

TALKING WITH STRANGERS – FOR BETTER OR WORSE

Lynne McKinnon
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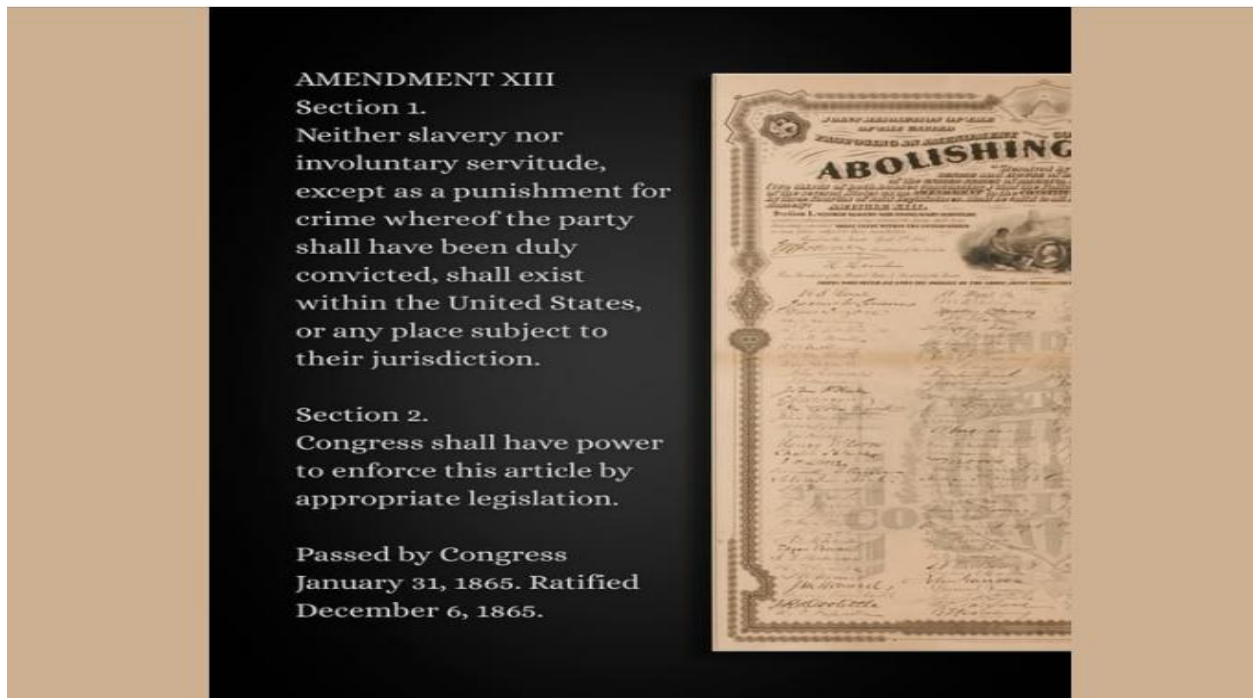
As with most of us, weekends and holidays give me a bit more time to indulge in surfing social media than usual. In early December I was splitting my leisure time between holiday preparations with family and friends, consuming way too much news and medicating myself with cat videos, and trying valiantly to finish some of the more interesting titles from the pile of books I had accumulated over the past 12 months (this last task was time-sensitive - I had already given my husband a list of new books to choose from for my Christmas gifts, so I wanted to clear the way, but more about this later).

Regarding social media, I don't usually engage at length in comment threads past a thumbs up, heart emoji, or brief positive comment. Family advice that goes back to princess phones and corner newsstands still holds true – 'if you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all,' 'don't let anyone put words in your mouth,' 'don't talk to strangers,' 'you've got two ears and one mouth for a reason.' But occasionally a post inspires a lengthier response. Such was the case when I saw U. S. Rep. Brad Schneider's Facebook post honoring the anniversary of the 13th Amendment. I wanted to offer my thanks for his acknowledgement with a brief paragraph, especially as I live in a community where not a lot of people look like me and my ancestors. It all began innocently enough, as these things often do:



Congressman Brad Schneider ✓
December 6 at 8:00 AM · 🌐

On this day in 1865, the 13th Amendment abolished slavery in the United States, a first step in the long fight for equality for Black Americans. We must never forget the horrors of slavery and must always reject every attempt to erase this shameful chapter of American history.



My initial comment was to thank the Congressman, and also to acknowledge some comments that preceded mine that argued - through the polarized lens of present politics - about which party supported the amendment. The comments that followed were enlightening, and not always in a good way. I might have just let them go unanswered, but after I'd spent a few days marinating in the sublime prose of Toni Morrison and the incendiary poems of Patricia Smith, I was a little more cranked up than usual. In particular, Morrison's Nobel Prize speech from 1993 spoke directly to the moment we are in now, a master class and warning on the use and misuse of language itself. I could not not respond.

I've reproduced below the comment thread and replies verbatim in italics, replacing only the names of commentators with unrelated initials; I retain my own initials as LM. My goal is not to call anyone out personally, but to ruminate on how we dialog and connect with each other across the divides that have simmered long, and now boil over from the heat of this new administration.

