

An American Education

The Richard Sherman Trilogy

By Jeremiadus

Jeremiadus.com

May 23, 2014

Contents

The Howl.....	3
Straight Out of Compton	7
The Mugging of Richard Sherman	13
Better at Life.....	28

The Howl

Race, Celebrity, and Social Change

May 23, 2014



Every so often, events (generally of a flamboyant or prurient or violent nature) lift an athlete from obscurity and hurl him (or her) into the TMZ/Gawker/Deadspin spotlight typically reserved for global celebrities such as Charlie Sheen, Miley Cyrus, Justin Bieber, Kim Kardashian, and Snooki. Among football players, recent recipients of this kind of doomed celebrity status include Tim Tebow and Johnny Manziel,

Aaron Hernandez, and Darren Sharper. In our gridiron hero's moment of suspect glory, celebrity klieg lights pin him like a moth, objectified, bleached and irradiated in the court of public opinion. It is not a pretty sight.

Richard Sherman is different, for many reasons. Recently named one of the 100 most influential people in the world by *Time Magazine*, Sherman's interest to us results from the way that he has successfully blended on-field heroics, off-field histrionics, and trenchant social commentary, perhaps to a degree unprecedented among our athletes since Muhammad Ali. Richard Sherman has not been afraid to use his fame to drive the conversation about race, sports, and society in the United States. As an African-American, and as a man who actually thrives in the light, but does not need it to grow, Sherman has single-handedly shifted attention to some of the most important themes of our time, regarding the prejudices that inhibit and divide us, and the empathy that can unite us.

Sherman, who from an early age excelled in the classroom and on the athletic field, and who has always possessed outsized confidence and charisma, might argue that fame has not changed him; that people now only notice him for what he always has been. Nonetheless, his celebrity status, normally the prelude to either a slide into notoriety or absorption into a stultifying, "brand-focused" conformity, has given him a clear voice and reputational credibility, and to date he has used both well, partly to leverage a historically munificent contract with the Seahawks, but equally, and truly without artifice or calculation, to leverage social change.

The essays included in this collection were all written and published on the Jeremiadus.com website in the months following Richard Sherman's nationally televised, emotional assault on his haters in the waning moments of the NFC championship game against the San Francisco 49ers. Sherman had tipped away what would have been a touchdown pass from Colin Kaepernick to Michael Crabtree, thereby sending the Seahawks to the Super Bowl, where they would cap a remarkable season by pulverizing Peyton Manning and the Denver Broncos. When Erin Andrews thrust the microphone under his chin, seconds later, Sherman let loose with a primal howl of pain, anger, and joy which, if clearly not jubilation, represented catharsis on an epic scale.

By decisively claiming the Super Bowl victory and so ascending to the top of the highest mountain in sport, Richard Sherman instantly silenced the many critics who in previous months deplored his own unwillingness to remain silent, and who applied to him, with various adjectival embellishments, the loaded epithet "thug", evincing a different kind of howl, a voice not of triumph against the odds, but of fear and ignorance.

The unifying theme of these three essays is that Richard Sherman's catharsis deserves scrutiny. My general, and often unstated, conclusion is that Sherman, much like Muhammad Ali in the late 1960s, presently embodies the most important social tensions, and thereby the most significant social growth opportunities, of our time. Like Ali, Sherman is the proverbial nail

who defeats the hammer. He is a one-man meme machine who won't go away. And so he irritates us, frustrates us, and fascinates us. But like Muhammad Ali, Richard Sherman also instructs us, and so over time can actually change us. For this reason, the education of Richard Sherman is also truly America's education.

Straight Out of Compton

The Education of Richard Sherman

April 3, 2014



Richard Sherman ignited a national conversation when, posting on the *Sports Illustrated* MMQB blog, he [defended](#) homeboy DeSean Jackson and delivered a cornerback smackdown to the Philadelphia Eagles organization for releasing Jackson because of alleged ties to Los Angeles gang members.

Before addressing larger issues Sherman spotlights, let's clear out the underbrush.

