



We are much too quick these days to be offended

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A few years ago, Leonard Pitts Jr. wrote a column headlined, “We should be made to feel uncomfortable sometimes” (Oct. 18, 2017).

Then, as today, I am reminded of how most people simply react without considering the implications of their actions.

Charles Davenport Jr. captured a similar sentiment last week (“Cancel culture is squelching open, honest debate,” Aug. 2).

It goes without saying that Pitts and Davenport could not be further apart ideologically.

Yet their concerns couldn’t be more similar.

Many of us simply fail to make any attempt to process the experiences and exchanges of our daily lives. We have become so certain that our affiliations, preferences and opinions are right that we immediately discount those who may disagree.

Such reactions are rooted to our primal instincts for survival.

Unfortunately, these instincts are not as useful in the public forum as they once were.

We live in too diverse a society, and too intricate a network of social exchanges, to rely on gut reactions.

Fortunately, our ability to think more critically about complex scenarios has evolved.

But, alas, it seems we rarely use it.

Simply *reacting* without a critical assessment is what leads to conflict and miscommunication.

It also adds to the spread of inaccuracies that plague public thought and discourse today.

Responses, on the other hand, stimulate the type of dialogue that requires critical thinking of both the speaker and the audience.

Sadly, however, more and more of us rarely do anything but react.

We have made our choices before we consider our options.

A relevant example of this failure to communicate is deeply rooted in the feeling of “offense” (which is not an emotion).

These days everyone is offended by something.

People are offended for one another, and people are offended if you are not offended by whatever it is that offends them.

But to be “offended” is to have made a choice without concern for context.

Typically, there is no willingness on the part of the offended party to reconsider his or her position.

Once someone has decided that some individual, comment, word, act or symbol is offensive, that person will shut down any opportunity for potentially meaningful dialogue, then or in the future.

He or she will dismiss any possibility of finding common ground, of understanding divergent perspectives.

To be offended is to embrace our inner child — to pout because we do not like what we have seen or heard. It is to have made a choice without concern for context.

The act of being offended is simply a reaction; an unwillingness to respond through critical reflection of the circumstances one is presented with solely because one believes themselves to be correct — end of discussion.

To be offended is to remove ourselves from any possibility of progress.

Pitts’ column addressed the importance of being willing to be uncomfortable to stimulate a dialogue, and more importantly, to stimulate societal progress.

He asked, “Who told you (that) you had a right never to be made ill at ease?”

When we refuse to respond, we refuse to think critically and engage accordingly, leaving the only alternative as one of thoughtless reaction, a default setting grounded in offense or an unwillingness to be challenged.

Citing data from a recent Cato Institute survey, Davenport in his column emphasizes the fact that 62% of Americans are afraid to share their political views for fear of stigmatization, social ostracism and in many instances, retribution.

Shutting down conversations and the attempt to impose a unilateral position on a diverse nation will not lead to any healing of social fractures.

When we simply react — which is the foot soldier of cancel culture — we have intentionally withdrawn from our duty to find the truth. The late sociologist Gene Weinstein said, “The meaning is in the response.”

We need to make better efforts to understand other people’s meanings, and how we will respond to them.