Cultivating Virtue — Against a Safe Christian Education

Randy Ridenour

October 20, 2016

Warning: the presentation you are about to hear contains material that may be considered offensive by some, or, if not offensive, then insensitive, inconsiderate, or simply misguided and wrong.

1 Trigger Warnings

I probably shouldn't have said that, because you might now expect me to have something interesting and exciting to say — an expectation that I may not be able to meet. I really don't intend to say anything offensive. I do, however, intend to talk about why encountering the offensive in Christian higher education is a good thing, for encounters with the offensive, the disturbing, the immoral, and the vicious, under the right conditions, are necessary for moral development.

Amanda Marcotte, writing in *Slate Magazine* called 2013, among other things, "The Year of the Trigger Warning" as the demand for such warnings proliferated. (Marcotte 2013) Marcotte was primarily concerned with the increased calls for trigger warnings to be prominently displayed as part of a television show or web page.[1]

Over the last few years, most of the debate concerning trigger warnings have been in the context of higher education. The Student Senate of the University of California, Santa Barbara made a formal resolution calling for trigger warnings to be issued in classes. (Diamba 2014) Other campuses at which trigger warnings were requested include Rutgers (Wythe 2014) and George Washington University (Peligri 2014). In the "Support Resources for Faculty" section of its Sexual Offense Resource Guide, Oberlin College suggests that faculty issue trigger warnings for material covering issues like "racism, colonialism,

1. Evidently, the satirical website *The Onion* is a common target for those wanting trigger warnings.

religious persecution, violence, suicide, and more." (Equity Concerns 2016) These requests have not simply been limited to campus newspapers and student government bodies, the demands have been taken to the streets. Protests have occurred on several campuses, include Amherst College, Princeton, and Yale. The Yale protest attempted to shut down a free speech conference, prompting alumnus Scott Johnston to cleverly remark that they had apparently "…missed irony class that day." (Hartocollis 2016)

These calls, as one would expect, have prompted responses on the part of some administrators and faculty. One response, which initiated an intense debate this year, was the letter sent to incoming freshmen at the University of Chicago by the Dean of Students, Jay Ellison. In it, he wrote,

> You will find that we expect members of our community to be engaged in rigorous debate, discussion and even disagreement. At times this may challenge you and even cause discomfort. Our commitment to academic freedom means that we do not support so-called 'trigger warnings,' we do not cancel invited speakers because their topics might prove controversial, and we do not condone the creation of intellectual 'safe spaces' where individuals can retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own. (Straus 2016)

The letter prompted quick praise from some and criticism from others.

That is the focus of the debate in the greater academic world. For the most part, though, that debate has affected neither my own institution, Oklahoma Baptist University, nor my teaching. I primarily teach courses in the history of philosophy, and my lecture on the medieval problem of universals generally triggers only yawns. So, I've paid at most a cursory attention to the question of trigger warnings. Two things, though, caused me to begin reflecting more deeply on the matter. First, Neil Gaiman published a book which was titled *Trigger Warning*. As the marketing campaign ramped up for the release date, Gaiman was asked why he chose such a "thoughtless and insensitive title." In response, Gaiman pointed to an excerpt from his introduction to the book, which was posted at USA Today. There, he did not so much defend his choice as express his conflicted feelings about trigger warnings.

> I was fascinated when I learned that trigger warnings had crossed the divide from the Internet to the world of things you could touch. Several colleges, it was announced, were considering putting trigger warnings on works of literature, art or film, to warn students of what was waiting for them, an idea that I found myself simultaneously warming to (of course you want to let people who may be distressed that this might distress them) while at the same time being deeply troubled by it: when I wrote Sandman and it was

> being published as a monthly comic, it had a warning on each issue, telling the world it was Suggested for Mature Readers, which I thought was wise. It told potential readers that this was not a children's comic and it might contain images or ideas that could be troubling, and also suggests that if you are mature (whatever that happens to means) you are on your own. As for what they would find that might disturb them, or shake them, or make them think something they had never thought before, I felt that that was their own lookout. We are mature, we decide what we read or do not read.
>
> But so much of what we read as adults should be read, I think, with no warnings or alerts beyond, perhaps: we need to find out what fiction is, what it means, to us, an experience that is going to be unlike anyone else's experience of the story. (Gaiman, n.d.)

The second event that led me to think more about trigger warnings was when three students, including my best philosophy student, marched into my office and demanded to know if I would be assigning any more reading assignments like the last one, presumably so that they could opt out of those assignments. ("Demanded" is too strong. Being Oklahoma Baptist University, it was more like a polite request.) The assignment was the "Rebellion" chapter of Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. My initial response was one of shock — I was shocked to find out that anyone actually read what I assigned.

Like Gaiman, I am conflicted about the use of trigger warnings. I am a chaplain in the Army Reserve with a deployment in Iraq and another in Afghanistan. I do understand what it's like to experience trauma and to be reminded of that trauma. We indeed ought to be sensitive to the emotional needs of others. Several years ago, I was at a session on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder with an Army colleague who had lost friends in the Korangal Valley of Afghanistan. When the speaker began showing clips from the documentary *Restrepo*, I watched my colleague appear increasingly uncomfortable. From her reaction, I don't think she was prepared to relive those experiences, especially in public. Since a large percentage of those present had been deployed, had friends who had been killed, or had ministered to the families of those who had been killed, it might have been appropriate to offer a word of preparation in advance.

