

"We're All Afraid" – Waleed Aly, Editorial, *The Project*, 19/07/2016

2016 has been a nightmare. Terror attacks, murders, riots, sexual assaults, corruption, famine, natural disasters; we're all reacting the same way. With fear. Because there's no more natural response when you sit down and watch the news and you're hit with these images over, and over, and over. We're told the world is scary, and it is.

I've been thinking about it though, and I can't escape the thought that how we deal with our fear is becoming the defining measure that determines us as a people. Awful news leads to fear which leads to an outrageous statement, which leads to a pile-on, which leads to a hardening of positions.

I kinda feel like we're on a Gravitron and spinning around and around and no one is interested in getting off. We're all in this cycle and as the year wears on it's just spinning faster and faster and we're all pushed to the edges and it is harder and harder for us, like it takes superhuman strength, for us to meet in the middle. And eventually, someone is sick and this is what that looks like.

Now, I could sit here and pull apart Sonia Kruger's statement. I could point out that Japan has had its share of terror attacks, or that the UN has attributed Japan's low crime rate to low inequality and low gun ownership.

I could point out that if Sonia is afraid, logically, as a woman in Australia, she has a much higher chance of being murdered by a man she knows, than a Muslim from another country.

And I could do all of this with the best intentions, but really, all I'd be doing is encouraging the inertia of outrage that spins the Gravitron that we're all on. I'd be fuelling the same cycle that has led to absolutely horrendous personal attacks on Sonia in the last 24 hours.

Sonia Kruger's not evil. She's scared and she's trying to make sense of the world. Yesterday, she admitted to not feeling safe. How do you think she feels now? And how do you expect her to react?

It's this cycle of legitimate fear that's met with hostility or derision that's led to more than 500,000 Australians voting for Pauline Hanson two weeks ago. These people are seeing the same images that you are, and this is their way of finding safety. And when we attack them, we spin the gravitron, and everyone's pushed further to the edge.

My point is that we're all now responsible for how this story's going to play out, and so I just want you to consider this: When we're presented with an outrageous opinion, we're actually presented with two options, destruction or construction. We can react emotionally and carelessly with little genuine critical thought, and we can destroy a perceived enemy in the hope that we'll neutralise the threat that's making

us feel unsafe. That's the destructive option. Or we can do something that's much more difficult than that. When we're presented with something that we perceive to be an outrageous opinion we can consider what motivated that person and try to understand their fear, and then empathise with how they came to their conclusion. Because the truth is that what motivates them is fear, and fear is the one thing we're all sharing right now because I'm scared too. I'm afraid for this country. I see such hostility and aggression, and I'm afraid about what it could do to this country. I'm terrified about what it's doing to my friends and my family. Honestly, I'm scared about where I belong.

Let me give you an example. You probably missed this this week, but *The Australian* chose to publish this letter from a reader,

It seems that the Nice terrorist was only a petty criminal and wasn't on a terror watch. That makes it worse because it underlines how there is not defence against these kinds of attacks. Eventually, the secular world is going to have to decide if it's going to accept these outrages as the new normal, or if it's actually going to do something other than lay flowers and mouth pointless platitudes. The solution is radical. We will have to consider internment. Outrageous? See if you can come up with an alternative. Malcolm Martin, The Entrance NSW

This is presumably an Australian man talking about locking up Muslims. People like me. Without trial or even allegation, in camps. And this comment was published in a national Australian newspaper,

You know, I get it. I get that this stuff is concerning and it's dangerous and the stakes are high and I'm right in the middle of those stakes. And we're afraid. Sonia, Pauline, Malcolm and me. We're all afraid. But, it's how you deal with that fear. You don't have to be calling for the incarceration of hundreds of thousands of innocent people to be acting destructively. You might just be angrily tweeting at someone who said something outrageous. But what I'm suggesting is while it feels good to choose destruction, right now I think we need to try construction. I'm not saying you should be silent in the face of bigotry.

But when you do engage with someone you disagree with, I'm talking about assuming the best in people, showing others radical generosity in the face of their hostility, even when it hurts. And this is the much harder choice because it demands much more restraint, and patience, and so much more strength.

I've lost count of the number of times I've seen outrage go viral. Wouldn't it be amazing if just once we could send forgiveness viral? These are dark times. But the best thing to do is reach for a flashlight, and not start a fire.