

WHAT TO DO IF SOMEONE DEFAMES YOU ON THE INTERNET

A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

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Note: Because the Internet is considered “written” material, defamation on the Internet is generally considered libel rather than slander. In any case, being maligned in print can be considered defamation of character and that is addressable under the law.

A Personal Assessment

Most people have been unwise at some point in their lives. We seem to all have that much in common. Most people have made the mistake of saying unkind things to others, and many of us have written annoying memos to others. As the saying goes, “Speak first, think later, regret forever.” I don’t know anyone, including myself, that doesn’t fit into that category from time to time.

The sad thing is not really that we do these things, though that is bad enough. The heartbreaking part is when we refuse to learn from our mistakes. But, the greatest misfortune of all is when we persist in our foolishness without improvement. I am actually relieved to admit that I do make mistakes, though I am certainly not proud of them, but my goal is to improve. I want to continue to grow.

I have said a few unwise things in my life, but I am also happy to note that I have made it a practice to improve at every place where I see my need. Humility does not come easily to anyone; we all come from a long line of pride and pain. Not an excuse, just a fact. But, I remind myself that a sincere practice of self-examination and a desire to improve one’s character is a truly good and useful process. By the grace of God, I am making a little bit of progress, for which I am deeply grateful.

So what I am about to write here comes from the school of bumps and bruises, and from a great deal of internal scrutiny. What would you do if you saw something written about you on the Internet, something that was unflattering, lopsided, intended to defame you, even something spiteful? Should you be gracious, or should you go on the attack? These are tough questions.

This paper is designed to give some food for thought about what one should think and do when one sees such things in the public square. What is the right thing—what is the wise thing to do? I hope the following thoughts might be a helpful.

Thanks in advance for following along with me as I explore some personal thoughts on the growing problem of Internet defamation, or what one ABC reporter called, Cybersabotage¹.

Become a discerning reader

To believe everything one reads on the Internet, or hears in a public venue is undiscerning. Discernment comes with maturity. Learning how to make wise evaluations is essential for survival in this world. It is the stuff of which rich and enduring relationships are made.

Because no one is entirely good or completely rotten we all ought to be cautious about the opinions we form of others, especially if those opinions are attached to documents that defame or malign another. For all the many accurate things one may say about someone they are defaming, I have learned that the one who smears another’s character is often committing just as great an injustice as the original offender, for there are legitimate avenues through which to place

complaints, and better ways to dissent than to take it on one's self to malign another in a public venue. Speak evil of no one. As the old proverb goes, "If we truly practiced the rule of, 'an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, the whole world would be blind and toothless;" I do believe this is a fair assessment.

A One-sided Affair

One reason for this is because things like Internet defamation is a one-sided affair that makes it difficult to fairly assess discord between individuals. I have read many blogs that made me blush, and rather sick to my stomach, because of the verbal cruelty practiced by some bloggers. Is it the anonymity that makes certain people feel they can say anything to anyone on line? Perhaps.

It is almost as if one automatically wins an argument on the Internet simply by publishing a defaming remark about someone in this very public format.

There is no way for the reader to make a wise evaluation about what is said about the person caught in the cross-hairs of the libelous remarks. This sort of tactic is similar to a terrorist attack.

The strike is made covertly, without warning to those affected by it, and it renders any satisfactory rebuttal difficult, if not impossible. The hit is made, the damage done. In many cases (but not all), Internet service providers are reluctant to get involved or to remove a defaming statement.

The Internet can be a bit like the Wild West, people killing each other in cold blood. There is often no justice to be found, and no marshal in town.

Serious Issues for Young People

Sometimes kids think it's funny to say cruel things online, and it would be almost tolerable if it weren't so damaging to the lives of those they criticize. Cyber-bullying is a very real problem for young people, and should be taken seriously by parents, teachers and guardians. There are cases where kids have committed suicide because of what was written, or revealed, or said about them online.

