

Yale's Scary Halloween Tale

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On November 11, in response to a campus crisis triggered by a dispute over Halloween costumes—or rather by an email about Halloween costumes—Yale University President Peter Salovey emailed a message to tens of thousands of Yale alumni that he and Dean of Yale College Jonathan Holloway had sent to members of the Yale community in New Haven the previous evening. “We cannot overstate,” the president and the dean wrote, “the importance we put on our community's diversity, and the need to increase it, support it, and respect it.” At the same time, they stressed the freedom that underlies liberal education: “We also affirm Yale's bedrock principle of the freedom to speak and be heard, without fear of intimidation, threats, or harm, and we renew our commitment to this freedom not as a special exception for unpopular or controversial ideas but for them especially.”

In addition, and encouragingly, they declare their dedication to the principles set forth in the 1974 Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression at Yale, a ringing endorsement of freedom of speech better known as the Woodward Report. That venerable statement emphasized that free expression is fundamental while recognizing that it cannot long exist in a community whose members do not exercise civility and demonstrate mutual respect.

The words of the president and dean were measured and calming. But these leaders have their work cut out for themselves in overcoming the passion to impose progressive orthodoxy that is not only well-entrenched at Yale but has proliferated around the country and poisoned liberal education.

The current crisis in New Haven was set off by Erika Christakis, a lecturer in Yale's Child Study Center and associate master at Silliman College—one of the university's 12 residential colleges or dorms. Christakis circulated to students an email gently suggesting that the proper response to Halloween costumes they found offensive was either to avert their eyes or explain to the wearer why they were offended. Many students responded to the email with outrage.

Last week, in a confrontation captured on video, students surrounded Nicholas Christakis—husband of Erika, a professor of sociology and medicine, and master of Silliman. One African-American woman, seemingly speaking for the crowd, told him that his wife's email and his failure to apologize for it made her feel “unsafe.” When Christakis earnestly explained that he would need to consider the matter before apologizing, the woman shouted at him, “Be

quiet!"; "Why the f--- did you accept the position!"; "If that's what you think, you should step down!"; and "You should not sleep at night! You are disgusting!" She then turned and walked away.

In the same spirit, more than 700 "Concerned Yale Students, Alumni, Family, Faculty, and Staff" signed an open letter asserting that since the university oppresses and excludes "students of color," students have no responsibility either to explain to their classmates why they find certain Halloween costumes offensive or to tolerate those costumes.

While meeting behind closed doors last week with a group of about 50 primarily minority students to discuss the Halloween costume email and other complaints, President Salovey did apologize: "We failed you," he said.

President Salovey is correct, but Yale's failure does not involve, as reports of the meeting suggest students understood him to be saying, neglecting to provide safe spaces. Rather, Yale's primary failure was reinforcing in students the illiberal belief that Yale has an obligation to provide spaces into which opinions that students find discomforting, unjust, or false are not able to penetrate.

The turmoil at Yale, which appears to have shocked some observers on campus and off, has been a long time in the making. It is a foreseeable consequence of the deformation of liberal education to which our elite universities have contributed so much.

A turning point came in 2005. That's when Harvard University President Lawrence Summers was attacked by the Harvard faculty, and eventually impelled to resign because, in a closed-door meeting, he raised the possibility—which he promptly rejected—that the reason women were underrepresented on natural science faculties was that disproportionately fewer women than men are born with the extreme kind of theoretical intelligence that groundbreaking research in the natural sciences requires. Initially, public opinion rallied around Summers' right to examine controversial hypotheses.

Summers, however, missed a golden opportunity to defend the fundamentals of academic freedom. Instead of setting the record straight about what he said and why robust intellectual exchange is at the heart of university life, he repeatedly apologized for the alleged crime of bringing the findings of natural science to bear on educational policy...in the natural sciences. The lesson was devastating: If the president of Harvard University—a hard-headed economist, the former secretary of the Treasury, and a prominent Democrat—felt the need to prostrate himself before the thought police, who could hope to resist?

One cannot say, however, that universities, and the reading public, haven't been warned. And for more than half a century. In 1951 in "God and Man at Yale," the young William F. Buckley Jr. documented a Yale faculty devoted to inculcating collectivism, progressivism, and atheism. In major books in the 1980s and early 1990s, Alan Bloom, Roger Kimball, and Dinesh D'Souza exposed post-1960s politicization of the curriculum. Later, a few honorable

non-conservatives, including Yale's David Bromwich, the indefatigable Camille Paglia, and criminal defense and civil liberties lawyer Harvey Silverglate prominently joined the fray by vigorously defending freedom of speech and liberal education.

The tumult at Yale is one sad consequence of the popular campus doctrine, with deep intellectual roots in the American academy, that universities must regulate speech by proscribing the expression of offensive opinions. That, however, is a surefire way to foster the virtues of submission and despotism.

Let's hope that President Salovey and Dean Holloway can lead the way to reestablishing at Yale the priority of free speech—that indispensable guardian of true diversity, which is diversity of opinion—so that the liberal education through which the nation's future leaders pass cultivates the virtues of freedom.

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