First, the Eagles organization has not disclosed the basis for the decision to release DeSean Jackson. While it is true that a South Jersey newspaper [revealed](#) some of Jackson's less savory hometown connections, his departure from the team may have been over-determined, in that many partial explanations exist for this decision to part ways, and none appears to take primacy over any of the others. The need to pay Jackson handsomely going forward was clearly an issue — money is never not an issue in the NFL. But while no one disputes Jackson's prodigious gifts as a receiver, he also was allegedly not beloved in the Eagles locker room and was widely viewed as a player who cared more about himself than his teammates. Jackson and head coach Chip Kelly apparently did not connect personally, and Jackson's fit within Kelly's up-tempo offensive scheme remains unclear.

Second, in the absence of any way to know for sure (over-determination and obfuscation go hand in hand), we can assume that Jackson's somewhat adolescent stylings and dubious associations simplified the decision of the Eagles to let him go. Putting aside a larger conversation about the Hobbesian state of nature inhabited by professional football players (*a war of all against all, continual fear of violent death, the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short*), teams part company every year with players like Jackson, who are in the prime of their career, and generally no one suffers inordinately on behalf of the departed player.

With a typically rear-view mirror approach to decision-making, however, the Eagles seem to have filtered DeSean Jackson's future with the team through the lens of Aaron Hernandez, and if the gang affiliations mattered, it was probably because the team was going to make absolutely sure no one could accuse them of not properly acting on the warning signs. In other words, the Eagles hedged pretty radically toward protecting their image, without perhaps much regard for the accurate interpretation of these gang-banging "warning signs", and therefore (probably too willingly) accepted the risk they might lose a terrific player, to a team in their own division (the Redskins), who would have every incentive, twice each season, to torch the organization that spurned him.

Third, the Eagles surely did not count on Richard Sherman sabotaging their desire to keep this story a blip in the news cycle. We can all admire Derrick Ward's [remarkable](#) Twitter rant about the smug, rampant ignorance of the ESPN corporate drones smogging up the airwaves with empty, self-important chatter about DeSean Jackson's gang affiliations and character. However, no one these days owns Richard Sherman's remarkable ability to claim the attention of the nation. While Sherman's candor surfaces some ugly responses, the ugliness actually signals the value and importance of his message, which is both more nuanced and more global than many of those most irked by him realize. And in the reaction to his MMQB post, the argument almost (but never quite) rose above the stew of hostile bile typically stirred up by stories involving sports and race.

Much has been made of parallel DeSean Jackson — Riley Cooper storylines. Talented Eagles wide receivers born within a year of each other. One black, the other white. One rises out of South Central Los Angeles and consorts with Snoop Dogg. The other hails from Florida and favors Kenny Chesney. The Eagles discipline one for gay slurs, the other for racial slurs. The Eagles sign the white athlete to a long-term contract and release the black athlete. Of course, Richard Sherman can't resist tapping the Shakespearean dynamics of these twinned storylines—Othello pitted against Iago. However, it would be a mistake to reduce his post to a statement of racial solidarity with his Compton Little League bro.

Richard Sherman is not about “Can’t we all get along?” He is about “Can’t we all understand each other.” Richard Sherman, in pretty much everything he’s said on-air and written online, is about explaining to Americans what it means to grow up in a poor, racially isolated, gang-infested, geographically bleak and endless community like South Central Los Angeles. He is about humanizing inner-city African-Americans and in the process building a foundation for a conversation about race, poverty, inequality, and ignorance that can elevate all of us to a higher plane of existence, simply because we do better understand each other and do better appreciate our common humanity and shared national identity.

In the DeSean Jackson post, Richard Sherman is not passing judgment on DeSean Jackson. He is not passing judgment on LA gangsters. He really is not even passing judgment on Riley Cooper. What Richard Sherman is instead doing is bringing us inside his community, and (as in the

movie *Pleasantville*) suffusing with light and color people normally viewed in black and white. He introduces us to his parents, who both must work late, and introduces us to Jackson's father, who drives 30 minutes across town to retrieve elementary school Richard so he can play Little League baseball with his friend DeSean. He helps us to appreciate what it may have meant for DeSean Jackson to lose his father to cancer, and how he might not care to walk away from people, unsavory or not, who supported him in dark times.