There are some, who, when engaging in cyber-sabotage, have nothing but sinister motives. They intend, for whatever reasons, to do tangible harm to another person. Is this not a violent act, especially when words meant for harm succeed? This behavior is not only unkind; it is, in fact, illegal. When one defames another person – especially for the purpose of doing them harm – it is not only immoral, it is scandalous. There are laws in every state, and in every country against smearing another's character, especially when it affects their livelihood or reputation in the community. I know of no society that sanctions such behavior, and there need to be enforceable laws to protect *everyone* from defamatory statements. The problem is in definition of the word, and in enforcement. So, until such a time as that is possible, the question remains, do we have what it takes to exercise self-control in what we publish about others in public?

presented in an argument, especially on the Internet, is biased. Even *this* opinion paper is biased – in favor of restraint and humanity. This posting is biased toward intelligent self-control. Why, because it seems reasonable—in the best interest of everyone—and because it is good. Is goodness important to us anymore?

We ought to be willing to suspend our judgments of others until we know the whole story. In addition, we ought to be reluctant to step into the middle of someone else’s trouble. It is wiser to avoid controversy than to explore. Trouble always soils us. Entering a fight that is not our own is an invitation to heartache and misunderstanding. Ancient wisdom tells us that *love covers a multitude of sins* – there is wisdom in keeping controversy out of the public square. There are so many legitimate and vital matters over which to become passionate, engaging the private matters of others is probably better left off that list.

How Would You Feel?

In addition, consider how you would feel if you were slandered or libeled, or defamed, especially in a public forum. Such things are intended to be hurtful, and they are, but not just one side gets hurt, everyone involved gets hurt. Public defamation is like a hidden animal trap that wounds not only the intended victim, but the innocent passer-by as well.

Those who launch public smear campaigns always do so out of questionable motive. I rarely say “always,” but I cannot think of an instance in which such campaigns are not genuinely questionable.

Sometimes frustration and vengeful feelings drive these things, and ignorance fuels them. Some folks intend on inflicting pain on others. They want to punish someone, so they use this public forum—a forum in which one cannot properly defend oneself—to exact their revenge. Such acts are simply violence without overt bloodshed, and I don’t see how it can ever be thought to be the right or just.

These Internet offenders often fiercely defend their behavior. They can depict themselves as a champion, a go-getter, who will single-handedly expose for all to see, the perceived errors of others. Some of these defamers seem to have something special to prove to themselves and their audience, and some simply think themselves superior to others, not caring who they hurt in the process. They don’t mind collateral damage. Some actually enjoy it, as if it is a joke or a sport.

Nothing New

I have witnessed many things in Internet-exchanges, including gloating over widening the damage from personal wars.

Once, while doing my undergrad work at Indiana University, there were two students posting insults on a bulletin board. It started over an article one had published in the campus newspaper. Their abusive invectives went on for weeks, each insulting response was worse than the one that preceded it. It was painful to

watch, and I couldn't help wondering about the character of these two guys who were locked into this deplorable behavior. It wasn't long before I and everyone else turned away from these ghastly rebuttals. Each one was an attack on everything possible in the other person's character. It degraded to the level of insulting each other's mother. It was truly sickening.

What did either of these guys hope to achieve? How could either one declare victory when such terrible things had been said by both? Each was hoping to bring others in the university onto "their side." The more they could sway others, the more they convince themselves they were in the right, but both were in the wrong. Nothing good can come of such things. In the end, this was not a struggle over what was said in the original article, it was nothing more enlightened than a power-struggle and ego-bashing; nothing else. Winning – whatever that might have meant to these guys – winning, seems to prove to them that one was better than the other. Neither was better. Both were disgusting. I don't think these kinds of confrontations show strength of character, or "rightness; quite the contrary.

A General Rule of Conduct

Of course, the best way to avoid these things is to keep a low profile, but sometimes that is not possible. Perhaps the general rule of thumb should be – that which is private should remain private; that which is done in public should be addressed publicly. People who make their private matters public are at the very least, unwise, and cannot hope to settle their differences in the public forum, but maybe settling the differences is not the goal. It is hard to tell what the motive might be at times.

Many times there is no way to settle personal differences, and people learn there is deeper wisdom in living and letting live. Once damage has been done in the public square, it is very difficult, and sometimes impossible to undo it.

