Character and . . .

Discomfort

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The faculty essays presented here emerge from a semester-long process of reading and writing together in an environment of critique and review. Nevertheless, this invited journal of essays represents the authors' views and not necessarily the views of the Wendt Center for Character Education or the University of Dubuque.

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Character and Discomfort

Annalee R. Ward

"Discomfort is the price of admission to a meaningful life."

Susan David

The first time I heard Susan David say this (00:10:20-25), I found myself stopping to ask, "Wait, that can't be true." But I like being comfortable! Our culture caters to this desire. We can get extra-soft t-shirts, extra-comfortable pillows or beds, extra-luxurious cars. We regulate the temperature of our environments to a comfortable level. Daily life is cushioned. And while some take that to a luxurious end, most Westerners have similar expectations of comfort that are rarely defined as luxury.

Comfort is not a bad thing in and of itself, and can even be a healing factor during times of particular distress and upheaval. So then, what is the role of discomfort in our lives? We don't typically seek it out unless we somehow wish to hurt ourselves. Or do we? What drives us to try something new, seek out opportunities to learn or grow? If our only motivation is comfort or self preservation, we won't stretch, learn, or experience change. But the human experience contradicts comfort as sole motivator. We are driven to pursue meaning. Yes, we want to survive, but to what end? To a life of purpose. And purpose doesn't always come easily.

The Wendt Research Team of 2018-19 chose the theme of "Character and Discomfort" as a way of digging into challenging ideas and experiences that might help us move toward a meaningful life, a life of purposeful living. As Beth McCaw noted in our group discussions, the

centering of comfort in our lives turns it into an idol displacing love for God and love for neighbor. When we do this, we neglect opportunities for growth and for building community by focusing our desires on comfort and thus, losing sight of what truly constitutes a meaningful life. As technology makes lives easier and commodities gentle life experiences (for some), goals of discomfort avoidance grow more problematic. The Research Team calls us to recognize the problem by getting our priorities straight in terms of loving God and neighbor first through self-giving service, leaning into the discomfort of paying attention as a way to increase our moral sensitivity, and finally recognizing the power of language to create and ease discomfort.

Thinking about Discomfort

At its simplest, we might understand discomfort as the absence of comfort. Jacques Pezeu-Massabuau extends our understanding: "everything that causes friction or conflict with the material and human environment essentially fits the term 'discomfort'" (15). In his exploration of the term, Pezeu-Massabuau argues the very pursuit of "the pleasure of existence" requires "labour and pain" (sic) (111). Discomfort is built into life.

It takes courage, patience, and compassion to be willing to experience the discomfort in order to pursue a larger goal.

Yet it is natural to try to avoid discomfort at root cause because of fear. We fear change, risk, and, especially, pain. Discomfort serves as a signal that one of these factors is at work. The discomfort warning sign flashes "Caution," if not "Stop." Things could move from slight discomfort to intense pain quickly if the signs are not heeded. But what does that have to do with character? It takes character to live into and through discomfort. It takes courage, patience, and compassion to be willing to experience the discomfort in order to pursue a larger goal. And by exercising the character required to accept the cost of discomfort, it in turn changes and forms that very character, usually for the better.

Amanda Lang in *The Beauty of Discomfort* shares stories of people who have learned to either live with discomfort or work through it in order to achieve change. She challenges us all:

> As we learn to lean into our discomfort, it will gradually turn into comfort. Our zone of discomfort moves, in other words, as our comfort zone expands. . . . Whether the answer is to reframe the discomfort, or ignore it, or lean into it, or reinvent yourself, or enlist help, or simply dive in at the deep end, there *is* an answer that will take you from "Why change?" to "But how?". (255–56)

Being willing to pursue change in order to improve oneself, one's community, and our world means discomfort is something we have to come to terms with. But Western culture puts up many barriers for us in the form of ease and convenience.

By exercising the character required to accept the cost of discomfort, it in turn changes and forms that very character.