What Richard Sherman discloses to us is pretty quotidian stuff—mundane details in the lives of normal (if exceptionally athletic) kids trying to reach adulthood under more difficult circumstances than most of us will ever experience. But quotidian is the point. Because quotidian is real. Quotidian is human. Quotidian is what we can all understand without too much trouble. And what Richard Sherman tries to make clear in his DeSean Jackson post, is that we, none of us, can fully sequester our past from our present, our origins from our destiny, our consciousness and our conscience from the people who raised us up and who continue to remind us of the meaning of life in our own specific communities.

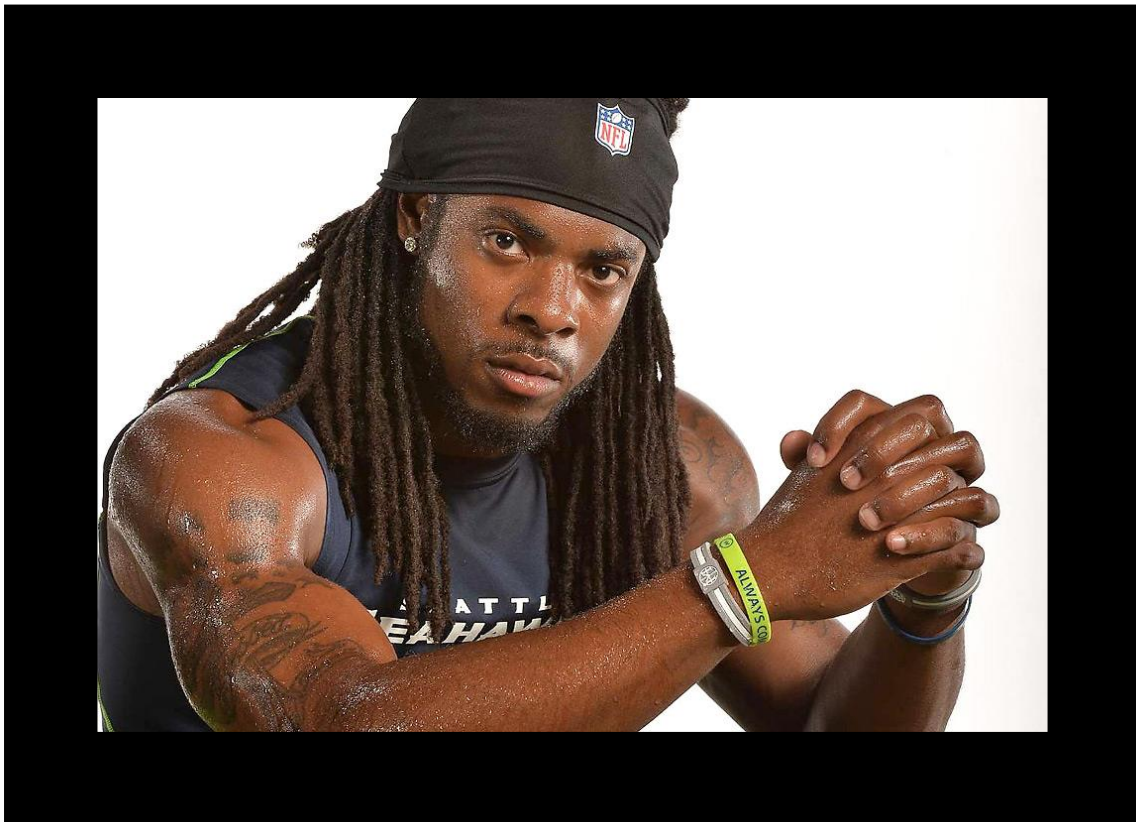
These fellow citizens, of Watts or Compton or Brentwood or Beverly Hills, of neighborhoods poor and rich, black and white, all walk through light and shadow, and certainly some live more in shadow, or perhaps fully in shadow. But arising from the same set of circumstances, and bound together by the same history and shared experiences, none of us who live in the light (as Richard Sherman and DeSean Jackson surely do most of the

time) can turn away from those who still inhabit a darkness we remember well.

The Mugging of Richard Sherman

Fox News, Free Speech, and the New Racism

April 25, 2014



In February, the Seattle Seahawks annihilated the Denver Broncos in Super Bowl XLVIII, an outcome decisive, complete, without reproach, and—given the leadership of Scripture-spouting nerd quarterback Russell Wilson—virtually providential.

