

Renewing the University

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FOR THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS, American universities have been buzzing with protests and counter-protests, charges and counter-charges. These have centered on a rather small cluster of concepts: safe spaces, the campus as home, microaggressions, and trigger warnings. As I write these words, the fighting seems to have subsided, though I suspect only for a season, as the combatants assess their positions. Perhaps, then, this is a good time to perform our own assessments: to explore the moral network within which these concepts operate, to see what consequences their deployment has had, and to suggest what might be required to restore to campus intellectual life some of the energy that has been sapped by this controversy.

For, whomever or whatever you might blame for the current state of affairs, the recent hostilities have been distinctly unfriendly to the creating and sustaining of intellectual energy. Universities need to get beyond these disputes, at least to some degree, if they are going to retain any meaningful chance to fulfill their social missions.

HABITS OF MIND

Richard Rodriguez, in his memoir *Hunger for Memory*, movingly recounts the day when a nun, one of his teachers at his parochial school in Sacramento, asked his Mexican parents to speak English at home in order to encourage Richard to improve his English and to grow more confident speaking it in school. He was in first grade.

His parents agreed, of course—a nun had asked them—and while young Richard missed very much the sounds of Spanish at home, his English did get better. He became more comfortable at school. Indeed,

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his public identity came to be closely associated with his academic success. And he became strangely grateful for that nun's request, for it set him on the road to manhood: "I became a man by becoming a public man."

Because of this experience, and others like it, Rodriguez became notorious, as a graduate student, for his opposition to bilingual education programs. He may or may not have been right in that opposition, but no one has ever articulated more precisely the essential principle at stake: "While one suffers a diminished sense of *private* individuality by becoming assimilated into public society, such assimilation makes possible the achievement of *public* individuality."

Rodriguez's point is essential for understanding many of the recent campus controversies. To take what has become a canonical example of the debates, we might consider last year's controversy at Yale University. Last fall, some Yale students and alumni demanded the resignation of the master and assistant master of a college because the assistant master suggested that the college should not exercise direct and dictatorial control over students' choice of Halloween costumes, and the master refused to apologize. To many outside observers this will seem pretty silly, but let's ask where the kind of reaction displayed by the students and alumni might originate.

The key may be found in a student's op-ed published in the *Yale Herald*, significantly titled "Hurt at Home." The op-ed was later deleted from the website at the request of the author, Jencey Paz, but I hope the way it is used here is not offensive. Paz wrote,

As a Sillimander, I feel that my home is being threatened. Last week, Erika Christakis, the associate master of Silliman College, sent an email to the Silliman community that called an earlier entreaty for Yalies to be more sensitive about culturally appropriating Halloween costumes a threat to free speech. In the aftermath of the email, I saw my community divide. She did not just start a political discourse as she intended. She marginalized many students of color in what is supposed to be their home.

To which one might reply: But Silliman College is not "supposed to be their home." It is a residential college in a university, a place where people from all over the world, from a wide range of social backgrounds, and with a wide range of interests and abilities, come to live together

temporarily, for about 30 weeks a year, before moving on to their careers. It is an essentially public space, though with controls on ingress and egress to prevent chaos and foster friendship and fellowship.

Like many universities, however, Yale presents its residential-college system to students as a kind of home, or at least a home away from home, offering, as one university pamphlet puts it, “cohesiveness and intimacy” and promoting “spirit, allegiance, and a sense of community at Yale.”

Such “cohesiveness and intimacy” can for some students be very powerful—their college can even be a better and healthier environment for them than the house they grew up in. The great theater critic Kenneth Tynan loved Magdalen College, Oxford (where C. S. Lewis was his tutor), so much that he wanted his ashes to be interred there. But even when he lived there some of his fellow collegians didn’t even know him, or knew him but didn’t like him, or had preferences for living that were radically different than his—and they had no long-term bond that would have forced them to come to mutually agreeable terms beyond basic tolerance for three years or so. The notion of residential colleges as “home,” however tempting, is ultimately unsustainable.

But if you have been led to think of your residential college—or, more broadly, your college or university as a whole—in such a way, then you might with some psychological justification have concerns for its “safety,” and could feel threatened or actually endangered if you perceive hostility from within. Moreover, several social forces are at work to intensify such a response, or create it if it is not naturally present.