LM: *Thank you Congressman Schneider for recognizing this important amendment on this date. Regardless of which party passed it, it was the right thing to do, and that's the main point of it all. The Constitution counted my ancestors as only 3/5ths of a human being and unworthy of the same freedoms the Americans threw off the British to secure for themselves. The Founding Fathers were men of the Enlightenment and the most brilliant thinkers of their generation, but many of them also were slaveholders and unwilling to risk their own wealth and that of their class by extending freedom to the people they held in bondage. On this anniversary of the 13th Amendment we have the opportunity to think and talk more deeply about what really matters – how do we call out hypocrisy when we see it, push back against scapegoating people who look different, and work in our communities to form a more perfect union, promote the general welfare, establish justice and secure the blessings of liberty?*

HS: *I am sorry the county treated your ancestors so badly. They deserved so much more.*

NFE: *no they did not.*

HS: *LM, don't mind 'NFE'. She is clearly having a bad day and having a hard time being the sunny person we would all like for her to be. Let me be your sunbeam of a Karen today...and again, on behalf of both 'NFE' and myself and all white Americans, we owe you an apology. Our race wants to do better in this country.*

NFE: *The Three-Fifths Compromise did not pertain to an individual. It was a decision made during the Constitutional Convention of 1787 regarding the apportionment of representation and taxation among the states. The compromise counted three-fifths of each state's slave population toward that state's total population for the purpose of apportioning the House of Representatives and determining the number of electoral votes each state would be allocated. This decision was made to balance the interests of slaveholding states and free states.*

LM: *The Three-Fifths Compromise pertained to not one individual, but to generations of individuals who were enslaved and disenfranchised. The Founders aim in Article 1, Section 2 was to secure their rights (in this case, right to electoral representation) without extending similar rights to the enslaved people who secured the nation's wealth with their labor. In the '3/5ths clause' as well as other articles of the Constitution, the Founders' debate included extended discussion and decisions about how the status of the enslaved should be handled. This summary is from the website of the League of Women Voters; Gerry's 'argument' below was especially revealing: "On June 11, 1787, Roger Sherman of Connecticut proposed that only the free inhabitants of each state should count towards apportionment (distribution by state) of the House of Representatives. Edward Rutledge and Pierce Butler of South Carolina then proposed what became the Three-Fifths Compromise, suggesting that House seats be apportioned 'in proportion to the*

whole number of white & other free Citizens & inhabitants of every age sex & condition including those bound to servitude for a term of years and three fifths [sic] of all other persons not comprehended in the foregoing description, except Indians not paying taxes, in each State.' In other words, every white citizen, including indentured servants, would be counted as whole people, while Black citizens would be counted as three-fifths of a person. Elbridge Gerry, a delegate from Massachusetts (and later namesake of the term 'gerrymandering'), criticized the proposal, pointing out that because they were legally considered 'property,' enslaved persons had no more reason to be counted for apportionment than cattle or horses, as 'property' should not be represented in the legislature. About a month later, after the issue of apportionment was delegated to a committee for further discussion, the Three-Fifths Compromise resurfaced. Several delegates from the 'slave states' (southern states in which slavery was legal before the Civil War), led by Pierce Butler of South Carolina, proposed counting enslaved persons as equivalent to free inhabitants of the states. This would mean enslaved persons would be added to each state's population as though they were free citizens, despite having no voting rights or civil liberties. This would allow slave states to have more power in the House of Representatives without granting enslaved people any rights. This proposal was voted down. After further discussion, the delegates adopted the Three-Fifths Compromise and moved on to other business. Thus, enslaved Americans would be counted toward the electoral population of those states without the right to participate in society or be recognized as citizens."

CE: *Lynne clearly has zero concept of history. She should watch the play 1776 and the movie Amistad. Might help the clueless woman be less clueless.*

Someone else would have disengaged after the commentator suggested I should watch more movies and plays as I was clearly clueless, but morbid curiosity about where this might lead inched me forward.

LM: *As a matter of fact I have seen Amistad – an excellent film, also Amazing Grace, and the mini-series John Adams – but I don't get my history from movies, I get it from reading actual history books, and the US Constitution. You don't know me or what I know, and you don't need to insult someone to try to make a point.*

CE: *the 3/5 compromise was for counting representation. The founders had to compromise with the Southern states or there would not be a Revolutionary War. The brilliance was that they also knew slavery in the south would not last. We can amend the constitution. So we had 70 years of the 3/5th rule and we abolished it for 150 years and counting. Why not live in the present rather than constantly fighting the past? I too read extensively on history. I referenced the movie and play because together it only takes 4 hours of one's time to view them. Do movies and plays take liberties? Of course. But even history books do that as well to a certain extent.*

At this point, I began to lean toward leaving this thread as an 'agree to disagree' conversation; I had real things to do with people I actually know, and we seem to have entered the circle of talking past each other. But eight minutes later CE posted a second comment. His fervent response included novelties in spelling and capitalization, but that aside, something seemed to have slid off the rails, and I couldn't help but respond.