The very idea of putting effort into something grows increasingly distasteful to a culture that has long valued labor-saving devices. Jen Pollock Michel writes, "With the push of every button, my illusion grows—that exertion is the enemy of modern life." Recognizing that we are steeped in a culture that values ease, she reflects on how it has turned to vice and must be battled as an enemy of God.

> In theory, I want to love [others]. In reality, I want it to tax me less. . . . Who do we become when we're no longer willing to bother? . . . I don't know that I can fully recover from my entitlement to ease. But perhaps I can remember that love, patterned after God's own self-giving, is bent on inconvenience and cost. (Michel)

Love of ease, avoidance of discomfort, or in Tim Wu's words, "the tyranny of convenience," all detract from character growth. Wu urges us to remember:

> [B]eing a person is only partly about having and exercising choices. It is also about how we face up to situations that are thrust upon us, about overcoming worthy challenges and finishing difficult tasks—the struggles that help make us who we are. What happens to human experience when so many obstacles and impediments and requirements and preparations have been removed? . . . Today's cult of convenience fails to acknowledge that difficulty is a constitutive feature of human experience. Convenience is all destination and no journey.

Removing the discomfort, many times even pain, robs us of the character-forming challenges that living with and into discomfort creates.

Illustration by Jimbob, www.etsy.com/market/made_by_jimbob

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This journal issue raises questions that will make us squirm. The articles shine a spotlight on places we'd rather not see or think about. But that's not the goal. Instead, our hope is that we will be reminded of what it means to be fully human, caring about and helping our communities as together we flourish in the kind of moral character that builds up, that exemplifies hope. The topic of discomfort could go in many directions. After reading together and discussing ideas, our authors chose to write

in areas where we might not first think about the role of discomfort in shaping character: service or mission projects, paying attention, and the slanderous use of language.

Removing the discomfort, many times even pain, robs us of the character-forming challenges that living with and into discomfort creates.

Beth McCaw, an experienced leader of group service and short-term mission projects, considers the bondage to self that so many participants inhabit. She writes of people wanting to do good but often doing it in order to feel good about themselves. Experiences that pull them out of their comfort zone might be viewed with a tourist gaze, tolerated as long as they can return to comfort. Even the well-intentioned service can quickly degenerate into self-congratulation. She argues: "Intentionally re-centering others or 'the other' as a primary object of our care is essential for a life that has integrity. . ." (10). Of course, recognizing motivations for service and even being able to objectively evaluate how one is serving requires a great deal of focused reflection.

Reflection, or in Adam Smith's words, "paying attention" not only requires concerted effort, but can be linked to moral character. "[A]ttention is how we practice virtue" (39). It's what McCaw calls us to do when we choose to give community service or mission service. Are we paying attention to our motivations, to the needs of others, to the call to community? Attention moves us toward excellent practices whether we are studying, choosing our entertainment, or listening to a joke. Attention develops discernment, a key part of growing in character.

And paying attention matters in the language we use and the word choices made, especially when it comes to sensitive topics, topics of deeply held convictions. The last article, by Sean Benson, examines the case of the U.S. women's soccer player Jaelene Hinkle and her refusal to wear a rainbow jersey. Concerned that the label "homophobia" has mischaracterized people who see a distinction between the person and the expressed sexual action, Benson calls for "the civility to talk with

one another so that we can cultivate intellectual tolerance of those with whom we disagree on the question of same-sex expression" (53). Whether or not one agrees with his essay, the willingness to be in discomfort by listening to one another and seeking ways to talk civility are important first steps in the pursuit of a just society.

Finally, in an insightful response, Roger Ebertz brings perspective on the topic and on these three essays. Weaving together their work, he highlights the self-centeredness that drives us away from practicing the kind of discomfort that will help us grow. Don't miss his conclusion, which highlights four action steps for all of us.

Conclusion

Author Darnell Moore, in an interview on Krista Tippett's "On Being" reminds us:

> [N]o one ever really takes the time to think about what it might mean to point the finger back at self and examine the monstrosities within us. So self-reflexivity, self-reflection, honest reckoning, is something that we do not like. But we resist the uncomfortable conversations. I mean, to love is to not lie. . . . I do understand how we resist discomfort, but what I do know is that we can only get to "light" if we are willing to work so hard to travel through the darkness.

