

Why You Shouldn't Label People

Labels abound in our overpolarized era.

Liberal, RINO, socialist, neo-con, Nazi, Marxist, racist - all these and more aren't meant to be descriptive but dismissive. Especially when we assign the additional labels of good or evil to people.

Labels shut down discussion. We use them to put people - who at that moment we are treating like opponents - on the defensive. Labels keep us from having to listen to what may be legitimate concerns about our own position.

More than anything, labels reduce people to things. Simple things at that.

People aren't things, and they sure aren't simple. Every person is a maze of complications, contradictions and insecurities, many of which they aren't even aware of.

Recently, I attended a reunion on my father's side of the family. Every surviving aunt and uncle, and most of my 18 cousins, gathered in Lucedale, Mississippi, a small farming town in the southeastern corner of the state, where the Eubanks family has roots that go back to the 18th century.

One of my aunts had a history of our family from an old George County newspaper.

Larry Eubanks

It was there that I learned the names of my great-great-grandparents, Thomas Jefferson Eubanks and his wife, Julia Gertrude Smith Eubanks.

Tom Eubanks was born in 1836, which put him in the prime of his life when the Civil War started. He traveled to Mobile, Alabama, the nearest large city, and enlisted in an Alabama light artillery regiment.

He was at Vicksburg, Mississippi, when Ulysses S. Grant lay siege to the strategic city overlooking the Mississippi River.

Confederate soldiers dug caves into the bluffs of the city for shelter, and my great-great-grandfather was in one when a Union shell exploded nearby, collapsing the cave and burying him alive.

Fortunately, his fellow soldiers were able to dig him out before he suffocated.

When Vicksburg surrendered on July 4, 1863, Tom Eubanks was captured and served out the rest of the war as a POW.

After the war, he returned to Lucedale to farm and raise his family. He died in 1907, 26 years before my father was born.

It's an interesting story, and the only story I know of him.

I don't know what kind of man he was - if he was kind or cruel, generous or

stingy, loving or withdrawn.

All I know is that my great-great-grandfather fought in a war that, if they had won, would have resulted in me being born in a different country than the U.S.

More than that, if the South had won, slavery would have continued for who knows how many more years.

Was my great-great-grandfather a racist? I don't know if he actually hated African slaves, but as a man of his time, he probably regarded them as inferior. Racist is probably as descriptive a term as any for his viewpoint.

Was my great-great-grandfather evil? Certainly, he supported a system that was evil, and fought in a war that propagated that evil.

He didn't own any slaves, and he might not have personally known anyone who did.

He probably would have said he wasn't fighting for slavery as much as he was for his home and family. Does that exonerate him? No. But was he evil?

I think he was much more complicated than a simple label like "evil" can contain. Or "good." Those labels lack the nuance that the complexity of the human personality demands.

Larry Eubanks

The best of us are capable of great evil, the worst of us of great good. Those words are best used to describe things: Slavery is evil. Racism is evil. Murder is evil.

That's why labels are wrong. They reduce people to things, which allows us to use terms on people that should be reserved for things.

Am I proud that my great-great-grandfather served in the Confederate army? The short answer is no.

That said, I also realize his options were few. He didn't really have the option to fight on the Union side.

And not enlisting as an able-bodied 25-year-old when all his peers were doing so would have been regarded as cowardice, something that would have followed him for the rest of his life.

But no, I'm not particularly proud. I'm not ashamed either.

Among the evils of the world are otherwise decent people like him being forced to make terrible decisions.

"Rich man's war, poor man's fight," described the Confederate cause, and Tom Eubanks was caught up in that. It described the Union cause as well. Pretty much all wars, for that matter.

The cemetery where he and his wife are buried is full of Eubanks, but I went last week hoping to find them.

I didn't have much time, and there were quite a few graves, especially old ones. I was ready to give up when I looked down and saw his marker. I had found my great-great-grandparents. I'm glad I did.

I'm glad he didn't win, but I'm also glad he didn't die in that cave. He was, like all of us, a complicated mixture of good and not so good.

Only one label can truly capture who he was: child of God. Created in God's image and likeness, and supremely loved by God.

He's my great-great grandfather. And I'm proud to be his great-great-grandson.

Editor's note: A [version](#) of this article first appeared on Eubanks' [website](#). It is used with permission.