More than anyone else on the Seahawks, the victory belonged to the team's All-Pro cornerback Richard Sherman, for this triumph redeemed not merely Richard Sherman, "talented football player", but perhaps even more, Richard Sherman, "freewheeling, trash-talking, truth-seeking, life-affirming human being."

Joe Namath, who rashly guaranteed victory in Super Bowl III, tossed the coin at the beginning of Super Bowl XLVIII. So fitting, because Richard Sherman, more than any player since Namath, 45 years earlier, staked both his professional and his personal reputation on the outcome of the Super Bowl.

The reputational stakes matter. Had the Seahawks not prevailed over Denver, the Sherman story would likely have taken a darker turn, as high stakes gambles that fail often do. To better understand how much of a turn, and how dark, we must unspool a larger and more sordid story, one in which national media outlets such as Fox News and ESPN commit to dubious journalistic practices that encourage race-baiting and that actively and systematically corrupt the meaning and impact of free speech.

A Short Disquisition on Free Speech

Free (or independent) speech is the foundation precept of democracy and the enabling condition for human dignity. It is the ultimate human right. In a world where many nations severely limit freedom of expression, it is incumbent on Americans to fiercely defend the right to free speech.

At the same time, we must recognize that free speech (understood as expressive freedom) differs greatly from speech that is merely “free” (understood as the absence of transaction costs, intellectual effort, and community standards). Free speech is a positive good. “Free” speech is simply the absence of restraint.

The Internet, imagined as communications pipe that vastly shrinks the transaction costs of speech, has served us well as a “speech utility”. However, “utility” is not utopia. The benefits of easy access to Internet chat rooms and comment threads are self-evident. In the past decade, however, the frenzy to eliminate speech transaction costs on behalf of a cynically flawed, business-driven concept of “community” has permitted a serpent to slip into this garden.

Enter any of these online communities — particularly on any subject that involves President Obama, the federal government, taxes, global warming, health care, or race relations — and consider whether you may not have been deviously transported to the Eden that provides the setting for *Lord of the Flies*. Far from experiencing communion, on these comment threads you encounter hailstorms of cheap, empty, incendiary, malicious, and craven speech, not always and not inevitably, but sufficiently often and with enough predictability that one quickly forgets that speech was ever anything but acid-tipped shards and fragments of thought.

In this online vortex, the governing rule of engagement seem to be “stand your ground” and “ready, fire, aim.” Lacking a shared and committed and

enforced awareness of what constitutes “community” online, we instinctively assume a combat stance.

Anonymity is clearly part of the problem. In the absence of any expectation of transparency or accountability, there is really nothing to prevent us from acting on our worst impulses. The effect, as we know, has been to drive Americans further apart, into solipsistic echo chambers of ill repute.

When speech is easy, slick, shallow, rote, insincere, or unkind, we debase our words, we debase ourselves, and we debase our democracy. We cannot afford to confuse this sort of speech with the independent speech that both secures and affirms our civic and personal freedom. Indeed, “free” speech and independent speech must fight to the death, and only one can prevail.

Richard Sherman. Better at Life.

In October 2012, most Americans learned about Richard Sherman for the first time, when in a Sunday Night Football game between Seattle and the New England Patriots, Sherman picked off Tom Brady and then taunted Brady after the game ended with the [now-famous Tweet](#), “U mad bro?”

In March 2013, Sherman once again blew up the Internet when, smarting from Skip Bayless remarks about his limitations as a player, he [told Bayless](#) on ESPN *First Take* that “in my 24 years of life, I’m better at life than you.”

Sherman’s media profile rose enormously after the *First Take* [episode](#), not merely because he is telegenic, confident, and articulate, but because unlike

most professional athletes he has refused to separate (or has simply not been capable of separating) his professional identity from his personal identity. More to the point, he has refused to distance either his professional or his personal identity from an emerging commitment to serve as an emissary for his community.

As one journalist [wrote](#), Richard Sherman chirps at the media like a modern-day Muhammad Ali. He is a meme machine, Not surprisingly, Sherman's audacity, particularly when amplified by the emotion surrounding professional football, has enormously irritated many Americans who just don't know what to make of him.