In pursuit of light, I conclude with the challenge to love, a strange ending perhaps, but that's where this journal has taken us. Self-giving love, love that is willing to be honest with oneself and sacrificial with others, love that listens first to understand, is a character virtue that will drive us to heights of discomfort and depths of meaning, to lives that have purpose.

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Thank you to Jimbob for permission to use the illustration on p. 5.

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The Oxymoron of "My Comfort Zone"

Beth Lindquist McCaw

Abstract

Common human needs combined with external forces in contemporary society can groom an individual to pursue personal comfort as a primary aim in life. In this article I argue that unchecked, the central pursuit of personal comfort displaces our love for neighbor, and renders us less compassionate and just. Thus love of neighbor needs to be a deliberate commitment. Service learning trips and faith-based missions are used to illustrate the different outcomes between an approach in which personal comfort is protected, and an approach that allows for personal discomfort.

A Life of Comfort (?)

Why did an animated family film, with no dialogue for the first 20 minutes, end up becoming a blockbuster and an enduring modern parable? The 2008 dystopian Pixar film *WALL-E* did just that, grossing over half a billion dollars. Alongside creative artistry, an explanation for its popularity might be that its messages have resonated with growing concerns in American society. The movie begins on earth 700 years after the planet was overrun with garbage, unable to sustain life. The Buy-N-Large corporation evacuated humans to the spaceship *Axiom* and dispatched "Waste Allocation Load Lifters: Earth-Class" to clean up. When the main character of the film—robot WALL-E—visits the *Axiom* and sees humans for the first time, he encounters a scene even more distressing than trashed *terra firma*. Humans are overweight to the point of incapacitation, carried along by hovering chairs, slurping liquid

meals and endlessly engrossed in a multiplicity of entertaining screens while floating through space. For some of the hundreds of millions of viewers, *WALL-E* has become a prophetic narrative about where current trends will lead humanity.

When thinking about how we will lead our lives, many of us are drawn to ideals of love or service. But then each morning we get up and careen through the hours given us, buffeted by various forces within and without. In scarce moments of reflection, we recognize that the sum of our day-to-day lives is not of satisfying substance, growing into a beneficial legacy. So much in our world today contributes to a way of life that is frantic, scattered, lonely, fractured, exhausted—personally, socially, and environmentally. And as we inhabit this context, the innumerable small, real thoughts and acts of our daily lives can sabotage altruistic hopes.

How does this happen? And how can we rewrite the story of our lives with a different trajectory that leads us somewhere other than mindlessly sipping protein shakes on the *Axiom*? One approach in answering these questions is to examine what becomes the governing pole as we move through life. As the cautionary tale of *WALL-E* illustrates, the centering of comfort (as a primary pursuit) in life goes hand in hand with a disregard for neighbor and environment. Ironically, we end up dis-eased, with our character disfigured. Intentionally re-centering others or "the other" as a primary object of our care is essential for a life that has integrity—meaning both to have moral merit, but also to result in a life that is whole.[1]

Disney's WALL-E depicted a dystopian future with humans focusing on comfort as their primary pursuit. Illustration by Evelin Ortiz.

The Centripetal Draw of Comfort

Charles Nodier describes comfort as "a state of convenience and well-being that approaches pleasure and to which all (people) aspire" (qtd. in Pezeu-Massabuau 18). This kind of comfort includes things that are pleasing, entertaining, flattering, agreeable. The other part of the pursuit of comfort is the avoidance of discomfort or challenge. This could include things or practices that are soothing, relaxing, restful, escapist—maybe delivering a hit of serotonin or cocooning us in the familiar. At first glance it would seem that no rationale or defense is needed for the human tendency to avoid distress and seek pleasure. Then we watch *Wall-E* with dismay and wonder why we let those tendencies hold sway to the point of toxicity.

