

## Sticks and Stones

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Almost two years ago, my daughter Kate returned home from her first semester of college. My wife and I were happy to have her home for the Holidays. Our thirteen-year-old son, perhaps a bit less so. During our first evening at the dinner table, my wife inquired about one of Kate's friends. "How is Danielle? Is she enjoying college?"

Kate replied, "They are fine."

"What do you mean 'they'?" asked my wife, her face taking on a hue of concern. "She's not suffering from multiple personality disorder, is she?"

"No Mom," answered my daughter. "Danielle prefers the pronoun 'they' as they identify as non-binary."

"Do you mean that she..." my wife began.

"They," insisted my daughter.

"Do you mean that *they* are bisexual?" asked my wife.

My daughter became visibly frustrated. She sighed the sigh of a child whose parents couldn't operate a VCR. "No Mom. This has nothing to do with sexual preference. 'Non-binary' means that Danielle identifies with multiple genders, not simply male or female. Danielle prefers to not be referred to as either male or female."

My son entered the fray. "That's crazy!" he said with eyes rolling.

"You can't use the word 'crazy'. It marginalizes the mentally ill," said my daughter.

My wife immediately followed on saying, "Multiple genders? Don't you mean *both* genders?"

Kate's face reddened.

Not wanting to be left out of the discussion, I chimed in, "English already has a pronoun for non-gendered entities and it is 'it'."

My daughter glared at us with our obvious ignorance, stood up and left the room in a huff.

The balance of our ever increasingly tense Holiday was filled with my daughter pointing out how racist, trans-phobic, sexist and generally insensitive we and everyone else in America were. This was accomplished by way of the language of ideology, derisively and judgmentally employed to our detriment. To say that there were many heated disagreements, usually ending with Kate's tears and growing resentment, would be an understatement. When Kate returned to school, my wife, son and I were relieved to no longer be the constant targets of our own speech police force of one.

Before Kate entered college, she was engagingly concerned with societal injustice and the suffering of the less fortunate. In a single semester, she had transformed into a person obsessed with calling out even the slightest transgressions termed micro-aggressions which are unintentional remarks that could be taken as insensitive. At one point, I teasingly asked about nano-aggressions. She was not amused.

My wife and I were concerned that our daughter had become so angry. She was emotionally invested in the suffering of others, which I laud, but was almost exclusively focused on what was happening in the United States. When she would talk about the degradation suffered by women being cat-called by men, I would suggest that even though it is a boorish behavior, it pales in comparison to the cultural practice of genital mutilation amongst other offenses to women around the globe.

The same is true of her critique of racism and gender identity issues. Clear examples of horrible treatment of minorities in other nations are not in her purview. The reason she and her compatriots will not criticize other cultures' practices is that it would constitute an attempt at cultural oppression.

A quick search on YouTube reveals a landscape upon which epic wars of words rage. Accusations and slurs are lobbed like chemical weapons across Flanders Fields. This phenomenon is occurring across the nation at every college and university. Hypersensitive students demand that any time professors are about to bring up a potentially sensitive topic, they must first issue a 'trigger warning' so that the students can brace themselves for the onslaught of challenging ideas. Students now demand 'safe spaces' where certain topics are not allowed to be brought up. These young people are pejoratively referred to as 'Social Justice Warriors'. I prefer to refer to them instead as Social Justice Advocates, or SJA's for short, since my daughter is one of them.

After further investigation and conversation with my daughter, I discovered that the basic tool or lens that is being used is the binary of oppressor and oppressed. Unlike self-chosen gender identity where the SJA's insist that the binary of male/female is illusory, they insist that there is no middle ground here, one is either an oppressor or a victim. In this view, the victims have a claim to virtue because of their suffering and the oppressors have no claim to virtue. It is held by SJA's that the only way to virtue is through victimization by others. A curious notion of virtue to be sure.

I pointed out to my daughter that any lens can be a useful tool to gain clarity on a particular subject. And that in this case, the oppressor/victim lens could shed some light on the

haves and have nots of the world. But I also warned her that lenses both focus and distort. No single lens can provide universal clarity. I urged her to acquire as many lenses as she could and learn to use them as tools of inquiry, not of revelation of absolute truth.