- ❖ *Is Richard Sherman a black man? Then how can he be so articulate and intelligent?*
- ❖ *Is Richard Sherman a good man? Then how can he be so gangster and thuggish?*
- ❖ *Is Richard Sherman a team player? Then why won't he shut up?*

Of course, these are precisely the questions that Richard Sherman wants us to ask, the point of his mission being to discomfort, disrupt, and shift our perspective on what it means to be young and black and male in the United States in the early part of the 21st century. What he's saying is "I'm here. I've made it. I deserve what I've achieved. I don't need to change. But if you have difficulty accepting me, than perhaps it is you who needs to change."

In 2013, Richard Sherman claimed the spotlight, and forced us to look at him not just as a football player, but as a man. Black, dreadlocked, and tall, yes. But also a kid from Compton who rose far beyond the expectations of American society for kids who match his profile, and who can claim, in his 25 years, to have fully realized his potential. In other words, Richard Sherman *is* great at life. How can we ask anything more of him?

By forcing us to look at him, understand him, and accept him on his terms, Richard Sherman also has required us to look at, understand, and accept the community that birthed and raised him. The bottom line for Richard Sherman is that in the United States young, black, males are like a Rorschach ink blot. Whether we, as a nation, see “potential” in this Rorschach both illuminates the fault lines that divide us and discloses where we can build bridges that unite us.

Foxhole of Fear and Loathing

This brings us to *Fox Nation*, a digital arm of Fox News devoted to capturing the raw, authentic popular voice, our native soundtrack, as it were.

In its *Statement of Purpose*, *Fox Nation* extends an invitation to all of us, with commitments to tolerance, mutual respect, open debate, civil discourse, and freedom of thought, expression, and worship. Terrific! Sounds to me like a summons to a kind of national high tea, or an NPR “conversation,” cool and refined and sublime. I’m on board!

Except *Fox Nation* blatantly *is not* (fair and balanced), *does not* (embrace all of us), and *will not* (commit to tolerance, mutual respect, open debate, civil discourse, and freedom of thought, expression, and worship). Instead, with Orwellian cynicism, *Fox Nation* invites us into a black hole of national fear and loathing.

Fox Nation lives on and lives for troll-bait. And race-bait. Which its managers know can reliably dog-whistle the misbegotten, the misinformed, and the intellectually malnourished to a trough of despair, from which Fox benefits both financially and politically.

And this is the problem. At the end of the day, online “conversation” and “commentary” and “community” on *Fox Nation* and on far too many other digital news platforms, is about little more than mouse clicks, the cheap high of canned cat food, the meth wheeze of suffering that knows no name.

The Mugging of Richard Sherman

Let’s backtrack. In March 2013, Richard Sherman “takes down” Skip Bayless. In reality, if you watch the video, what one really sees is an uncertain, tentative 24-year old man who has entered the den of the dragon at ESPN to deliver a message to one of the more powerful, if reviled, sports media celebrities in the nation. With Stephen A. Smith writhing on the monitor to the far left of the television screen, and with Skip Bayless acting like, well, Skip Bayless, Richard Sherman, in the heat of battle, must have wondered who was taking down whom.

Nonetheless. The Internet blows up. Richard Sherman acquires infamy. And the next day, *USA Today* publishes “Richard Sherman blasts Skip Bayless on *First Take*”, a short piece on the Sherman-Bayless spat that pulls out some of Sherman’s tastier “money quotes”.

Hilarity ensues. Over the next few days, the *USA Today* article receives 176 reader comments, most of which are thoughtful and/or light-hearted. By March 9, the Sherman-Bayless controversy fades from the news. Everyone moves on. Except for *Fox Nation*.

... *Time Passes* ...

On January 19, 2014, Richard Sherman tips away a Colin Kaepernick floater that allows the Seattle Seahawks to defeat the San Francisco 49ers to win the NFC championship and earn the opportunity to play the Denver Broncos in the Super Bowl. As the game ends, Richard Sherman, overcome by emotion, goes off on 49ers receiver Michael Crabtree while being interviewed by Erin Andrews in front of the entire world. The Internet blows up again. Richard Sherman acquires even more infamy.

