

# **If I Get Canceled, Let Them Eat Me Alive**

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What should my friends do if I am being canceled?

A decade ago, when I was a nonpublic philosopher writing only for a small group of academics, it would never have occurred to me to ask myself this question. But things have changed. These days, anyone with a public-facing persona must contemplate the prospect of having her reputation savagely destroyed.

A few years ago, I wrote an essay that, in passing, questioned faculty solidarity with unionizing graduate students. I had not realized how sensitive that topic was, and I was inundated with angry and hateful messages and a few threats online. In the scheme of things, the episode was quite mild, lasting only a few weeks. But it felt all-consuming at the time. And it was a taste of what could come.

My most vivid memory from that period is how good it felt when people defended me on Twitter: a balm on my wounded soul. I desperately wanted people to speak up for me. I wanted to defend myself, too. My wise husband stayed my hand. He saw what I could not see, which is that there was no “winning” this war; every act of defense and every show of loyalty served to keep the fight alive. This explains the curious fact that for all the fighting people do against cancellation, no canceled ever vanquishes her cancelers.

I know some of the people who agitated against me. They are not bad people; one shouldn’t think of what was happening as a conflict between my team and theirs. There were no sides. You imagine that you are fighting against the mob, but actually you are becoming a part of it. Within the mob there is no justice and no argument and no reasoning, no space for inquiry or investigation. The only good move is not to play.

So this is my answer: If I am being canceled, I want my friends — and this includes not only my closest associates but any people who consider themselves friendly to me — to stand by, remain silent and do nothing. If you care about me, let them eat me alive.

When I try to imagine my own cancellation, two main avenues come to mind. The first is that I write something triggering a wave of offense, as I did when I wrote about unions. There are symbolic traps all over the cultural landscape; I do my best to avoid them, but they have a tendency to cluster near some interesting topics. Anyone who writes for the public, and who maintains a social media presence, must accept some measure of risk.

Second, I exhibit a personal failing. I wear many hats in addition to that of public intellectual — I am a mother, a teacher, a mentor, an administrator, a scholar, a member of the broader academic philosophical community. When asked how I juggle so many different roles, I explain that each time I add a new one, I do all the others a bit worse. The secret to success is failure. I try to keep the failure at a manageable level, but one day I might fail at that, too.

Because I am only a very minor public figure, not much worth canceling, I think it’s likely I would have to go wrong in both ways — by causing offense, and by falling down on the job — to merit a coordinated public outcry. I am not saying that such a perfect storm is very likely, but it is far from impossible.

My plan, if I am being canceled, is not to fight it. If I can quickly put an end to the accusations with some clarifying explanation, I will: The public deserves to hear the truth. But my efforts to rehabilitate myself will cease before I get to the point of reorganizing my public persona around the battle to do so. The goal of my public engagement is a certain kind of open-mindedness, and that becomes impossible when all you ever think about is one thing — even if you call that thing “freedom of speech” or “liberal tolerance” or, for that matter, “open-mindedness.”

The most important component of not fighting cancellation is not recruiting friends to my cause. The expectation that one’s friends exhibit the “courage” to speak up on one’s behalf, the inclination to see the cancellation as a test of the friendship, which suddenly requires proofs of loyalty — these are the first step on the road to the friend purge.

Here is how it goes: A few of the canceled’s friends meet the expectation to speak up in support, but those who remain silent — which is most of them — become suspect. New, publicly aligned friends are acquired to take their place. The beleaguered canceled now feels she sees who her “real friends” are, but in fact she has no friends anymore. All she has are allies. First she turned her friends, and perhaps even her family members, into allies; and then she acquired more allies to fill the ranks of the purged friends. The end result is a united front, but what I would call real friendship has gone missing in the bargain.

I do not want any of that. I want friends who feel free to disagree with me both publicly and privately; friends who will admonish me, gently but firmly, with whatever grain of truth there is in any accusations against me. I want friends whose minds are not tethered to my own in bonds of allegiance, but spin freely of their own accord. I love my contrarian friends, and the way their thinking traces wonderful and mysterious paths, following a logic all their own; and I cherish my conformist friends, who keep me in touch with the wisdom of most people.

I want friends who ask the right questions, friends who bring me cookies, friends who help me up when I stumble, friends who expend so much attention on the inner me that they have little to spare for how I am perceived by others. I want friends, not allies. I value my public persona, but not enough to sacrifice the liberty of my friendships at its altar.

But what if, when the moment arrives, I come to see all this differently? Isn’t there a chance that when I’m in the thick of it, I’ll want “my” people to rally round me, to stand up for me, to call out my accusers, to be willing to risk their own reputations on my behalf, to show the world that I stand equipped with a team of supporters ready to fight at my side? Yes, of course.

My brief tangle with the mob taught me that it is not when I am most embattled that I see most clearly. Hence I, like Odysseus, am tying myself to the mast in advance. I commit now, publicly, in print: Please don’t fight on my behalf. Don’t stand up for me. Don’t rescue my good name. Let it be tarnished. Let my reputation die.

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<[www.nytimes.com/2022/06/21/opinion/cancel-culture-friendship.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/21/opinion/cancel-culture-friendship.html)>

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