First, there is the extension of John Stuart Mill’s “harm principle”—almost the only agreed-upon moral principle in our society today—from its original context of physical endangerment to far broader forms of “harm,” including simple emotional or intellectual discomfort. Even the inducement, in class discussions, of *uncertainty* can be perceived as a form of harm. (During a 2015 debate at Brown University on campus sexual assault, one student retreated to a pre-arranged safe room, explaining that “I was feeling bombarded by a lot of viewpoints that really go against my dearly and closely held beliefs.”)

Second, we have what sociologists Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning have described as “the emergence of a *victimhood culture* that is distinct from the *honor cultures* and *dignity cultures* of the past.” Such a culture is one “in which individuals and groups display high sensitivity

to slight, have a tendency to handle conflicts through complaints to third parties, and seek to cultivate an image of being victims who deserve assistance.”

The third force is acknowledged in the last quotation: an increasing reliance on authority figures within colleges and universities to fix any and all problems. New York University’s Jonathan Haidt, commenting on Campbell and Manning’s article, noted that aggrieved students often conclude that “they must not obtain redress on their own; they must appeal for help to powerful others or administrative bodies, to whom they must make the case that they have been victimized.” Indeed, he argued, “It is the very presence of such administrative bodies, within a culture that is highly egalitarian and diverse (i.e., many college campuses) that gives rise to intense efforts to identify oneself as a fragile and aggrieved victim.”

Some of these habits of the contemporary undergraduate mind are likely connected to the upbringing of today’s students. Young people who have had very little experience of unsupervised play, whose parents have hovered over them their whole lives, may easily come to believe that the core function of adults is to protect them from dangers. They may not discern the same dangers their parents do, but the structure of their expectations remains shaped by those parental attitudes. So some of them—by no means all, probably not even most, but enough to create a stir—will lift their voices in outrage when potentially offensive books are assigned, or potentially offensive speakers are invited to campus, or potentially offensive Halloween costumes are not explicitly forbidden.

It appears to be difficult for university administrators to ignore these calls for intervention. Many of them have children of their own, and are shaped by and participate in this same parental culture; many have a genuine desire to serve students; and at least some are drawn by the opportunity to increase the scope of their power.

When protestors occupied part of the University of Missouri in the fall of 2015, they quickly began writing to administrators to demand extension cords and power outlets for charging their electronic devices, and, when the weather grew cool, a fire pit around which they could warm themselves. The university’s chief diversity officer, Noor Azizan-Gardner, wrote to other administrators in a tone of parental concern about these requests, concluding, “Please let me know how we can provide this for them.”

HIDDEN COSTS

Even committed leftists, largely in sympathy with protestors' charges of institutional racism, may well wonder whether having university administrators run interference for aggrieved students is a wise tactic. For instance, Fredrik deBoer has incisively noted that, "Yes, students get to dictate increasingly elaborate and punitive speech codes that some of them prefer. But what could be more corporate or bureaucratic than the increasingly tight control on language and culture in the workplace?"

When students demand the intervention of administrative authority to solve every little conflict, they end up simply reinforcing a power structure in which students and faculty alike are stripped of moral agency, in which all of us in the university—including the administrators themselves, since they're typically reading responses from an instruction manual prepared in close consultation with university lawyers—become instruments in the hands of a self-perpetuating bureaucratic regime. Few social structures could be more alien to the character of true education.

Indeed, as David Graeber has pointed out, these administrative intrusions may have a cost not just in morale but in substantive intellectual achievement. It's hard to think freely when you're constantly being watched over by helicopter administrators:

If you look at the lives and personalities of almost any of the Great Thinkers currently lionized in the American academy, certainly anyone like Deleuze, or Foucault, Wittgenstein, Freud, Einstein, or even Max Weber, none of them would have lasted ten minutes in our current system. These were some seriously odd people. They probably would never have finished grad school, and if they somehow did discipline themselves to appear sufficiently "professional," "collegial," conformist and compliant to make it through adjunct hell or pre-tenure, it would be at the expense of leaving them incapable of producing any of the works for which they have become famous.

A strategy for changing the educational system that relies on placing more and more power in the hands of the people already at the top of the university's organizational chart, and leaving less and less to the discretion

of students *or* teachers, can scarcely be described as a form of radical protest—or as likely to produce any genuinely meaningful change.