... *Fox Nation Gets Ornerly* ...

Here’s where the story begins its descent. On January 20, 2014 (as it happens, the federal holiday for the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr.), *Fox Nation* publishes a selectively edited digest of the March 7, 2013 *USA Today* article, without identifying the story’s dateline, leading

many readers to assume the Sherman-Bayless interview occurred after the NFC playoff game with San Francisco, not ten months earlier.

Hilarity does not ensue. Over the next four days, *Fox Nation* republication of the *USA Today* story receives 170 reader comments, most of which are misinformed, crude, angry, racist and/or unintelligible.

Let's roll the *Fox Nation* "conversation" tape (not edited for grammar, syntax, spelling, nor for consumption by children).

- ❖ *You can take the boy out of the ghetto and EVEN send him to Stanford BUT you can't take the ghetto out of the boy!!!*
- ❖ *And then they wonder why some of them are called what they are called . This is the proof .*
- ❖ *Wish some of that would rub off on the rest of his race.*
- ❖ *Gee, not another hyper-esteemed angry balack man.*
- ❖ *\$400.00 for Rosetta Stone is a bit much for a copy of "Ebonics"*
- ❖ *Thanks man — you just proved to a large percentage of us what we thought all along. Black football players are just street thugs in shoulder pads. Slime.*
- ❖ *This nut played a minor roll in Planet of the Apes.*
- ❖ *New body guard for the Black House in DC..*
- ❖ *If Obama had a football playing son.. he would be just like Sherman!*
- ❖ *He gets his arrogance from Obama.*
- ❖ *Arrogant, hate ful, and just really disgusting human being.*
- ❖ *I remember a boxer that talked like that, and he is part brain dead today..... good luck with that jive talk now, because you can be half*

brain dead too Richard!

- ❖ *Did you expect anything different from a blaaaaaak football player he's another OJ waiting to happen .*
- ❖ *Richard Sherman is an animal. Nothing more.*
- ❖ *I think Rodman spoke a lot like this in the past as well. And then, one day, they wake up singing happy birthday to a murderous dictator.*
- ❖ *Just another delusional, self appointed, egotistical hood rat! Can't wait to see him break a leg and have no where to go on his uneducated pass from Stanford....you reap what you sow!*

Heading into the Super Bowl, it's now clear that many people in the United States took Richard Sherman *personally*. He had morphed into something raw that stuck oddly in their craw, indigestible, not quite choking, but certainly neither pleasant nor comfortable. In days that followed the NFC Championship game, sentiment did shift back towards some semblance of rationality and balance, and in the end Richard Sherman played an important, but not outsized, role in the Seahawk's Super Bowl victory.

And so Richard Sherman did silence his critics, and truly his capacity to walk the talk may well have silenced them indefinitely. But the fact remains that had the Seahawks not prevailed against the Broncos, the trolls would have come hunting for Richard Sherman. No physical mugging, perhaps, but certainly a hungry, persistent claim upon his spirit and soul, retribution for not following the unspoken rules of the race game, for not being sufficiently grateful, sufficiently humble, sufficiently ignorant, sufficiently safe.

In the aftermath, we must wonder why, more than 150 years since the American Civil War, we continue to labor under illusions and misconceptions and prejudices and fears that illustrate the degree to which socially constructed racial categories still rub raw our psychic wounds.

And, too, we must wonder about the unmediated or disintermediated structure of our discourse, the degree to which open online publishing and illusions of digital anonymity tap deeply into the fear centers of our brain, a persistent amygdalic hijack inflamed by coded words and images, a pervasive and journalistically devastating reduction of thought, conversation, ideas, and truth—the constituents of our social coherence—to a mere slurry of tokens, memes, verbal discharge that resembles sewage more than it does considered speech.

Finally, and probably most importantly, we must consider institutional culpability, the degree to which *Fox Nation*, along with many other media websites, knowingly and with exquisite calculation, leverages the social psychology of fear (savagely so, given their “media” credentials) by actively dismantling community standards and civic obligations, the mechanisms we have traditionally used to “mediate” speech and to anchor it in a shared belief that empirical truth and spiritual awareness remain aspirations, loftier and more elusive than opinion and emotion perhaps, but still barely within our reach, and predicated on the social trust that collective pursuit of knowledge requires.