CE: *you are right. I don't know you. But reading your post shows you are a Democrat. The Democrat party has gone crazy ever since Newt Gingrich. Under Trump they won't even deal with him and just attack attack attack. Insanity. If you claim to know history, how is Trump and his supporters NAZIS? How is Trump being like Hitler? ICE agents are Gestoppo? Democrats allowed an invasion of illegals for 4 years. Trump was elected to stop the invasion, arrest the invaders, and send the invaders home. Why do 90% of African Americans support the ILLEGAL ALIEN INVASION? Makes no sense.*

LM: *Well, this thread began with Rep Schneider's acknowledgement of the anniversary of the 13th Amendment of 1865, so that's why history is the subject of these comments. But you (not I) felt it necessary to pivot to Nazis, the Gestapo, Newt Gingrich, ICE, President Trump, immigration and Democrats, so whatever. The Chicago Tribune reported on November 14th that of the 614 people who were arrested by ICE so far during the 'Midway Blitz', only 16 (2.6%) had a criminal history that posed a safety threat. The others scooped up in the ICE dragnet included people who were US citizens, people who were legally going through the asylum process, people who were showing up for their scheduled court appearances, and people who were handcuffed and hauled in off the street because of the color of their skin or the way they speak. The tactics of detaining people without probable cause, a warrant, a phone call or due process is unjust, unconstitutional, and yes, not unlike tactics used by Nazis against Jews and others who the state had targeted for removal and worse. You need only listen to President Trump's comments this week about Somali immigrants to hear echoes from the 'dehumanization playbook' used to convince the mainstream that some among us are suspicious on sight (another Nazi tactic, to turn neighbor against neighbor) and less worthy of the same human rights as 'regular' people. The very phrase 'illegal alien invasion' is designed to make people fleeing persecution or seeking a better life sound less like those who came in through Ellis Island, and more like vermin infesting our pristine property.*

Regarding political parties, I worked in DuPage County for 30 years in healthcare, working and talking on a daily basis with many people who didn't share my politics, but we shared the same values and commitment to support the best health care possible for everyone. We didn't let party affiliation divide us from our shared goal to serve the interest of the public. I can't speak to your 90% statistic because you didn't mention where it came from; I don't claim to speak for 90% of anyone, no more than I would expect you to speak for 90% of whatever group you're from. I don't know how many African Americans you actually converse with on a regular basis, but among my family, friends and church members we generally support legal apprehension and due process for any violent criminal no matter where they came from, and common-sense immigration laws. But we also recognize injustice and hypocrisy when we see it – and we've seen plenty since January 20th – so we are ultimately guided not by he who sits in the West Wing, but by Jesus' admonition in Matthew 25 and Luke 10 to do justice, welcome the stranger, and care for those in need.

After 3 days there was no response to my last post, but there was this news item, one of many that validated my concerns: [ICE Tackled a US citizen in the Snow: He Says He was Targeted for Being Somali](#) (Mother Jones, 12/11/25)

And this news to wrap up the year, indicating that even the military dead from World War II have not escaped this administration's callous disregard for the contributions and sacrifices of people of color: [U.S. removal of panels honoring Black soldiers at WWII cemetery in the Netherlands draws backlash](#) (NBC News/Associated Press, 12/30/25)

And as I write this barely one week into 2026, we have witnessed this administration's pardon and release of one former head of state convicted of drug trafficking, capture and arrest of another head of state for very similar charges, and renewed threats of expansion of American power – by force if necessary - into Latin America and Greenland. The ousting of Nicolas Maduro from Venezuela has been met with near universal praise, but the vision of what comes next varies based on who is speaking for the administration; the only consistent message seems to be the need to extract treasure from Venezuelan soil 'for the good of the people': [Trump says US to get 30 million to 50 million barrels of oil from Venezuela at market price](#) (Associated Press, 1/6/26).

Things are moving quickly, but some things never change. Toni Morrison warned us in her Nobel lecture in 1993 - “The systematic looting of language can be recognized by the tendency of its users to forgo its nuanced, complex, mid-wifery properties for menace and subjugation. Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge. Whether it is obscuring state language or the faux-language of mindless media; whether it is the proud but calcified language of the academy or the commodity driven language of science; whether it is the malign language of law-without-ethics, or language designed for the estrangement of minorities, hiding its racist plunder in its literary cheek – it must be rejected, altered, and exposed. It is the language that drinks blood, laps vulnerabilities, tucks its fascist boots under crinolines of respectability and patriotism as it moves relentlessly toward the bottom line and the bottomed-out mind. Sexist language, racist language, theistic language – all are typical of the policing languages of mastery, and cannot, do not permit new knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of ideas.”

Facts matter. Truth matters. Context and cause and effect matter. History matters. This should be as self-evident as our Declaration that ‘all men are created equal...endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights.’ But when Constitutional order and even this very Declaration are under threat, we the people must not be silenced. In these conversations and connections with neighbors and strangers, ignorance cannot have the last word. And because sometimes a picture is worth a thousand words, I’m giving the last word here to some potent messages from the No Kings Rally in Gurnee, Illinois in October 2025.