Words Can Be Weapons

Words really can be weapons, and they have the power to wound and maim. No human being on the planet is guiltless in these matters. We all have said, and will say things that hurt others – either deliberately or accidentally – but we all should keep working at improving how we speak about others, and what we say. "*A word excellently spoken is like apples of gold in bowls of silver.*" In other words, they are beautiful and priceless, a joy and a wonder to all who see them.

Caution

Some people who vilify others may be disturbed in their minds, and it is more than difficult to correct an emotionally disturbed person. You may just be stirring up more strife than you bargained for. If you choose confrontation, be sure you are ready for dirty tactics from the offender. Pain and impertinence await you. Consider that. Sometimes, however, you have no choice. You just have to go after the offender, but be sure you do it through the law, and never ever take matters

into your own hands. Whatever you do, do it cautiously, considering consequences and negative possibilities. Weigh your options carefully.

Things are not always what they seem.

Neither the things stated, nor the motives behind what others say/write can be clearly seen. It is best to stay away from ascribing motive to the offender. Motives cannot be seen. Only behavior can be seen, and behavior is always open to interpretation. An offender's statements may go into great detail about a situation or a person, but one can be certain that defamation is rarely concerned with telling the whole story. It is deliberately one-sided. It obscures the truth more than reveals it.

Not All That is Written is Accurate

One of the phenomena of the Internet is that it creates a feeling that what is written is somehow also true, or that the one doing the writing is automatically credible. This is a shortcoming of the written word. One should always think critically about what one reads or hears, especially online. One should do their own independent research. If it is a subject that interests you, search out the entire matter, and not just what the offender has said. Look at all the facts you can find.

It is not merely difficult to know what is true about people based on Internet accounts, it is *impossible*. Too much is left out. Many injustices have been loosed into our world through the Internet. Anyone can say anything they want at any time, but that does not make it true. Be a good researcher. Look beyond the Internet.

Will Our Better Angels Rule?

The real question is, will this wonderful gift of the Internet merely degenerate into a petty heckling device, whereby people proclaim outrageous and catty things about each other, or will it allow our better angels to come forward in decency and good judgment? Will the Internet bring out the worst in us, or something better? As for me, I refuse to be pulled into endless demeaning denigration of others. I am hoping for a better day, and working toward it with practical actions, like with this article.

More Heat than Light

Things are not always what they seem. In fact, things are rarely ever what they seem. I am not perfect, but I do sincerely try to give the benefit of the doubt to all parties and walk away from confrontations. I have not always succeeded, but I am making every effort to grow in this. Though not pristine, I do endeavor to keep my own hands clean from every form of unbecoming speech about others. I strive to forget or ignore cutting remarks people say about each other, or those others have said about me. I have discovered that trying to get to the bottom of defamatory remarks about others always generates more heat than light, and creates more distortion than clarity. I am learning new ways to avoid being soiled by these verbal mud-slinging sessions.

What Is Not Said May Be More Important Than What Is Said

We are all painfully aware that we (and everyone else in the world) say things we regret, but just as important as what we say is what we don't say. Arguments, disagreements, or verbal assaults are not necessarily what one would call "effective communication." It is a wonder that we haven't yet figured that out.

The Shouting Game

If you see an argument unfolding, or read something defamatory about another person, know for certain that you are not witnessing responsible reporting. FOX NEWS is a great example of this new "shouting-culture." People screaming at each other may be momentarily entertaining but one is not likely to come away from a shouting game with a deeper understanding of the facts, or an appreciation of significant nuances of divergent viewpoints. I always wonder what was *not* said in those shouting matches that should have been said.

Putting Others Down

Sometimes people are shouted down before they have a chance to present their views accurately, and sometimes those who control the argument withhold information from coming to the fore in the argument – be that good or bad. In other cases those holding an opposing view are simply mocked and maligned. Is this civilized behavior? I know, I have been guilty of this myself, but that does not mean I am pleased about it. It is plainly unacceptable. I am determined to do better than that. Perhaps we all could do better than that. Do you want to be better than that? We all can improve. We all hear a lot – but do we really listen?

There are times when what is **not said** is just as important as what actually was said. Sometimes it is even more important than what **was** said. I look for silences. I look to the questions posed but unanswered. It is there I often find the details for understanding important parts of the story.

