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COMMENTARY

‘Safe’ Is in the Brain of the Beholder

By Lee Burdette Williams | SEPTEMBER 06, 2016



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As a child, I was a serial fort-builder. Whether it was under a desk, a piano, a basement workbench, or constructed of blankets and random furniture, I found comfort and coziness in a variety of forts I built in rooms throughout the house. Lit by flashlight or battery-powered lantern, my forts were where I (and the occasional friend or pet) spent hours engrossed in books, games, and conversation. My mother gamely joined me

when invited, though I'm sure she didn't love getting on her hands and knees and crawling beneath the canopy of old blankets I had repurposed.

I found myself thinking about those forts as I read the much-discussed letter from John Ellison, dean of students at the University of Chicago, and then the many columns, letters, and comments in response to his letter. Ellison wrote a letter to welcome new first-year students, much like I did as a dean of students at the beginning of each year. His was a letter full of hope and exhortation, infused with the kind of optimism most deans of students feel at the start of the academic year. He also told students, in language that some saw as condescending, to expect to find a campus committed to free expression, not one that condones "safe spaces" where uncomfortable views can be silenced.

One of the most profound challenges that all of us who work on campuses in service to students' learning and growth routinely face is to see the world through their eyes, not ours. I have come to believe that at the heart of the conversation and controversy

provoked by Dean Ellison’s letter is the difficulty we have in shifting our perspective.

Dean Ellison’s letter was met by criticism from those who believe that designated safe spaces and trigger warnings are necessary constructions in an environment that causes some students distress. And those critics were, in turn, lambasted by those who believe that such spaces and warnings undermine the very purpose of higher education: to push students beyond what they know and believe to seek a greater, and more complex, truth. The battle is as intractable as a Middle East conflict, though with considerably lower stakes.

And perhaps there is some similarity to a political conflict: each side certain of its merits, each side incredulous that the other side cannot see the flaws in its point of view.

The scholarship of several developmental theorists is what I find myself coming back to, and my fort-sharing with my mother led me there. I felt safe in my forts. My mother likely felt cramped. She had her own safe spaces that meant nothing to me but helped her maintain her sanity as the mother of six. She, however, respected mine, recognizing, I suppose, that they mattered to me and that eventually I would tire of them and she could reclaim her furniture and linens. She knew, as we need to know about our students, that I learned and grew and changed on an almost daily basis and that today’s need for a fort would be eclipsed by tomorrow’s eagerness to walk alone to the park.

Theorists like William E. Cross, Robert Kegan, and Marcia Baxter Magolda remind us of the inevitability of growth over time. Each of them, in similar ways, describe the shifts we make in our cognitive and moral growth in ways that are, across gender, race and experience, remarkably constant. In a nutshell, it’s this: We move from *being* our relationships to *having* our relationships, from *being* our beliefs to *having* our beliefs, from *being* our identities to *having* our identities.

In our growth as human beings engaged in learning, the subjective experiences we have (and the attendant ownership and fierce affection we have for those things) become objects we can step apart from and view, well, objectively. When we can do that, we are then able to withstand some critical analysis, incorporate the opinions of others, and ultimately arrive at a richer, more deeply held (but flexible) belief, self, relationship. For those things to become truly ours, we must first offer them up for review.

That review is painful. When our students seek safe spaces, perhaps they are acting the way any of us do when faced with discomfort: avoidance. And it is very uncomfortable to have one's beliefs, identity, and relationships challenged when that is still so very much who one is.

As anyone who has taught both first-year students and seniors knows, their relationship to truth and knowledge is very different. It is that process of growth between those years (and beyond) that is at the core of a college education. The first-year student *is* his or her beliefs and guards them carefully. The experienced learner has beliefs and can be challenged without the world caving in.

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When we feel safe, which is an individual thing, we are able to learn, and perhaps then to expand our notion of what feels safe. It is no surprise to me that many of Dean Ellison's staunchest supporters are white men, for whom their campuses are exceedingly safe spaces, and many of his critics are women and people of color, for whom their campuses aren't always safe.

But if we start with the assumption that all of our students want to learn, then we need to provide them the best environment for that effort. And that best environment is unique to each person, as is the growth they will experience that will allow for greater discomfort and, ultimately, greater learning. If neuroscience has taught us one thing about learning, it's that it doesn't happen when people are overly stressed.

If you find yourself disparaging students' requests for safe spaces and warnings of challenging or painful material, perhaps it is because you no longer require such things. Those of us who are a decade or three removed from the life of a traditional undergraduate need to shift our perspective to a time when certain structures provided the safe space from which we could then venture forth.

Don't judge students by our particular moment in life. Let them build their forts. Try joining them there, cramped though it may be. Understand the comfort and security those forts offer and then encourage them to meet you on the outside. The forts will, over time, be dismantled as these same students move along the well-worn path of cognitive growth and maturity. The campus will still present plenty of challenges, but students are more likely to rise to them, and beyond.

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