Nor is it likely to produce even a minimally responsible citizenry. As Notre Dame's Patrick Deneen has commented, "Restraint of any of these activities [academic cheating, sexual pursuits, general lawlessness] is understood to be the domain of the state's exercise of positive law and not the result of cultivated self-governance born of cultural norms and institutions." Instead, the cultivation of virtues is replaced by ever-increasing *surveillance* of students.

That this top-down way of dealing with conflict could become counterproductive is a possibility raised, ever so gently, by Erika Christakis in the email she wrote to Silliman College students that caused her so much trouble. To call this ironic is to understate the matter considerably, in light of the views she expressed:

I wonder if we should reflect more transparently, as a community, on the consequences of an institutional (which is to say: bureaucratic and administrative) exercise of implied control over college students. . . .

What does this debate about Halloween costumes say about our view of young adults, of their strength and judgment?

In other words: Whose business is it to control the forms of costumes of young people? It's not mine, I know that.

It's noteworthy that, in her email, Christakis made a point of emphasizing her own academic specialty: early-childhood development and education. She all but says that Yale students are asking their academic leaders for a degree of intervention that might not even be appropriate in kindergarten.

In a fascinating 2011 article called "The Japanese Preschool's Pedagogy of Peripheral Participation," Akiko Hayashi and Joseph Tobin describe a two-pronged approach commonly deployed in Japan to deal with preschoolers' conflicts: *machi no hoiku* and *mimamoru*. The former means "caring for children by waiting"; the second means "standing guard." When children come into conflict, these approaches help make sure that students know the teacher is present and watching, but will not intervene unless absolutely necessary. Even if the children start to fight, the teacher may not intervene; that will depend on whether a child

is genuinely attempting to hurt another or the two are half-heartedly “play-fighting.”

The idea is to give children every possible opportunity to resolve their own conflicts—even past the point at which it might, to an American observer, seem that a conflict is irresolvable. This requires patient waiting, and of course one can wait too long—just as one can intervene too quickly.

The *mimamoru* strategy is meant to reassure children that their authorities will not allow anything really bad to happen to them, though perhaps some unpleasant moments may arise. But those unpleasant moments must be tolerated, else how will the children learn to respond constructively and effectively to conflict—conflict which is, after all, inevitable in any social environment? And, if children don’t begin to learn such responses in preschool, when will they learn them? Imagine if by the time they got to university they had developed no such abilities and were constantly dependent on authorities to ease every instance of social friction. What a mess *that* would be.

THE PLACE OF DISAGREEMENT

Of course, college students’ reliance on administrators to address their social conflicts and support their causes is not the only matter for concern. Perhaps even more troubling are the triviality of the offenses for which punishment is sought and the gravity of the punishments demanded. In an excellent article from June 2015, Mollie Hemingway wrote, “We are slowly forgetting how to dislike something without seeking its utter destruction.” I would only replace “slowly” with “quickly”—very quickly.

Many years ago, the philosopher Michael Oakeshott warned against those who believe there is “only one authentic voice”: “The view dies hard that Babel was the occasion of a curse being laid upon mankind from which it is the business of philosophers to deliver us, and a disposition remains to impose a single character upon significant human speech.” By “Babel” here Oakeshott does not mean the diversity of languages but the diversity of beliefs and positions. His statement is a kind of challenge to philosophical hubris, to the idea that arguments can be produced that will defeat the opposition once and for all.

Bernard Williams likewise made a philosophical case for the value of disagreement: “Disagreement does not necessarily have to be overcome. It may remain an important and constitutive feature of our relations to

others, and also be seen as something that is merely to be expected in the light of the best explanations we have of how such disagreement arises.” The context here is, broadly speaking, ethics—how people should live—and Williams thinks that ethical questions are immensely complex, so that disagreement about them is “merely to be expected.” Indeed, any attempt to shut down disagreement on such matters will lead to an impoverishment of thought, and eventually of life itself.

The ancient idea of the philosopher as gadfly arises from the awareness that a person can serve society not only by being correct but also, and in a distinct way, simply by being *different*—by challenging conventional wisdom and received beliefs. In the American legal culture, we have long seen defense attorneys serve a similar role: It is good for society, and for justice considered generally, that even seemingly indefensible clients or ideas be defended. And sometimes, of course, what seems indefensible proves to be justified after all.