This victim narrative has taken hold not only of the young SJA's on college campuses, but also extremist groups of both the right and the left. The leftists are victims of rightist hatred and the rightist are victims of leftist change. Both sides compete for who is a greater victim, who has the moral high ground of virtue.

Under the oppressor/victim lens, people of color are the victims and white people are the oppressors. Members of the marginalized LGBTQ community are the victims and those who are cis-gendered, meaning those whose gender matches the one assigned at birth, are the oppressors. Women are the victims and males are the oppressors. This can be summed up by the following tenets held by the SJA ideology: all men are misogynistic, all cis-gendered people are trans-phobic, and all white people are racist. In the most extreme version, not only are all white people racists, *only* white people can be racists. Put most simply, the western patriarchy ruined, and continues to ruin, everything.

What is a cis-gendered white male to do? How can I lessen my oppression of others? The SJA way insists that I must first admit that I am a racist, misogynistic, transphobe. I must become an ally of the oppressed. Then I must set out to identify the transgressions of others, to publicly shame other perpetrators of racism, trans-phobia and misogyny. It is only in this way can I signal my virtue to others in spite of my definitional oppressor status.

The phenomenon of protests on college campuses is not new. One of the first campus protests (if not the first protest) took place in 1766 at Harvard College over the poor quality of the food. Little did those protesters know that crappy food at college would become the overwhelming norm for the next 250 years. When I was in college, there were no protests over poor food quality, just a lot of muttering and griping.

The 1960's were rife with college protests over the treatment of African Americans, the war in Viet Nam and Free Speech. The first protests of the sixties took place in 1964 at UC Berkeley over Free Speech. The university did not allow political activities on campus. The protests were peaceful and resulted in the lifting of the ban, thus increasing the diversity of opinion on campus.

Recently, in addition to the protesting against racism and other forms of oppression, some students are taking aim at bad grades. Students at Oberlin College held protests demanding the abolition of all grades less than a 'C' citing that they were struggling to keep up with both coursework and activism.

Absurd protests like that are a good source of humor. However, many of today's protests seek to silence speech that is deemed to be racist, misogynistic or transphobic. Invited speakers who do not conform to the SJA's ideology become the target of protest. The tactics include signing petitions prior to the speaking engagement to have it cancelled. If that fails then SJA's

flood the venue with protesters who chant and yell so that the speaker cannot be heard. Whenever chanting begins, reason departs.

This year, UC San Diego invited the Dalai Lama to give its commencement speech. Protests erupted demanding that he be uninvited. It is difficult to imagine what reason could exist to uninvite a man who has consistently presented a message of non-violence and compassion. The reason given by the protesters was that the Dalai Lama might offend Chinese students if he mentioned the status of Tibet. To UC San Diego's credit, the Dalai Lama was not uninvited.

In a stroke of monumental irony, UC Berkeley had a protest in February of this year with its goal to have an invited speaker's appearance be canceled because of his assertively confrontational political stance. The protest took place at the same building where the Free Speech protest of 1964 arose. The student protest was peaceful, that is until outside forces entered campus. The group Antifa, meaning Anti Fascists, caused general mayhem, setting fires, attacking people with pepper spray, throwing rocks at police, etc. until they decided to move off campus into the city where the rioting and looting continued. Not to be left out of the party, Nazis and White Supremacists participated in subsequent protests at Berkeley. It is not surprising that more violence came to pass.

I am very relieved that my daughter does not attend UC Berkeley given the violence that has occurred there. I feel very confident that her campus will not erupt into violence. For even though their sports teams are called the Fighting Quakers, they are Quakers none the less and Quakers don't fight.

Kate spent this past summer break at home with us and I am pleased to say that, while still being a SJA, she has declined the impulse to participate in public protest. I am also pleased that she is beginning to conclude, after the experience of a couple more years of life, that while racism and misogyny and transphobia still exist, her family and a majority of the U.S. populace are perhaps not quite the evil oppressors she once believed we were.