I was a neo-Nazi. I know the cure for hate

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I watched the violence unfold in Charlottesville with a deep sense of shame about who I was decades ago. In the 1990s, similar street violence would exhilarate me – like the rallies I used to organize for the White Aryan Resistance, a white-supremacist group.

Today, with deep sadness, I remember the murder of Nirmal Singh Gill in 1998; the 65-year-old Sikh caretaker kicked to death by five skinheads in Surrey, B.C. Canada does have a history of white-supremacist-driven murder. This hate-fuelled ideology inevitably ends in murder. Charlottesville was a massive wake-up call for Americans who had swept this problem under the rug, and it should be the same for Canada.

So what draws young people into these groups? Research and my personal experience show that it is a sense of identity, belonging, acceptance and purpose. The lack of these factors in a young person's life creates vulnerabilities that extremist groups exploit.

The culprit undermining these critical pieces of our human experience is a deep subconscious belief that we are unlovable, powerless and invisible – we call this the feeling of "less than."

I can look back on my youth and see that the level to which I dehumanized others. As a skinhead recruiter in the 1990s, I was deeply entrenched in hate. **I realize now this was actually a reflection of how disconnected and dehumanized I was inside. I was so numb that I couldn't recognize the humanity in others and certainly couldn't conceive of the pain or suffering I was causing**. (To be very clear: I don't blame anything on my childhood.) **Everything I did, I chose to do because I got a sense of power when I felt powerless, significance and attention when I felt invisible, brotherhood and acceptance when I felt unlovable.**

I am often asked how had I lost my humanity. How does one become a skinhead? My reply is this: I didn't lose my humanity. I traded it for acceptance and approval until there was nothing left. I am not a victim here; I was a perpetrator who victimized others.

Life After Hate, the non-profit I co-founded with other former members of the white-supremacist movement, recently received a letter from a concerned parent. Her 18-year-old son with Asperger syndrome is up to his eyeballs in the white-nationalist scene. What frightened the parent was the community had embraced and accepted her son in a way he had never experienced in his entire life. Those are very deep psychological strings being pulled and that seduction is wrapped in racist ideology. This child could probably rationalize believing any ideology in exchange for that acceptance and belonging coming from such isolation.

To help this child and so many like him, we need to address the loneliness and isolation before the ideology. If shame and loneliness are the drivers here, how can shaming, isolation and violence be the answer? The antidote to shame is compassion.

Compassion was at the heart of my transformation. Compassion from my children who created the safe space for me to love and feel loved. To open up and allow my frozen heart to begin to thaw. Compassion from my mother who despised what I was all about in those years, but never gave up on me. Compassion from a mentor (ironically born Jewish) who also saw the humanity in me helping heal the wounds that had influenced my dark choices. They all saw my humanity when I was incapable of seeing it myself.

When we are compassionate, we hold a mirror up to that person and allow them to see their humanity reflected back. One of the hardest things in the world to do is to have compassion for someone who has no compassion, but those are the very people who need it most.

There is nothing more powerful than receiving compassion from someone who we feel we don't deserve it from, especially if that person belongs to a group we had once dehumanized.

As human beings, we can operate from one of two places, fear or love. As a society, we must choose to respond to this darkness with love.

In Vancouver, Saturday's counterprotest of an estimated 4,000 people peacefully occupied the space that was supposed to be used to sow fear and division. Instead, the event was largely one of celebration, inclusion and diversity. To respond with fear, judgment and violence only further entrenches and feeds the beast we seek to overcome. I know all too well that these groups thrive on conflict, violence and negative attention.

As Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding a deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."