

In face of intolerance, reflection is crucial

By Peter Salovey

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In recent months, a number of incidents have taken place on the Yale campus that disturb the sense of community most of us value and are accustomed to here. We have witnessed anti-Muslim cartoon postings; words considered blatantly offensive by many students in campus publications; and a homophobic incident that was not meant to hurt or harm, but did so nevertheless.

I often hear students speak of living in the Yale “bubble” — a mythic place separated from the harsher realities of the world by an invisible barrier that protects and shields. For those who believe that Yale should be an exemplar of values and a model of tolerance and acceptance, it can be doubly disturbing to see the bubble burst.

That happens when there are attacks on the principles and beliefs that form the basis of community within the University. Words or actions, articles or flyers, that promote hateful views, particularly when directed at religious or ethnic backgrounds, are especially distressing. What has made certain of them even more troubling is their anonymity. The cowardly nature of flyers, posted in the middle of the night without attribution, is deeply offensive and counter to everything Yale represents.

Over 30 years ago, a committee of Yale faculty and students met at President Kingman Brewster’s request to reflect on the role of freedom of expression in the University. The report that emerged from this committee, known familiarly as the Woodward Report, in honor of its chair, the distinguished historian C. Vann Woodward, has become one of the nation’s most respected documents on free expression (and I urge you to read it at www.yale.edu/yalecollege/students/administration/documents/speech.html). It affirms the special responsibility for a university community to uphold its members’ rights to “think the unthinkable, discuss the unmentionable, and challenge the unchallengeable,” even in the face of words and acts that members find abhorrent.

In response to the recent distressing acts, we must strive to understand how free expression and a tolerant community coexist. The kinds of initiatives that the Dean's Office and many students have proposed, some of which are now in place, others of which are being planned, represent opportunities to reflect on considerations of free expression in a context of tolerance and respect. These include an increased focus on diversity in its many forms as part of freshman orientation programs; residential college-centered conversations that draw in those who may not have been part of these dialogues in the past; discussions between groups who need a better understanding of one another; forums and speakers from a wide array of backgrounds; and panels and speakers that reflect on the role and responsibility of the student media.

In addition, I believe we can take a lesson from the response of an associate University chaplain, Shamshad Sheikh, to the recent anonymous flyers. She did not lash out or blame; instead, she welcomed all to a dialogue. With a forgiving spirit, she encouraged those who posted these drawings to attend prayer meetings on Fridays at 1:00 in Bingham, or to meet with the Muslim community for Halal dinner in Commons on Wednesday evenings. It would be wonderful if those who were responsible for the posters were influenced by this invitation and were able to respond in the same spirit, and with the same grace and good will, as those they victimized.

As your dean, I look forward to engaging with you in an ongoing conversation about the values held dear on this campus, including both free expression and mutual respect.

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