My students who made the request, though, didn't quite have the same concern. It's not that the passage was likely to trigger a memory of past trauma. I know these particular students well, and I don't think there is any trauma of the sort that occurs in the story to trigger. When I asked them why they wanted to opt out of such assignments, their reply was that the reading was disturbing.

It *is* disturbing; Dostoevsky intended it to be disturbing. In it, Ivan regales Alyosha with tales of child abuse, tales intended to be knock-down evidence against the goodness of this world that God has created, and the case that Ivan makes is vivid and compelling.

I'm sympathetic to the students' desires. Neither they nor I really want to read the passage. It's too dark, too disturbing, too real. So, why assign such readings? Why not simply present the standard abstract philosophical argument from suffering, without actually describing any instances of suffering? One response is the same as that given to a call for trigger warnings, that faculty view "being provocative as part of their mandate." (Medina 2014) I'm confident that the administration and the board of trustees don't consider being provocative as part of my mandate. I admit that I enjoy being provocative, but I shouldn't provoke merely for the sake of being provocative. So, again, why assign provocative readings?

2 The Mission of the University

A suitable answer, if true, is that they are necessary for accomplishing the mission of the institution. The mission statement of my own institution is to transform lives "by equipping students to pursue academic excellence, integrate faith with all areas of knowledge, engage a diverse world, and live worthy of the high calling of God in Christ." The university then adopted ten educational goals designed to aid the accomplishment of this mission. Here are some key concepts found in these goals:

Students should

- appreciate the joy of discovery and the beauty of existence
- affirm the freedom and dignity of others
- foster mutual kindness and respect, and also a concern for others
- develop a lifelong habit of critical thinking, and
- develop in Christian commitment and lifelong service.

Note that the mission of the institution is not merely to provide access to information, but to produce a certain kind of student—one that is described in terms of both intellectual and moral virtues. My particular institution is no different from other faith-based schools in this respect. When I read the mission statements of these other universities, they all share this vision for education, even when it is expressed in different ways in different traditions. It is a vision that other kinds of institutions lack.

Jamie Smith expressed this vision for Christian education beautifully: "…a Christian education shapes us, forms us, molds us to be a certain kind of people whose hearts and passions and desires are aimed at the kingdom of God." (Smith 2009, 18)

I should say, rather, that Smith thinks that a genuine Christian education *should* shape, form, and mold us to be such people. Unfortunately, Smith admits, even our faith-based institutions often fail, because we reduce Christian education to something we call "developing a Christian world-view." That is, we abandon our goal to produce virtuous graduates for the much simpler task of producing graduates with correct beliefs, who adhere to the correct doctrines. We settle for graduates who know the good, but may not desire the good. The Christian university becomes a place for mere knowers, when it should be, as Smith claims, a place for lovers. (Smith 2009, 215)

This is not just a failure of faith-based institutions. The elite secular schools may be in an even worse position. In 2014, William Deresiewicz noted this, as he lamented the state of Ivy-League institutions in an article for *The New Republic* titled, "Don't Send Your Kid to the Ivy League: The Nation's Top Colleges Are Turning Our Kids Into Zombies." According to Deresiewicz,

> Religious colleges—even obscure, regional schools that no one has ever heard of on the coasts—often do a much better job in that respect. What an indictment of the Ivy League and its peers: that colleges four levels down on the academic totem pole, enrolling students whose SAT scores are hundreds of points lower than theirs, deliver a better education, in the highest sense of the word.

The elite secular schools, Deresiewicz claims, "like to boast that they teach their students how to think, but all they mean is that they train them in the analytic and rhetorical skills that are necessary for success in business and the professions." (Deresiewicz 2014)

So, some of our institutions produce graduates who know how to get what they desire, other institutions produce graduates who know what is genuinely worth desiring. How, though, do we produce graduates who actually desire what is worth desiring?

3 Virtue

For Aristotle, a virtue is an excellence of the soul. Virtues are not innate, but acquired.[2] "Soul" need not have dualistic or religious connotations; it can merely refer to whatever is at the core of the human being. So, it is probably best to think of virtues and vices as those character states that best define a person.

Acquiring a virtue requires effort on the part of a person. That is, virtues require time and work to cultivate, both on the part of the agent and on the part of those involved in the

2. A vice is an acquired defect of the soul.

moral education of the agent. Not everything that requires time and effort to cultivate will be a virtue; some are merely skills. Skills lack the depth of intrinsic value that is associated with a virtue.

Importantly for our purposes, a virtue has a motivational component. This motivation is a disposition to have a certain emotion sufficient to prompt actions that aim to achieve desirable ends in the proper circumstances.