No society tolerates every imaginable form of speech; there are always boundaries. What is disorienting about contemporary American society is how quickly the boundaries are shifting. Beliefs that were almost universal 20 years ago—and are held by around 40% of the American people now—are deemed (especially on university campuses) utterly beyond the pale. It’s hard not to suspect that some of the people most devoted to policing those boundaries are pouncing prosecutorially, with the zeal of the convert, on views that they themselves held not that long ago. And social media often provide the chief impetus for both changing one’s own views and policing those whose views are different. In this environment, it’s hard to see who will resist what Oakeshott calls the “disposition . . . to impose a single character upon significant human speech.”

Maybe the Oakeshott/Williams view of philosophy as an opening-up rather than a closing-down of options can assist. In a fascinating recent online conversation about the value of political disagreement (published on the *New York Times* website), philosophy professors Gary Gutting and Jerry Gaus end up doing what people always do in these conversations: They advocate open disagreement but then quickly pause to say that “toleration has limits.” Being philosophers, they go on to ask how those limits should be determined. Gaus notes: “The critical question is not whether I judge a person to be radically misguided, or judge her way of life to be morally repugnant, but whether she is a danger to the life and liberty of others.”

But that doesn't help us very much unless we can define "danger," and its sibling, "harm," and no concepts have undergone more radical alteration in the recent shifting of social opinion than these. Thomas Jefferson famously said, "[I]t does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg." But, in a culture devoted to a minutely particular screening of language for microaggressions, the injury inflicted by opinions becomes the most talked-about form of harm. There are no socially useful gadflies in Microaggression World—unless, of course, you think it's okay for some ideas to be challenged but not your favorite ones. And no one would ever be so inconsistent—would they?

People who traffic in symbolic manipulation (as so many of us do, these digital days) are typically inclined to overrate the importance of symbolic manipulation. It's always tempting to think that to exercise control over symbols (the Confederate battle flag, for instance) is to strike a blow for justice. Again, social media play a key role here, as they leave everyone with the sense that they are always being watched and must always watch others. Survey and critique everyone else's opinions, lest you make yourself subject to surveillance and critique.

Minding your own business, on this commonly held account of things, is a vice not a virtue, and those who handle disagreement calmly are *ipso facto* deficient in their commitment to justice. To restore a belief in the positive value of disagreement, here, would be a challenging task indeed. When Williams writes of disagreement as "an important and constitutive feature of our relations to others," he is speaking a moral language incomprehensible to those for whom free speech is "so last century" and for whom history is always a story of moral progress.

How might such people come to see, with Williams, the virtue of moral and epistemic humility? How might they be brought to see that it can be a positive good to belong to a society in which people with deep disagreements, even about sexuality and personal self-determination, can live in peace with one another and, just possibly, converse? It is difficult to imagine how this might happen, especially when expulsion from the academic community is the sanction typically demanded for wrong thinking—or even just misspeaking.

We may take as a fairly representative example of that impulse the fate of Mary Spellman, a dean at Claremont McKenna College, whose obviously sympathetic email to a troubled student led to her forced

resignation. Spellman had expressed a desire to help a student who felt marginalized, along with other students “who don’t fit our CMC mold.” Clearly by this she meant that there was a tendency at Claremont McKenna to see a certain kind of student (presumably white and well-off) as the norm—fitting the “mold”—and Spellman wanted to make other students feel more included and comfortable. But those very students insisted that Spellman was telling them that they didn’t fit and was therefore complicit in their marginalization, and therefore must be forced out. At a protest at which students shouted “Bring Spellman out!” she appeared and made repeated and even tearful apologies, but it seemed that none of those present considered them adequate. After her resignation, Claremont McKenna’s student-body president, William Su, said, “I’m pretty happy she resigned.”

BACONIAN PROTESTS

This single-sanction model of discipline—expulsion being the only adequate response to error—is clearly draconian but, equally clearly, inadequate. As Michel Foucault demonstrated so powerfully in his classic *Discipline and Punish*, within the ideological framework of the “disciplinary society,” the very *need* to punish is a mark of failure: Those who have been properly disciplined will not err in the first place.