Can Free Speech Survive “Free” Speech?

In what way does eliciting and encouraging this version of the *vox populi*—even under the guise of promoting “free” speech—serve any purpose beyond the embellishment of dark emotion and the destruction of civil society?

Fox Nation’s misleading and incendiary republication of a fragment of the *USA Today* story only encouraged the haters, people who would casually and anonymously make statements to Richard Sherman *hyper-esteemed angry balack man* that they would never directly say to Richard Sherman *human being*.

So let’s make speech truly “free”, as in “without cost”, as in “loose and licentious and profligate”, as it is on the *Fox Nation* comment threads. And this is where we will inevitably land, in a boisterously uncivil, angry, belligerent society.

How do these rage-filled online expletives differ from road rage? Would we allow them on our streets? Would we allow them in our classrooms? Would we allow them in our churches? Would we allow them in NFL stadiums?

But what if speech were not “free”? What if it were not so easy for people to debase and embarrass themselves? What if we all had to work even a little bit hard to fashion and explode Internet hate bombs?

Here I’ll be charitable. One month out, six months out, how many of the folks “sounding off” about Richard Sherman in response to this half-baked article would be proud of what they had posted to the *Fox Nation* website?

How many would stand by their words? How many actually would take these statements offline and repeat them directly to Richard Sherman the human person? Probably very few.

Anti-Free Speech Manifesto for the Digital Age

Setting aside the strange timing of the Fox republication of the *USA Today* article, and for the failure to make clear the Sherman-Bayless interview had occurred 10 months earlier, not after Sherman's Erin Andrew rant, what accounts for the remarkably divergent tones of the *USA Today* and the Fox News comment threads? Well, we might start with what happens when a reader clicks on the Comment button on the *USA Today* website.

Before one can publish comments, *USA Today* requires anyone posting to an article's comment thread to read the media company's "Conversation Guidelines and FAQs" [document](#), which establish clear standards of community conduct, "rules of the road" that actively forbid acts of online "road rage". *USA Today* also encourages readers to report abusive or inappropriate content and reserves the right to suspend users and remove comments that violate the rules of the road. Finally, *USA Today* refers readers to its general [Terms of Service](#) (last updated September 23, 2013), which includes a section detailing the newspaper's policy on user-generated content.

By contrast, Fox News does not offer or require engagement with any conversation guidelines. Moreover, by omission, the Fox News [Terms of Service](#) (not updated since May 7, 2010) pretty clearly communicates to its

readers that there are no community standards, no conversational rules of the road.

Fox News actually states in its *Terms* that management exercises no control over user content, and that visitors to the site who post comments should not be surprised if they are the target of offensive, indecent, inaccurate or “otherwise objectionable” content. Moreover, Fox News assumes no responsibility or obligation for monitoring or removing posts that violate common standards of discourse. Fox expects little from its readers and receives less.

How would an influential news organization like Fox actually encourage truly democratic discourse, not empty, angry spewing. How about an *Anti-Free Speech Manifesto for the Digital Age*? With this Anti-Free Speech Manifesto, we might encourage Fox to lead its huddled, starving masses with their wisest self, not to their most cynical or most angry self.

For example, Fox might adopt the simple precepts below as the minimal conditions for posting comments on your website.

- *Require comments to be at least 100 words.* This requirement elicits some minimal thought process and intellectual filtering, rather than impulsive eruptions of bile from our darkest places.
- *Require people to wait 24 hours before they can publish their comments.* This mandate encourages people to cool their jets and forces

them to reflect a bit on whether they really want to be responsible for the comments they are on the verge of posting.

- *Require people to register and post using their real names.* This rule ensures that people “own” and take responsibility for their speech.

Speech should NOT be free. People need to take responsibility for their words as much as they do for their actions. Public speech, in particular, and in a democracy, should require an investment of time and thought, decency and generosity, wit and humor. Everything we don't find in the meretricious “conversation” *Fox Nation* sponsored when it poached, pinched, and published the *USA Today* article about Richard Sherman's Skip Bayless “takedown.”