Avoid Being Manipulated

In every Internet argument, in every defaming story online, in each malignant thing said about another person in a one-sided public attack, you can be certain that you are witnessing manipulative speech intended to distort rather than illuminate. It is my belief that the mature person does not seek to do either of these things. A wise person seeks reconciliation and peace.

Electronic Bombers

It seems to me that those who publish abroad the failures or shortcomings (real or supposed) of others are either ignorant of the trouble they make, or they are aware of their spitefulness and seek some kind of personal fulfillment through inflicting suffering on others. Their words are like electronic bombs. This is not the kind of person I want to be. I doubt this kind of person could ever bring either enlightenment or benefit to society through such verbal coercion, even if everything they said was 100% accurate (which is fairly unlikely). We all need to

ask ourselves about the intent of our words. This doesn't mean we can't speak the truth, but the truth from the wrong motivation can do more harm than good. We can all think of times when we have seen that happen. No one should be subjected to criticism devoid of human concern.

Offenders Have Been Offended

In some cases a person who lashes out at another online may have been deeply wounded by someone against whom they cannot retaliate, or against some force they feel powerless to combat, so they strike at others whom they think represent the former offender. They fight a kind of shadow-war against straw-men who don't really exist. They make enemies of people who are not their enemies at all. They see in every confrontation an echo of some previous battle they lost, and take a swing at anyone or anything that reminds them of the pain of their former defeat. They project. They just never get over their feelings of humiliation or weakness, or whatever, so they fight on, lash back, try to even the score.

On one level, a wounded person can be duly pitied, but in the long run, they will harm themselves far more than they had hoped to harm their supposed enemies. This is a sad fact of life. There are many examples of this in our society. Fighting, even murder, and all sorts of violence get generated when people hold onto hard feelings. Sometimes it is in one's own best interest to just let go of one's own offenses. It really is possible to get un-stuck, and to move on to something better.

The Intelligent Way

There is a profound intelligence in learning to forgive those who have hurt you. The greatest hindrance to one's self is unforgiveness. One can find liberation from the bondage of offenses. One can move on. Endlessly striving to correct a wrong done; trying to put the genie of pain back into the bottle; attempting to undo the injury that was inflicted is an exercise in futility.

Who is Guiltless?

We have all offended, and we have all been offended. This is part of life. As for me, I choose to move forward, not backward. I am happy to help my brothers and sisters heal from their wounds, but I refuse to let others drag me into their pain simply because they cannot move forward. We must all move forward, or perish in our anguish. I do not choose to remain in a state of torment. I desire to heal and to be a help to others in their suffering.

Forgiveness is deep stuff, and difficult, but it truly is do-able.

Forgiveness heals the one offended, regardless of what the offender does.

Forgiveness makes it possible for the offended one to move forward.

What is forgiveness? It is not naively sweeping the offense under the rug. It is sensibly releasing the offense and the offender, and getting on with one's life.

Forgiveness is Not Generic

Of course, there is no such thing as a “one size fits all” kind of forgiveness. It is different for each person and for each situation, but each of us should look into this miracle-working act and find a way to forgive and move on. The fact is, companies can exercise forgiveness. Nations can exercise forgiveness. It is in the best interest of every entity to learn how to forgive. Justice and forgiveness are not mutually exclusive, they are connected.

Forgetting is Not Required

This does not mean we will forget the wrong done. It means we are able to find a path beyond it. Unfortunately, some folks are so damaged that they scoff at the notion of forgiveness. They are consumed with the overwhelming desire to get even, and so, ruin the life they could have had, and the good they could have done perishes forever. They not only lose the battle, in the end, they lose their own self. With great sorrow it is true that some are so consumed with anger and anguish, that they end their lives badly; they never find the healing that forgiveness could have brought into their lives. They remain stuck with a festering wound forever.

Does the Characterization Match the Person?

When you read or hear something bad someone says about another person, ask your self, “Does this defamation match what is generally known to be true about the person being defamed?” Most often it does not. People are complex entities, and even the “bad guys” (in most cases) have redeeming qualities. No one is totally evil, and no one should be totally demonized. Even if the defamer is telling the truth about some bad thing the accused is being sited for, there is still some good to find in our fellow humans. We are, after all, siblings of one family on this tiny planet. If you were to meet the person being defamed, you might think something different of them than what was stated by the one who besmirches them.