Finally, having a virtue requires general reliability of success in achieving those desirable ends. A person does not have the virtue of charity if she cannot actually perform acts of charity, no matter how strongly she desires to do so.[3]

The success condition means that virtue requires knowledge and understanding, something that the American educational system does very well. On the other hand, the motivational component means that virtue requires developing proper emotional reactions to situations that are encountered. That, though, is puzzling. How should one produce graduates who go on to have proper emotional reactions to situations? One cannot learn to have the right emotional reactions to war without somehow experiencing the horrors of war. Surely, proper education doesn't require us to send students off to war as part of their studies. What we can do is immerse students into the experiences using literature and film, like Raymond Carver's beautiful, yet raw, short story, "A Small, Good Thing." Reading that, students can better understand the experience the pain of losing a child, and the anger directed to what is perceived as an evil, callous, uncaring world, and what it is like to be a baker who somehow connects anew with his humanity, and heals both himself and grieving parents with cinnamon rolls and fresh bread.

It seems that many of the trigger warnings used today in higher education, or at least Christian higher education, are not used to protect those who have had disturbing experiences in the past. Instead, they are used to protect innocent minds from having particular kinds of experiences at all, like hearing vulgar speech or seeing a nude body. Such trigger warnings are concessions to those who want education to be safe, and students to be protected from the vulgar, profane, and offensive.

The world, though, is often vulgar, profane, and offensive, and to portray it otherwise is a lie. It is impossible for students to receive a Christian education and never encounter the world as it, for a Christian education in which students never encounter accounts of violence, drunkenness, and rape would be a Christian education in which students never read Genesis — that is, it would not be a Christian education at all.

3. For an excellent contemporary introduction to the concept of virtue and to virtue ethics and epistemology, see Zagzebski (1996).

Trigger warnings, like the ones that my students requested, serve two purposes. First, they give students the opportunity to opt out of engaging the material. Second, they give students the opportunity to mentally and emotionally prepare themselves for the disturbing material that lay ahead. To do the former is to opt out of an education, but what could be wrong with the latter?

There are some events to which the only appropriate emotional responses are shock and horror. To portray these events in ways that do not elicit shock and horror is to do so in a way that ensures that students fail to have the appropriate moral responses. So, in an effort to avoid emotional harm to students, we have caused moral harm instead. Our goal in Christian education should not be to sanitize the world, but to encounter it as it is in the context of a community of love and grace.[4]

As God's creation, the world is filled with examples of beauty and grace, but in its present fallen state, it is also filled with examples of cruelty and horror. To portray only the horror is to leave students in cynicism and despair; to portray only the beauty is to leave students in gullible idealism and naiveté. Neither genuinely prepares students to deliver the gospel of Christ to a beautiful, yet broken, world.

References

Deresiewicz, William. 2014. "Don't Send Your Kid to the Ivy League." Accessed October 26, 2016. https://newrepublic.com/article/118747/ivy-league-schools-are-overrated-send-your-kids-elsewhere.

Diamba, Jessy. 2014. "A.S. Resolution Policy Aims to Protect Students From PTSD Triggers." Accessed October 21, 2016. http://dailynexus.com/2014-03-07/a-s-resolution-policy-aims-to-protect-students-from-ptsd-triggers/.

Equity Concerns, Oberlin College Office of. 2016. "Oberlin College, Sexual Offense Resource Guide." Accessed October 21.

Gaiman, Neil. n.d. *Trigger Warning: Short Fictions and Disturbances.* First edition. New York: HarperCollins.

Hartocollis, Anemona. 2016. "College Students Protest, Alumni's Fondness Fades and Checks Shrink." New York Times. Accessed October 21, 2016. http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/05/us/college-protests-alumni-donations.html?_r=0.

4. Like Mr. Beaver's description of Aslan, education is never safe, but it *can* be good.

Marcotte, Amanda. 2013. “The Year of the Trigger Warning.” Accessed October 20, 2016. http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2013/12/30/trigger_warnings_from_the_feminist_blogosphere_to_shonda_rhimes_in_2013.html.

Medina, Jennifer. 2014. “Warning: The Literary Canon Could Make Students Squirm.” Accessed October 22, 2016. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/18/us/warning-the-literary-canon-could-make-students-squirm.html?_r=2.

Peligri, Justin. 2014. “Why we need trigger warnings on syllabi.” Accessed October 21, 2016. http://www.gwhatchet.com/2014/04/16/justin-peligri-why-we-need-trigger-warnings-on-syllabi/.

Smith, James K. A. 2009. *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation.* Volume 1 of Cultural liturgies. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic.

Straus, Valerie. 2016. “So you like the University of Chicago’s rejection of ‘safe spaces’ for students? Consider this.” Accessed October 21, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2016/08/30/so-you-like-the-university-of-chicagos-rejection-of-safe-spaces-for-students-consider-this/.

Wythe, Philip. 2014. “Trigger warnings needed in classroom.” Accessed October 21, 2016. http://www.dailytargum.com/article/2014/02/trigger-warnings-needed-in-classroom.

Zagzebski, Linda Trinkaus. 1996. *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry Into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge.* New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press.