are setbacks and, like normal people, revealing our disagreements and disappointments openly rather than knifing each other in the back.

It's not only that my new friends are numerous. They are also racially, ethnically, religiously, politically, socioeconomically, and ideologically diverse. They don't all live in the 08540 zip code. And, thank God, they are not all academics. They are schoolteachers and interior designers, psychiatrists and priests, guitarists and journalists, and stay-at-home parents.

I used to view the elite echelon of the academy as the pinnacle of culture. Recent years, however, have seen universities, museums, concert halls, publishing houses, newspapers, magazines, and other once-great cultural institutions expend significant resources amplifying and enforcing what is wrongly called "cancel culture"—wrongly because, whatever this revolting phenomenon is, it is not culture. It should not have taken me so long to realize that, in many cases, I find the greatest pleasure in the company of men and women who lack fancy credentials but who know perfectly well what culture is and value it.

Let me tell you about canceled culture—the culture of the canceled, I mean. We have culture in spades but do not share *a* culture, aside from the culture of believing in both the desirability of individual freedoms and the necessity of maintaining a civil society. Some of my friends voted in 2020 for Biden, others for Trump, still others for Jo Jorgensen, and at least two for Ben Sasse. As we talk and argue and tell jokes and poke fun at one another for our divergent tastes in art, music, and books, some are in T-shirts, others in ties. We get together without fear: without fear that our unscripted remarks are being recorded for use against us; without fear that we might be accused, for no good reason, of one or another -ism or -phobia; without fear of association. We have self-respect, we enjoy one another's company, and we revel in our different affinities.

In short, we are free. It's a wonderful feeling.

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overtake the inevitable grief.

Now, you may be thinking that while I have been very fortunate, you, if canceled, would not be so lucky. I am convinced that you would be, though a few years ago, I could indeed not have said this with confidence. An early victim of cancellation was Mike Adams, a professor of criminology at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, who shot and killed himself in July 2020. I did not know Adams. But the beautiful and honest tributes to his life make me wish he had been able to hang on a bit longer.

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Because things have changed. Nowadays, thanks to the depressing urgency of the problem, those of us who have been canceled have instituted a culture of care. We do our best to look after one another. Make a list of the people who have gotten into trouble in recent years. I'll help you out by naming four: liberal philosopher Peter Boghossian, centrist journalist Bari Weiss, conservative geophysicist Dorian Abbot, and libertarian legal scholar Ilya Shapiro.

Before July 2020, I didn't know any of them. Now they are friends, people who have helped me and whom I, in turn, hope and believe I have helped. If you get into trouble, these people and many others on that ever-growing list will help you. More to the point, *I* will help you. I mean this seriously: Get in touch with me, and I'll do what I can.

Did I just engage in name-dropping? Yes, but it wasn't gratuitous. My point is that the canceled are generous. We know all too well what the experience is like. We are acquainted with lawyers,

therapists, sensible pundits, people with the financial means to offer support, and the leaders of national and international free-speech organizations. (I am proud that Professor George and I cooked up the initial plans for the Academic Freedom Alliance in my backyard—in the spring of 2020, a couple of months before all hell broke loose in American society.) And we are creating both formal and informal networks of people who can help, even if it's only to send the occasional encouraging email or lend a sympathetic ear. Most of these people are not household names, but they have offered immense assistance to me and, I know, to so many others. They have my gratitude for life.

There are also professional benefits to being canceled. I won't lie: It's painful to lose a prestigious position at Princeton. But I have landed on my feet. The American Enterprise Institute, where I now work, might be called the Princeton of think tanks.

Again, you may be thinking that you would not be so fortunate if you were canceled. Put your mind at rest: The networks I have just described would help you find a new job, as they helped me and as they have helped others I know, across a range of professions.

And, scary as it is, there's something to be said for a change in career—especially, perhaps, for someone who lived his life, as I did, in an academic bubble. I was a single-minded denizen of the ivory tower for so long, and believed in the enterprise so strongly, that I was blind until too late to just how low higher education had sunk. Be that as it may, while I don't think I was growing stale as a classicist and linguist at Princeton, it is also the case that, after nearly a quarter of a century in the same place, I did sometimes go on autopilot. Now there's a lot of excitement to look forward to. It's not just the same old same old.

I have a platform now, and a large number of new opportunities. If my life hadn't changed, I wouldn't be writing for SAPIR, wouldn't be the scholar-in-residence at the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, and probably wouldn't be involved with the nascent University of Austin. Living well really is the best revenge.

In the 2020–21 academic year, the University of Colorado Boulder hosted a topical lecture series: “The Canceled.” Mine was the kickoff talk. The title: “Cancellation and Its Discontents.” The next month, I gave a similar Zoom talk, “How to Lose Friends and Influence People,” to the William F. Buckley, Jr. Program at Yale. Thereafter, on the advice of lawyers, I was mostly quiet for a long time. But now that I have a new life, it is time to be vocal again. For the first time in years, I feel free to say out loud—with responsible candor—what I believe. If some are celebrated for speaking their truths, the least the rest of us should be allowed to do is speak our opinions without fear of reprisal.



Speak your mind in good faith. You will discover that the vast majority of people are not the crazies who have succeeded with frightening rapidity in taking a wrecking ball to our cultural institutions and turning the mainstream media and big businesses into ridiculous echo chambers. You will gain friends as you influence people. You will discover that there is contentment in being canceled. And you will also find that those who cancel others are doomed to discontentment: Building is more satisfying than destruction, and, anyway, these very unkindly inquisitors (apologies to Jonathan Rauch) must live in fear that the mob will come for them as well. History will not look fondly on the cancelers. But it will be kind to you—as will the new friends you make in your happier and more fulfilling post-canceled life. *