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Speak Free or Lie: Academic Freedom & the Obligation to Speak Truth

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Abstract

In recent days a colleague in the Political Science Department at Gettysburg College has been pilloried in the local and national press for her stand on teaching the upcoming presidential election. It troubles me that much of the criticism levied against her seems disengaged from the text of her original column on the subject, or from the ample evidence of excellence in her long and well-respected career; it horrifies and disgusts me, however, that she has suffered through epithets and threats to her personal safety for simply voicing a thoughtful, heartfelt opinion, however provocative or controversial. I firmly believe we should protect and indeed celebrate respectful dissent and unpopular speech. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

academic freedom, presidential election, Quakerism, truth

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In recent days a colleague in the Political Science Department at Gettysburg College has been pilloried in the local and national press for her stand on teaching the upcoming presidential election. It troubles me that much of the criticism levied against her seems disengaged from the text of her original column on the subject, or from the ample evidence of excellence in her long and well-respected career; it horrifies and disgusts me, however, that she has suffered through epithets and threats to her personal safety for simply voicing a thoughtful, heartfelt opinion, however provocative or controversial. I firmly believe we should protect and indeed celebrate respectful dissent and unpopular speech.

As a Quaker, I have raised my children to follow a set of “testimonies” drawn by early Friends from the teachings of the Gospels. Although Simplicity and Peace are probably those values most commonly associated with Quakers, Integrity is also a key testimony. Because Quakers practice silent worship until we feel the divine spirit incite us to speak, Integrity to me includes the imperative to speak Truth, however inconvenient or unpopular, when one’s conscience bids one do so.

I hold myself and my family to that standard, and I respect it in others, whether or not I agree with the ideas they articulate: Thoughtful, sincere expression of

Truth is the highest form of worship to me, and it is, in addition, so vital to democracy and such a fundamental American value that it is enshrined in the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States.

I am proud and grateful to teach at Gettysburg College, a historic institution witness to and at the forefront of the defense of basic rights and freedoms for nearly two centuries. At the core of our mission at Gettysburg is an acknowledgment of the centrality of free speech to our educational endeavor; as the mission statement makes clear, Gettysburg College is dedicated to “the free and open marketplace of ideas and the exploration of the ethical and spiritual dimensions of those ideas....”

At times one of my colleagues will make a statement that ruffles some feathers, or perhaps even sets the hen-house on an uproar; I have done so once or twice myself. My point, however, is that unpopular and even provocative speech, thoughtfully articulated by a person of character enough to stand up, sign his or her John Hancock, and take responsibility for those words, is the very life’s blood of democracy, and it is so central to the academic endeavor that it is protected by the institution of tenure, which exists primarily to protect exactly such speech.

Tenure is a widely misunderstood and often maligned aspect of academic life, but public attacks upon professors voicing thoughtful, sincere, opinions in a politically-charged atmosphere proves just how vital it is. The First Amendment is meant to protect unpopular speech, and what teachers and scholars term “Academic Freedom” really is an extension of this core American principle into our professional lives. Simply put, academic freedom and the institution of tenure for college teachers fundamentally have to do with freedom of expression, and in particular the freedom and security to voice unpopular opinions and perspectives. At times we do this in the classroom to foment respectful debate, at times we publish our views in scholarly journals and books to invite comment from our professional peers, and at times our

professional position privileges us to make informed statements on our topics of expertise to the public at large.

I personally have been the subject of attacks in the past as a result of my exercise of free speech, and although I have tended to ignore the cowardly anonymous rants, I often have attempted to find common ground with those who argued against my position thoughtfully and in good faith. As a Quaker, it is in fact my nature and the obligation of my Faith to attempt to see the best in others, and to trust that they, as fellow children of the God I worship, have insight into some aspect of Truth as well, perhaps one which is obscure to me.

I also have the obligation to speak Truth to power, however, and to stand up for what I believe is right, even if that act makes me unpopular or even endangers me. I teach my children to try to meet hate with love, as Christ instructs us so very clearly, but I would rather be hated for standing up for my beliefs than tolerated for sitting in silent cowardice, and I am blessed to be surrounded by friends and colleagues who feel the same way.