This is why so many of the demands of protestors on campuses around the country focus on training people—faculty, administrators, and students alike—in racial and cultural sensitivity as a basic requisite, and when possible a prerequisite, for participation in the life of a given academic community. “Bard College [must] support and ensure the establishment and provision of Diversity and Sensitivity Workshops multiple times a semester to faculty and staff at all levels,” reads one characteristic statement of student demands. Another list requires “Recurring diversity sensitivity training for faculty and staff [at Beloit College] to promote better inclusivity for students of color in classroom, office, and administrative spaces.” Yet another from Brown University students reads, “We demand the introduction of compulsory, in-person, and regular anti-oppression training for faculty, staff, DPS, and administration.”

Dozens more could be cited. Much can be said about such demands that has already been said: that they clearly repudiate the value of disagreement, that they eerily echo Maoist and Stalinist re-education

programs, that they assume that “error has no rights,” and so on. All true. But what strikes me about the whole approach is how *Baconian* it is.

Francis Bacon’s early attempts to inaugurate what we would now call the scientific method, and to extend it into the whole of philosophical reflection, seem to me to prefigure rather precisely the thoughts of many student protestors. In his *New Organon* of 1620, Bacon lays out his method for inquiry. He begins by stating, “I propose to establish progressive stages of certainty,” and agrees that many of the medieval scholastics who emphasized the power of logic wanted to do the same thing. He doesn’t think they went about it the right way, but he and they have this in common: “[T]hey were in search of helps for the understanding, and had no confidence in the native and spontaneous process of the mind.” That’s true of our modern protestors as well: The “native and spontaneous process of the mind” — the white male mind anyway — is notoriously unreliable.

Yet Bacon also differentiates himself from the logicians:

But this remedy comes too late to do any good, when the mind is already, through the daily intercourse and conversation of life, occupied with unsound doctrines and beset on all sides by vain imaginations. . . . There remains but one course for the recovery of a sound and healthy condition — namely, that the entire work of the understanding be commenced afresh, and the mind itself be from the very outset not left to take its own course, but guided at every step; and the business be done as if by machinery.

The mind of someone like — for example — Mary Spellman is “occupied with unsound doctrines and beset on all sides by vain imaginations.” She can only be cast out, so the community can turn to the more promising work of educating younger people. They will be “guided at every step,” and, since the lessons they have to learn are fixed and invariant, “the business [may] be done as if by machinery.”

The philosopher Charles Taylor calls this Baconian habit of mind “code fetishism” or “normolatry.” And in summarizing the thought of Ivan Illich in an important essay from 2005, Taylor develops this point:

Codes, even the best codes, can become idolatrous traps that tempt us to complicity in violence. Illich reminds us not to

become totally invested in the code—even the best code of a peace-loving, egalitarian variety—of liberalism. We should find the centre of our spiritual lives beyond the code, deeper than the code, in networks of living concern, which are not to be sacrificed to the code, which must even from time to time subvert it.

This Baconian disciplinary “machinery,” executing the normolaters’ preferred codes, simply eliminates the possibility of strengthening our “networks of living concern.”

There is a great moment in the movie *High Noon* that can help us better understand this mindset. Despite having promised his fiancée that he would leave town with her, Marshal Will Kane decides he has to stay to fight the Miller gang, who are about to terrorize the town. He makes a strong case, but she—vitality, a Quaker—says, “I don’t care who’s right or who’s wrong. There’s got to be some better way for people to live.”

Those words keep echoing in my head when thinking of the campus protests: *I don’t care who’s right or who’s wrong. There’s got to be some better way for people to live.* Alas, the way things play out in the movie doesn’t seem to reinforce that view. The notion that our disagreements can be disconnected from the question of what might be a better way to live is ultimately not a path out of conflict but a means of suppressing the truth.

A MATTER OF TRUST

At Baylor University, I recently taught a class called “Great Texts of the Twentieth Century.” As I was making up my book orders, I considered that I want my students—most but not all of whom are Christians; some are simply unbelievers; some are uncertain and struggling—to encounter Christian writers for whom the 20th century’s challenges provided an impetus to re-think and re-live Christianity in fresh ways. But I also want them to encounter the texts and, through those texts, the experiences that served to undermine Christian faith and practice in the 20th century. So we read Sigmund Freud as well as Karl Barth; Richard Dawkins as well as Walker Percy; Virginia Woolf and Ralph Ellison and Wole Soyinka.

