

Language, truth and logic

Some thoughts about the recent "don't say anything offensive in class" policy that has enjoyed so much success here at Dal:

Such a policy seems to me an odd thing to find at a university. Perhaps there are those who come to a university to live a quiet life, free from care and worry. I, however, have come here to learn, and in my experience it is often the case that one must err in order to learn. If one does everything right the first time, what does one have to learn? This is one of the few places where one is supposed to be wrong and one is expected to be corrected.

For instance, I feel sure that it would be considered inordinately wrong of me to oppose this policy. However, what if I find it to be not only wrong, but downright offensive? According to the very policy that was designed to protect my tender sensibilities, we cannot discuss the policy's merits or deficiencies. It seems an odd piece of legislation that inhibits its own discussion. However, it seems we are not supposed to disagree — political correctness admits of no discussion. It's just right.

While I don't agree with this sort of policy, it's a simple thing to trace the logic that underlies it. Language is a tremendously potent thing. We use language to communicate our thoughts, but more importantly, we use it to frame those thoughts. Therefore, if we can control the language that people use, we can control their thoughts. This in the hands of some might be a fearful thing, but in the hands of liberals is just fine because the liberals are simply right. From this line of reasoning stems the whole movement for political correctness: "If only people wouldn't say nasty things to one another, then they would stop being nasty to one another and the world would be a happy place." I submit to you that this is a silly line of reasoning.

Let us reflect, for a moment, upon what this policy is supposed to combat. It was hailed as a measure to combat sexism and racism in the classroom. I personally would very

much like to see the end of such things myself. My point is that the policy that has been passed is a most unfortunate way of going about affecting an end to sexism and racism, in the classroom or anywhere else.

Look at the civil rights movement, or the feminist movement. In both cases we find that there was a group who was not allowed to voice their views — it wasn't politically correct for them to voice their views — and in both cases the movement succeeded. Indeed, I think the claim can be made that these movements derived no little strength from the suppression of their voices — because they had something of truth to them, and the fact that they were stigmatized made people wonder.

For instance, suppose that I'm right about some view. What need have I to disallow you from having your say? If I attempt to stifle your voice instead of listening to your view, assaying its merits and, if it is mistaken, supplying a reason for why it is wrong, it appears that I fear to be confronted about my beliefs, and the question arises as to just how valid such 'in the closet' beliefs can be. If we really wish to end racism and sexism (here or anywhere), simply

silencing those who hold those views is not only going to fail to end these things, it is going to make them stronger.

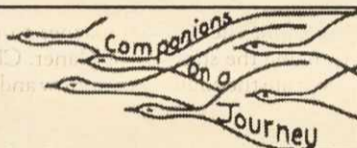
The whole issue is just one of whether or not freedom of speech is a good thing. In any society that would make even a tentative stab at 'freedom', freedom of speech is not only a good idea, but a necessity.

Consider what this society would look like without it — civil rights and feminism would be unheard of. To decide that we are now in possession of The Truth and that we can now close off the articulation of any contrary thought is nothing more than the prejudiced view that those who now find themselves to be empowered are all knowing, and without question correct in all their beliefs. It might be the case that they are correct, but if they are, that's all the more reason to eschew the sort of policy that they are imposing upon us.

Now, I've no doubt that there will be those who find this article to be offensive, and I suppose that I'll just have to hope that no one brings it into a classroom, lest I be charged with the heinous offence of (perhaps) being mistaken.

Glenn Wylie

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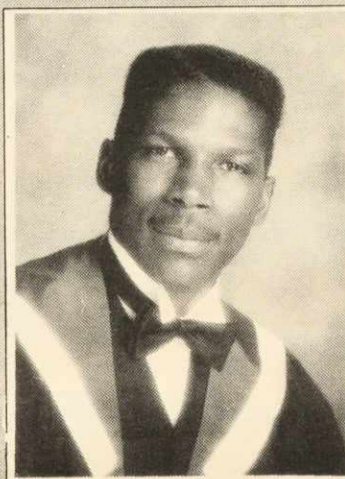
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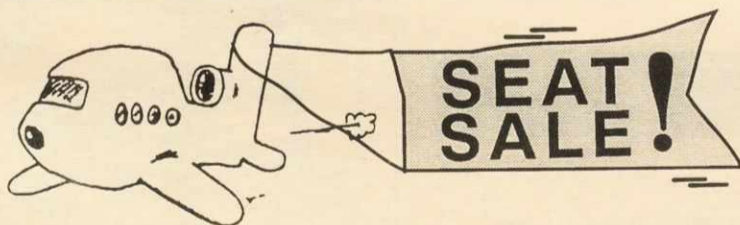


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