Give the Benefit of the Doubt

When in doubt, give the benefit of the doubt. Unless one just likes controversy, the general rule ought to be that it is better to turn away from a bad report about someone than it is to dig deeper into that matter. The truth will come out in time. Getting to know the one defamed is the remedy for any defamation.

What to Do if You are Defamed, Slandered, or Libeled

In these days, people can say anything they want about you. They can invade your life, your privacy, ruin your credit, and can say all manner of evil about anyone, almost with impunity.

Modern communications and especially the Internet have made this possible on a global scale. Everyday there are lawsuits and arguments over things that people say online. So, what should you do if this happens to you?

It All Depends

First, it depends on how serious it is. If it is truly serious, seek legal counsel immediately, and see if you can convince the ISP on which this libelous material is located to remove it from their servers. Be polite. Ask nicely. Explain your position. When they respond, you will then know how you should proceed.

If it is not serious, a good sense of humor and a little humility might make it palatable, even if it never goes away.

The weakness with any defamation is that it attempts to freeze-in-time a single image of a person or a group, but life is too dynamic, too multifaceted for that. Even if the details of a particular defamation were precise, life goes on. People change; time itself mollifies every form of slander. It puts each into perspective to the whole of one's behaviors – not allowing any single slander to stand on its own.

No one stands still in life. Even after being defamed, life goes on, if you want it to. People continue to build on their life everyday. They continue to act in this world. If they act well, they can overcome the tongues of slander. If they do not act well, then those deeds will follow them too. The dynamic nature of living makes it impossible to entirely sum up an individual by one single negative sketch. Life is too complex for that. Maligning someone is simply irrational. It might do transitory damage, there is no doubt about that, but it is not as strong as is a life consistently well-lived. Just because someone slanders you, that does not make you the person they say you are. You are yourself. Live like it.

People *do* change; even corporations and institutions change. Criticism can make us better, even if it is distorted or flatly untrue.

The sad fact is that people do bad things in this world. They can be vicious with their words. They can be intractable in their actions. They can be legalistic and demanding of their “pound of flesh,” but they often inflict more pain on themselves than on others. This is an unfortunate reality in this world. Very fine people have had careers negatively impacted by spiteful narratives, and good folks have been assaulted by evil-doers. That is always a risk in this world, and it is not likely to go away any time soon. This is one reason why we have laws and courts to handle issues of defamation, slander and libel. If you do something someone does not like, you **will** be spoken evil of. Each of us must come to terms with this fact of life.

Write a Rebuttal

Second, write a rebuttal to the defamation. You might want to tell your own version of the story, but this can be a problem too. How you write your rebuttal will certainly be picked apart. It is not likely that the defamer will let your words stand without another rebuttal, especially if they are what Jack Nicholson calls a “last word freak.” They will not suffer you to have the last word. These people are

extreme and you would do well to cross to the other side of the street when possible.

Whatever you do, do not lose your cool. Do not resort to name-calling, or to threats. Stay calm. Take things in stride. Act, of course, but do so logically, deliberately and with measured wise counsel. You can trust that good is stronger than evil, and that you will be able to overcome any bad words with goodness and consistently positive action. It has been said that “living well is the best revenge.” So, live well.

Could Mary Poppin Have it Right?

Remember the simple wisdom of Mary Poppins, when asked to explain herself by her employer, she frankly stated, “I never explain myself. My enemies would not believe it, and my friends don’t require it.” This may not always be an option, sometimes one must tell their own side of the story in order to set the record straight, but do not be under any delusion that doing so will improve the mind or behavior of your nemesis. Nor will it change the mind of your truest friends. A friend of mine once said, “A friend is someone who knows exactly what you are, and doesn’t give a damn!” This may be crudely stated, perhaps, but it is truer than true. Your real friends do not heed slander against you. Note them. Honor them.