I could, of course, work to protect my students from this violent clash of powerful and contradictory ideas; I could—I am free to do this, in any of my classes—construct a syllabus that focuses on Christian

writers, and perhaps other religious believers, and presents anti-religious writers whose work is cartoonish or in other ways simplistic. And perhaps if I did that some of my students would feel safer. But that, I am convinced, would be a false sense of safety and would leave them under-prepared for an adult world in which their ideas and beliefs will receive daily challenges. What kind of teacher would I be if I let that happen?

The eminent sociologist Frank Furedi writes:

There is one point on which the crusade for the imposition of trigger warnings is absolutely right. It is not for nothing that reading was always feared throughout history. It is indeed a risky activity: reading possesses the power to capture the imagination, create emotional upheaval and force people towards an existential crisis. Indeed, for many it is the excitement of embarking on a journey into the unknown that leads them to pick up a book in the first place.

He rightly adds that “it is precisely because reading catches us unaware and offers an experience that is rarely under our full control that it has played, and continues to play, such an important role in humanity’s search for meaning. That is also why it is so often feared.”

And reading *should* be feared; particular books and authors should be especially feared. But it is not always — indeed, it is not often — best to flee from what we fear. Better to master the fear, to approach what scares us, but to do so with care and preparation and in an environment where those around you wish you well.

Curiously, Christian institutions like the ones I have worked for (Wheaton College and now Baylor) tend to be less rigorous in policing such details than many secular institutions — perhaps because they only hire people with explicit ethical and religious commitments. If you take some care to know the kind of person you’re hiring, with the caveat, of course, that every institution can be fooled into making bad hires, you need be less diligent about demanding conformity in the little details of academic life. As Stanley Fish once pointed out, in the academy we get to choose “not . . . between a closed environment and an open one but between environments that are differently closed.” There may be intellectual, and not just intellectual, rewards to be reaped by institutions that set their boundaries wisely and police them appropriately.

Two years ago I taught a course called “Confession and Autobiography,” which covered some of the many types of self-writing from Augustine to . . . well, where should one conclude a course on that topic? After considerable reflection, I decided that I would choose Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*. I knew that some of the subject matter of the book might be a bit challenging for some of my students — this is Texas, after all, and Baylor draws on a more socially and culturally conservative pool of students than many schools do — but *Fun Home* is a remarkable book, rich and complex and resistant to simplistic readings (not least those that tend to come from the cultural left). I also knew the students were juniors and seniors and would likely have the maturity to handle those challenges, as long as I gave them the proper context.

That last clause is key. A good teacher, in any environment, must be willing to prepare his students for what he assigns them. As I have noted, the decision of what books to assign is morally fraught, and the more seriously the teacher considers that decision the better prepared he’ll be when the time comes for reading and discussion. So, having thought carefully when I was ordering books, I was ready to spend some time on the first day of class explaining why I wanted them to read *Fun Home*.

But there is only so much a teacher can do in advance. One may offer some abstract descriptions of what’s in a book, but such descriptions are necessarily inadequate at best and at worst profoundly distorting. So I wasn’t altogether surprised when, as the time for discussing *Fun Home* drew closer, a couple of students expressed some anxiety about whether it was the kind of thing they wanted to read. And while I tried to reassure them, I knew that, in the end, the proof could only be in the pudding: It would only be after they had read the book and discussed it, under my leadership, in class that they could know whether the book was worthy of their time and any discomfort it might cost them.

So really what I was saying to these students was *please trust me*. Most of them ultimately did, I think, and when we actually got into *Fun Home* we had some of our best discussions of the semester. The pieces of the puzzle, or so it seemed to me from the head of the table, seemed to fall beautifully into place. And I got two really outstanding term papers on *Fun Home*.

All of which shows how hopelessly misbegotten the whole idea of “trigger warnings” is. Even aside from the widespread failure, in

discussions of this topic, to distinguish between triggers experienced by people who have undergone severe trauma on the one hand and the discomfort experienced by anyone who's encountering new and challenging ideas on the other, there is a still deeper problem. There is a failure to realize that just as important as what you read is whom you read it with—the social and personal context in which you experience and discuss and reflect on a book.

A list of troublesome “topics”—basically, tagging books with simplistic descriptions—simply trivializes all of these matters. Any teachers who think that they have met their moral responsibilities to students by loading their syllabi with such tags—and any institutions that find such tags adequate—have grossly misunderstood what education is. And that would be true even if such tags could adequately capture the ways in which a given theme (sexual violence, say) is treated in a given work of art, which they can't.