Better at Life

Richard Sherman Takes the Selfie Test

May 10, 2014



The irrepressible Richard Sherman is back in the news.

First we learn that the Seattle Seahawks have locked down their loquacious cornerback for the next four years with a contract worth \$57 million, a historically massive deal for a football defensive back.

Second, after signing his contract with the Seahawks, Sherman weighed in on the Donald Sterling controversy. Because of Roger Goodell's commitment to the league's financial bottom line, Sherman said, the NFL would not, could not deliver an Adam Silver-style knockout punch to team owners who crossed the *being rich doesn't allow you to be a racist asshole* line Donald Sterling trespassed as an NBA team owner.

Does Richard Sherman deserve the cash?

Absolutely. And not simply because Richard Sherman plays some bitching football. In fact, football is the least of the reasons for paying him top-dollar. The larger reasons are:

- As attention he received for the Roger Goodell comment demonstrates, football virtuosity gives Richard Sherman a fantastic platform for communicating his opinions on race, sports, and society in the United States.
- When his football career has ended, Richard Sherman can leverage his sports celebrity and his communication skills to pursue other venues for displaying all of the ways in which he is “better at life” than most of the rest of us.

So what does it actually mean to be good at life or (if we want to make it a competitive sport) better at life than someone else (perhaps Skip Bayless)?

If we use Richard Sherman as our case study (and why would we not?), people who are good at life might possess the following attributes:

- *Driven* and *Directed*—They work hard and strive to be the best at whatever they do.
- *Passionate* and *Present*—They are opportunistic, living for the pivotal moment that counts, claiming that moment, tipping history in their direction, exulting in the aftermath.
- *Engaging* and *Eloquent*—They enjoy and are good at connecting and communicating with other people.
- *Articulate* and *Aware*—Their speech is clear and precise, indicating both measured thought and elevated social awareness.
- *Effusive* and *Energetic*—They are extroverts, excitable and outspoken. They enjoy laughing and they enjoy life.

Can being good at life translate into being great at life?

No. Because the difference between these two states is existential. It is the difference between analog and digital, between mechanical and quantum.

Those who are good at life possess basic trust, an unshakable belief that they belong in the world and that, in some fundamental way, the world belongs to them. They occupy historical space and act within it to pursue personal goals aligned with ambition and opportunity.

In the moment, we will acknowledge and celebrate those who are good at life. *Time Magazine* or Barbara Walters may recognize them in a list. They are “influential” and “fascinating”. They illuminate us.

Richard Sherman is good at life. Barack Obama, LeBron James, George Clooney, Bruce Springsteen, Oprah Winfrey, Ellen DeGeneres, Macklemore, Bill Gates. All good at life. They create the mold. They establish the standard. They set the bar, become the ruler, post a smiling selfie. We make them our role models.

Those who are great at life? Not so much. They break the mold. They destroy standards. They crash through the bar. They feast on failure. They are not role models. One would not want them to post a selfie.

Lacking basic trust, those who are great at life do not experience a fully connected relationship to the world as it exists. They will not easily merge. Death haunts them.

Artists and scientists are often not so good at life. A sad light may illuminate them, a sullen anger gnaw at them. They may hew a savage trail of personal destruction. They obey no rules.

Alienation and solitude can offer compensations, however, including opportunity to stand outside of history, or on the margins of history, and to act upon it, to leverage or bend it, to make the straight way crooked.

Abraham Lincoln. Jimi Hendrix. Picasso. Poe. Melville. Einstein. James Baldwin. Emily Carr. Alan Turing. Charlie Parker. Virginia Woolf. Steve Jobs. Malcolm X. Kanye West. Woody Allen. Charles Barkley. Amy Winehouse. None so good at life. But all great at shifting the plates beneath our feet. Disturbing our universe.

Don't cry for Richard Sherman if he can't be great at life. No one chooses to be great at life. Greatness chooses them. And it may take years before that greatness manifests within them. And even then, we may for years or decades or centuries—or forever—label that greatness as failure.

Richard Sherman—with his fine new contract, his talent for claiming the moment, and his clear awareness of social disparity—has chosen to be good at life. And we should celebrate that choice, which has a profound meaning of its own, without requiring him to be anything more than a 26-year old athlete and human being at the top of his game.