



HOW TO BECOME A DANGEROUS PERSON

NANCY ROMMELMANN

You are looking at a dangerous person. You may feel unsafe—even threatened—by my very existence. What is this power I possess?

It's called... "free speech."

While I knew it was always there, I recently discovered its true value. Here is my story. It could easily be yours.

I'm a journalist, an author, and a podcaster. I live in Portland, Oregon. My husband owns a few local coffee shops and a small coffee roasting business called Ristretto Roasters.

In December 2018, I started a YouTube podcast entitled #MeNeither. The show's "about" page reads, "#MeNeither is an almost-weekly conversation about the cultural issues of the day, and an attempt to create a space where people can find ways to think out loud through uncomfortable topics."

One of those topics is the #MeToo movement and what I see as some of its excesses, including celebrities who exploit #MeToo for personal gain. Sexual assault and harassment are real, but the idea that any charge any woman—or man—brings must be believed without question... where's the logic in that? I believe we are better off judging any claim of harassment, like any other claim, on its own merits. This, I would learn, is not a popular position.

It turned out, one of the people tuning in to my new show was a former employee of my husband's coffee business. She claimed my views were "vile, dangerous, and extremely misguided" and, in an email to the press, claimed my opinions created a "demoralizing and hostile environment for employees."

Why would the opinions of the wife of the boss demoralize an employee? No one bothered to ask that question. That I appeared to be on the wrong side of the #MeToo debate was all people needed to know.

By the time you could say "Twitter," a social media mob formed to say they would never spend another penny at my husband's business.

A college-age girl stormed into one of the cafes screaming, variously, that the baristas were in danger and that their working at the cafe posed a threat to the community.

Employees previously secure in their jobs grew jittery and quit. One suggested that my husband

sell the company and that I offer a public apology before it was too late.

This all happened within the first 48 hours.

As the outrage grew, local businesses that make up a big part of my husband's base cut and run. Wholesale customers cancelled large accounts, afraid they'd be caught in the #MeToo crossfire. Staff now worried that they'd lose their jobs (and health insurance) if Ristretto were forced to close; that I—a person with whom they'd heretofore had a perfectly congenial relationship—might, in fact, be a secret monster, a rape culture apologist.

Many of those who claimed to have been offended had not seen the podcast. One woman wrote, "I clicked, down-voted, then reported on YouTube that it violates community guidelines: hateful... I didn't listen, but it's one way to make that [expletive] go away."

This kind of uninformed, virtual attack strikes me as childish—the behavior of a toddler whose tantrum brings a dinner party to a halt until it's placated with the attention it seeks.

I invited my critics to speak with me—the whole point of #MeNeither is to provoke discussion. No one took me up on my offer. It was evidently easier for so-called feminists to tell my husband to leave his wife or lose his business, for some random dude on Facebook to send me the message, "You are scum. Rot in hell you dirty..."—just use your imagination—than to honestly confront me.

I can't help but think that those who engage in this kind of behavior are steering themselves into perpetually unhappy waters, that they live in fear that everyone and everything is out to get them, so therefore they must strike first. Or are they addicted to the feeling that what they are doing is righteous? Not considering intolerance in the name of tolerance is a frightening contradiction and solves nothing. Or maybe they think they are making progress. But if this is progress, one might reasonably ask, for whom? And to what end? It's also contrary to what is most fundamental to America: that every citizen has the equal right to voice his or her opinion, and to express these opinions in a public forum.

My story is one of many, another cautionary tale for those who get pulled into the culture wars. I understand why most people want to stay out of it. It's scary to fight for liberty and against a mob. The whole thing is exhausting.

I have repeatedly been asked, usually in "you should have known better" tones, if I am going to stop having nuanced conversations about sensitive subjects. The answer is absolutely not.

And if that makes you feel unsafe? Too bad.

I'm Nancy Rommelmann, journalist and author, for Prager University.