If you trust your teacher and your fellow students, then you can risk intellectual encounters that might be more daunting if you were wholly on your own. That trust, when it exists, is grounded in the awareness your teacher desires your flourishing, and that teacher and your fellow students share at least some general ideas about what that flourishing consists in. Which is why colleges and universities with distinctive religious commitments can be more open to challenging ideas, both old and new, than many of their secular counterparts.

Shared commitments build mutual trust, and there are few things more needful for those of us seeking knowledge and wisdom in academic communities. Building such trust offers a “better way for people to live” than a world governed by relentlessly enforced sensitivity training and zero tolerance for certain kinds of error, even when the errors are made by good and kind servants of an institution.

BEING HUMAN

The word “compassion” means to “suffer with.” It presumes fellow feeling, based on a shared experience of what Hamlet called “the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to”—and also, alas, of the unnatural shocks that we humans inflict on one another. That this is a reasonable, indeed an essential, way of thinking and feeling is intrinsic to the idea of the humanities, the study of what is human. It is within this moral frame that Terence's line, clichéd though it has grown over the centuries,

becomes so vital: *Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto*—I am human, and nothing human is alien to me.

To be sure, few sentences can be more wounding to the one who suffers than the casual “I know just how you feel.” *No, you damned well don’t* is the instinctive response, and often rightly so. But here Terence comes to our aid. He doesn’t say, “Everything human is fully comprehensible to me,” but rather, “Nothing human is *alien* to me”: Nothing that my fellow humans experience is beyond my ability to recognize, to have some understanding of—to have compassion for.

In *The Doors of Perception*, Aldous Huxley claims that “by its very nature every embodied spirit is doomed to suffer and enjoy in solitude. Sensations, feelings, insights, fancies—all these are private and, except through symbols and at second hand, incommunicable.” Therefore “every human group is a society of island universes.”

This is disconcerting. But, he continues, “Most island universes are sufficiently like one another to permit of inferential understanding or even of mutual empathy or ‘feeling into.’ Thus, remembering our own bereavements and humiliations, we can condole with others in analogous circumstances, can put ourselves . . . in their places.”

Genuine compassion is therefore an achievement, something gained only by disciplined attentiveness, not to “the other,” that empty abstraction, but to some particular other: to a neighbor. (“‘Neighbor,’” Kierkegaard dryly commented, “is what philosophers call ‘the other.’”) And the greater the suffering of that neighbor, the more rigorous must our attention be if we are to reach some understanding. This is one of the great themes of Simone Weil’s writing, especially in her powerful, spiritually intimidating meditation on “The Love of God and Affliction.” But—and Weil makes this clear too—as great as the challenge is, we must always hold the possibility of compassion before us, because the personal and social costs of neglecting or refusing it are catastrophic.

For the last 25 years or more, what used to be the humanistic disciplines—and these disciplines are absolutely central to the campus debates and controversies we have been exploring here—have ignored the vital Terentian claim that nothing fully alienates one human from another. It might be better to say that they have betrayed it, which is why I insist that they “used to be” the humanistic disciplines. I don’t have a name for what they are now. Instead of acknowledging the power and shaping force of race and gender and sexual orientation and culture,

professors are treating them as a series of hermetically sealed boxes, making it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, for their students to see themselves as sharing common experiences and common pursuits. (No one who has even the slightest understanding of how cultures actually operate in relation to one another — a ceaseless interchange of ideas, visions, experiences, and techniques — could take the notion of opprobrious “cultural appropriation” seriously. Appropriation is what culture does.)

If you cannot see your fellow students, or colleagues, as engaged in a common and intrinsically human search for knowledge — maybe even wisdom — then you will have no incentive to cross the boundaries of race, gender, or culture. You will in the end have no incentive to cross the boundaries of your narrow little self. You may occasionally speak the language of “alliance,” but you will define your allies as those who obey your demands. And, in times of conflict, it will be characteristic of your stance toward the world to make demands.

This is a way to live. But it is not a good way to live, and it exacts a heavy toll on everyone involved — especially the students, who postpone beyond any reasonable point that vital achievement Richard Rodriguez described: becoming “assimilated into public society” in such a way as to make possible “the achievement of public individuality.” If our young people are going to see that there are less confrontational alternatives, something other than zero-sum games, they will need instruction in the humanities. Some of us are prepared to give it.