Live well, make new friends and hold them close. Seek to become stronger and better by the things you experience in this life. Moving on is better than getting even. That kind of behavior simply bogs one down in the mire of the defamation wars. Never be afraid to fight for what is right, but do not imagine that you will vanquish evil or malignity by one simple act; most of the time it takes persistence in building a good life and a respectable reputation. Nevertheless, you **can** light a candle and brighten the corner where you stand. Sometimes this is enough to begin the process. Overcoming evil with good can be as effortless as refusing to return evil for evil. You can stop it in its tracks by merely not passing it on. This takes courage, patience and faith that good is stronger than evil.

It May Not Be That Simple

There is no either-or situation in these matters. Sometimes one has to do numerous things. Just be certain that if you do decide to fight, that you have the stronger heart and the wisest counsel you can find. Be serious about it and determined to see it through to its finish. Realize that it is entirely possible that you will not win the battle against your accuser in this life time, but also realize that you will have the satisfaction that you were not passive either.

You May Have to Fight For It

Sometimes it is important to fight, even if you know you will lose the battle. These are things each of us must weigh in prayer, and in our hearts. God will defend you, even if others will not. You can trust that you have a friend in Him. He knows what it is like to be defamed by cruel speech.

It may be that this will happen to you, or someone you love. It may even impact your career. Often employers will Google their prospective employees to find out more about them. When they see unkind things written against a potential employee online, they can become skittish and decide not to even interview the person. This is a terrible injustice, and it plays into the hands of the cruelty of the slanderer. It perpetuates narrow-mindedness and spreads the offense of the mischaracterization.

Sometimes good people are scared off by malice. This too is part of life. I don't blame people for being frightened away, but I do hope and pray that they grow to maturity and recognize defamation for what it is – and fight it by including the people they see maligned; if for no other reason than to resist malevolence in this world, and give each person their rightful opportunity to stand on their own.

What About Hiring Someone Ridiculed Online?

If you are ever an employer and see this kind of thing happen to a person whom you are considering for a position in your company, it would be important not to let unfair Internet libel harm a good person's reputation. It would not only be a shame, but it give strength to the very thing that may attack you in the future. We all have an moral obligation to resist this form of tyranny. At the very least, an employer should question other witnesses who know the applicant best in order to establish a more reliable view of the candidate's character. Personal knowledge should always trump the malicious words of a cyber-malcontent. Don't be fooled.

Does Karma Apply to the Internet?

As the saying goes, "What goes around comes around." Someday it may be you, yourself, at the mercy of an Internet verbal-sniper. Wouldn't you would want others to give you the benefit of the doubt rather than buying into some distorted view of yourself? The golden rule is especially apropos on the Internet. *Do to others what you desire them to do for you.* In all of these things, being gracious with each other can overcome the many evils intended by those who exploit Cyber-sabotage to attack, malign, defame, abuse, punish or insult others.

Resistance Is Not Futile – Eliminate Internet Bullying

I believe that we should all fight this kind of cyber-crime. If we do not resist it, we dare not complain when such verbal violence harms those we love and care for. And, finally, be sure that you yourself are not guilty of this petty behavior. Stand taller than those who use these irresponsible juvenile bullying tactics. Prove yourself of better quality by remaining above this unwise and malicious conduct. You will be a benefit to yourself and a pleasant relief to the whole world.

Resources:

Disclaimer – These are merely sites on the internet that discuss this issue. They range from free advice to services and publications. It should not be construed that I endorse any of these individuals, these sites, or the content on these sights. The views they discuss or advocate are their

own and do not reflect the views of this writer in any way. These resources are offered only as indicators of websites that discuss various issues of Internet defamation, and nothing more.

1. Tory Johnson: How to Avoid Cybersabotage – *much of what you post online can't be considered private* / ABC News – Good Morning America –
<http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/TakeControlOfYourLife/story?id=2933734&page=1>

2. C.A.: Defamatory Internet Postings Libel, Not Slander
<http://www.metnews.com/articles/vari111403.htm>

3. Defamation and Slander on the Internet

By Nicholas Deleault

<http://ezinearticles.com/?Defamation-and-Slander-on-the-Internet&id=422889>

4. Internet Defamation

Guide to Defamation, Libel, and Slander.

Includes extensive information about online defamation,
plus research from jury verdict reports and online resources.

<http://www.dancingwithlawyers.com/pubs/id-gawl.shtml>