

Our Abuser's Humanity

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Often when survivors of abuse speak out against our abuser's behavior and control, we are approached by seemingly well-meaning people who exhort us to "remember" our abuser's humanity in the process, even going so far as to tell us to not use the term "abuser" at all, but person-first language like "person who abuses" just to make crystal clear to all who hear us that we put our abuser's humanity first. Anything less is, in their argument, counterproductive to creating change, because what is needed for change is to center the abuser's "healing" from their own abusive behavior.

There are a great number of frustrating and harmful aspects to this line of thinking, and foremost among them is the assumption that prioritizing an abuser's humanity is something that will challenge their abuse, rather than the very thing that upholds it. Far from being people who need reminding of their abuser's humanity, survivors are actually intimately connected with the reality of it, and it is that connection that has facilitated our entrapment in abusive relationships of all kinds. Our understanding of our abuser's humanity, our compassion for them, our usually incredibly deep understanding of their context and history that led them to become the person they are now, our acceptance of the myriad of excuses for their abusive treatment of us (ex: their traumatic past), are often key components to what keep many of us in abusive relationships. It is finally being allowed and encouraged to be in touch with *our humanity* and our anger at the way it is undermined and dismissed by abusers that allow us to dream of and strive towards escape.

Survivors are *intimately* aware of our abuser's humanity. It is our abusers that deny *our* humanity. When you tell survivors to quiet our our rage, to go back to accepting all manner of excuses for abuse, you are ultimately advocating for us to return to the conditions of the abuse itself. You're telling us to elevate our abuser's humanity above our own. Our abuser's past trauma matters when we challenge their abuse, but our own past trauma never does. Our abuser's feelings and comfort take precedent, ours are sidelined.

When people paternalistically tell us to remember our abuser's humanity, it becomes very clear that they have spent little to no time supporting survivors of abuse, as so much of our healing process is learning to accept that regardless of how good our abuser sometimes seems or how hurt they've been in the past that there's no excuse for us to be treated that way. When we actually get to the point where we can say "that was abusive and it is inexcusable" it's because we've done an incredible amount of work unlearning the messages forced into us by our abusers.

Messages that held their desires as paramount, while casting us in the role of subvertents to their whims.

Further, we must challenge the assumption that calling someone an “abuser” is something that calls their humanity into question in the first place. Do the people who have such a strong aversion to using other nouns to describe people? Must we call cops “people who police”, landlords “people who collect rent”, and bosses “people who coercively extract labor value”? Does neglecting to do so indicate that we don’t think cops, landlords, or bosses have human lives not fully encapsulated by these labels, or that we think they are incapable of becoming something different by waking up tomorrow and quitting their job? Surely not. In fact, a part of the utility of these labels doesn’t lay in negating humanity, but in being able to point to a social position a human being takes on that characterized by a dominating relationship over others. We call someone a landlord rather than “a person who collects rent” because while there are probably many other things that person is in the world, we’re *specifically* talking about the exploitative power they hold over others and, in doing so, make that power visible.

Referring to someone as an abuser doesn’t dehumanize them any more than calling someone a landlord does. What it *does* do is allow us to speak about an exploitative power imbalance and point to where the power lies, and it is my assessment that this is the real problem many people have with the term “abuser.” To call an abusive person an abuser isn’t to erase all the other aspects of their humanity. Not any more than calling ourselves survivors does that of us. We are talking, specifically, about an exploitative relationship that often remains invisible. When people advocate for person-first language instead, they are working to keep the reality of abuse unseen and unanalyzed.

Abuse is not individual pathology. It is not a tragic mistake. It is a system of power all on its own, structured to constrain, exploit, and co-opt the agency of the victim(s). There are abusers. They hold power. And they benefit from people being afraid to say so. They benefit from people continuing to enforce the conditions of the abuse by keeping focus on uplifting the abuser’s humanity rather than restoring a sense of humanity and value to the survivors from whom it was actively stolen. They benefit from people flinching back from pointing to the power relation that keeps abusers empowered as it steals and co-opts the power of their victims. Further, it denies the reality of the abuser’s own agency in the relation. Denies that, just like the boss, the cop, the landlord, they continue to make the choice to prioritize their own desire for sovereignty and power over others and thus could, at any time, decide to do differently.

Do survivors need your reminders that our abusers are also human? No, we do not. We know it intimately, for seeing and prioritizing our abuser’s humanity is the very task they used abuse and coercive control to shape us to perform. What we need is to be given space and support to make visible the power relation that oppressed/continues to oppress us. We need your affirmations of OUR humanity. We need your solidarity in challenging *anyone* who calls it into question in the first place.

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