

Have you ever heard of ASMR? It stands for autonomous sensory meridian response, and it's an embodied neurological phenomenon, experienced by some folks. It's often described as a sort of brain tingle. The most common triggers are soft whispering voices, certain, specific types of light tapping sounds, humming, or fluttering. It's usually a considered a very pleasant experience indeed, and for those lucky enough to feel this rather unique brain-based sensation, it can elicit feelings of relaxation and deep calmness, or a pronounced sense of wellbeing or even euphoria. ASMR content had a moment in the late 2010s with all kinds of folks posting stuff on Instagram, attempting to create that perfect ASMR sound and feel, and this is when I got kinda fascinated by it.

So when I heard this week that an ASMR video had been posted by the White House to its official Instagram account, I had to check it out.

And what I saw and heard horrified me.

The "ASMR" created for this reel begins with the drone of the jet engine we can see in the background of the frame, it then transitions to the repeating metallic sound of shackles being slowly pulled out of a plastic crate, the long chains, with their metal cuffs at their ends, jangle together, and then clink on the concrete as they're neatly laid out next to a number of other sets already in place on the ground. Next we hear the clicks of handcuffs being secured as a person, we only see from behind and from the neck down, has a full set of shackles securely fastened behind their back. The final sound we hear is the clanking of leg chains as someone, head bowed, and restricted in their movement by their cuffs and chains, slowly climbs the flight of steps to board the waiting plane, the shackles at their ankles knocking against the metal of the steps as they move.

The video, on the official Instagram page for the White House is titled: ASMR: Illegal Alien Deportation Flight.

Obviously I can't be sure of the motivation behind creating and posting this ... but, objectification and dehumanization is never a bit of a joke, it's never benign, it always serves a purpose, and it's old as the hills.¹ There's evidence of dehumanization being part of the human experience for as long as there have been records of human action and behavior. In fact, it seems it's crucial if we're to enslave, or dispossess indigenous folks from their land, or colonize, or persecute, if we're to discriminate or even criminalize folks based on skin color or gender, based on ethnicity, on physical or cognitive ability, or on sexuality, or class.

Objectification and dehumanization are the primary ways we humans 'other' the ones we intend to abuse, or oppress, or be violent towards, and remember: violence takes many forms. Generations of scholarship has shown that we humans are actually quite reluctant to inflict pain on each other ... unless, we've gone to some effort to no longer consider the target of our action to be like us, to be fully human. When we no longer see another as 'kin' or as 'neighbor' we're able to act in all kinds of abhorrent ways, fully justified in our actions, because that 'other' isn't like us and so certainly isn't deserving of the same dignity and respect we would show to one of our own.

I'm sure you need no reminding that the Nazis referred to Jewish people as subhuman, and vermin, that Hutu extremists who organized the Rwandan genocide called the Tutsi cockroaches and snakes,² the Israeli government has repeatedly used dehumanizing language about the Palestinians, calling them wild beasts, not human, and cancerous.³

¹ <https://aeon.co/essays/why-is-it-so-easy-to-dehumanise-a-victim-of-violence>

² <https://items.ssrc.org/insights/dehumanization-and-the-normalization-of-violence-its-not-what-you-think/>

³ <https://www.palestineadvocacyproject.org/quotes/>

And there are many examples of ways undocumented migrants in this country are consistently being othered in a similar way.

Dehumanizing or objectifying rhetoric will embolden those who are ready to internalize the language and believe it and perhaps act on it, and, it will also enrage those who oppose it. So the violence of dehumanization can easily escalate to become a source of conflict, and additional violences, spilling out in all directions, will inevitably result. Dehumanization will always be a source of great suffering, for those who are targeted, especially, and for those who are enraged, and for all those unwittingly caught up in the violence of it all.

And this is precisely where I found myself this week. Enraged, filled with all kinds of thoughts about “them” – and feeling quite satisfied about the righteousness of my response. The loud, repeating dialogue running through my mind was wrestling with what kind of people they could be, what kind of malfunctioning minds they must surely have, to think this was an appropriate video to post. They have no compassion, and no inherent ability to respect, or to maintain the dignity of a fellow human being, despite the circumstances. Words like demonic, heartless, cruel, and evil floated into my awareness ... not like me. Not like “my people.”

And then I realized where I was going, the well-trodden path I was walking. In my own way, in my response, I was doing my bit to keep the cycle going. I felt satisfied was fully justified, and yet I was dehumanizing and making those I disagreed with different from me; less than.

Jesus said, “I say to you that listen, Love your enemies ...”

But I only know that well-trodden path, I have no clue what a response rooted in love *really* would feel like, or be like - - but I’m pretty

confident, at least initially, it won't feel half as satisfying as the response that effortlessly arose from within me.

Jesus said to his disciples, Love your enemies – the great wisdom here, that struck me this week, is that in my own way, I was doing my bit to keep the great wheel of hate turning; when my response to abuses, to oppression and discrimination, also dehumanize, I am not doing a new thing. I am not insisting on healing, I am not insisting there is another way, born of love.

And I'm not entirely sure there's actually an alternative way, already in place, for me to find and follow, however hard I look for it. I think this other way, this new thing Jesus calls his followers to, is something born of the wilderness experience: perhaps I can only begin to understand what on earth he must have meant by Love your enemies if I set down all that I've practiced my whole life, my now-easy repertoire of responses, my thought out beliefs and opinions about how to counter and resist those I deeply and entirely and fundamentally disagree with; I have to set it all down and step into the wilderness of *not knowing*, trusting that my task as a follower of Jesus is to take seriously my faithfulness to him and to God, and that this will lead me in the right direction.

And then I felt the risk of that, how daunting it is to stand at the edge of an unknown landscape – what if I'm wrong?

Jesus never promised us safety or certainty, but the deep abiding love of God, and freedom, and fullness of life, and it's here I hope to find my courage to go into the wilderness of not knowing any other way, and to be transformed by that, and do my bit to break the cycle, to truly learn the meaning of Love your enemies.