Re-centering others or "the other" as a primary object of our care is essential for a life that has integrity.

Inner Forces There are many forces at work that push us to repeatedly and reactively make our own comfort the first thing we reach for in the circumstances and choices of our daily lives. Some of them are internal. Consider, for example, the basic human need for belonging and acceptance as a good that can go wrong. Being wired for relationships is good. That capacity can become twisted into dysfunctional neediness, void of mutuality and exploitative of others—cliques, cults, peer pressure, manipulation. Anxiety, currently at epidemic levels in North America, is another internal reality that constricts our awareness of others and our ability to relate to them in attentive and healthy ways. Our vision narrows and we move into defensive and self-preserving postures. Addictions of all sorts tragically rewire our brains to crave particular satisfactions at the expense of relationships and healthy engagement with the world. And the Christian faith holds that each person has a spiritual bent toward self-centeredness that grows into selfishness apart from the workings of love.

External Pressures At the same time that internal dynamics draw our attention to "me," there are cultural and societal influences operating in concert. Consumerism grooms our never-satisfied

appetites for ever-refined experiences of pleasure. The prized values of individualism and autonomy—with endless opportunities to personalize our points of contact with the world—take us on a bypass around the voices and interests of others. Convenience, too, has become enshrined in North American culture; we enjoy our favorite goods and services anytime and anywhere, and have the trash carted off. Automation makes possible 24/7 self-service in lieu of dependence on another. Our relational energy can be siphoned off by a pseudo-social life—robocalls, electronic billboards, peripheral social media contacts that hound us until we feel strangely and sadly exhausted of interest in people.

As we attend increasingly to our needs and wants, gravitating too much toward whatever soothes or distracts or affirms or excites, something paradoxical happens. Trying to live on the couch, on dessert, or on QVC shopping binges leaves us feeling queasy and unsatisfied. But there is more to the problem than our queasiness. As we focus increasingly on superficial personal comfort, others are moved to the periphery of our care in life and the moral and vocational fabric of life starts to unravel.

To disconnect ourselves from the discomforts that come with relationships is to develop callousness.

Displacing the Other by Centering Comfort

If centered comfort displaces "the other"—someone(s) other than ourselves—as the object of our sincere and interested care, then we have a problem of character. As illustrated above, our singular pursuit of personal pleasure leads to isolation from our neighbor, which leads to a lack of compassion. The Latin roots of "compassion" speak to "suffering with"—interpersonal connection accompanied by vulnerability to one another's experience, including pain. To disconnect ourselves from the discomforts that come with relationships is to develop callousness. That callousness to others then becomes a foundation for injustice. Making direct connections between personal comfort and injustice might seem startling, but the orientation toward personal comfort as primary is so influential that it will steer our thoughts and actions in directions that contradict our professed values.

The Pursuit of Comfort in Service Trips To illustrate how implicit the pursuit of comfort can be—undermining even our deliberate attempts at other-centeredness—consider as a case study the contemporary phenomenon of the mission or service trip. One and a half million religious adults from the United States participate in international missions annually (Howell 26). Add to that domestic destinations, participants under the age of 18, corporations building Habitat houses, and high schools and colleges engaging in service learning, and a significant movement of millions of Americans serving annually is represented. Common to both religious and secular manifestations are professed goals of learning to see and serve one's neighbor—outreach.

Even mission trips that aim to serve can be undermined by an unchecked drive for comfort.

As a leader of short-term teams working in cross-cultural partnerships, I have watched this movement with interest. As I began researching literature and interviewing leaders of varied communities about their experiences in hosting work groups, I was unprepared for the high proportion of negative responses in host communities. One African leader named his "outrage" that teams were prepared for novel vacations but not to serve. A missiologist observed that "short terms have increasingly taken on the character of a standardized religious service offered to a new generation of consumers anxious to find meaning in a borderless world" (Slimbach 429). A field facilitator lamented,

> Today (visiting groups) are much less concerned about the impact they will have in Mexico and more concerned about the impact Mexico will have on them. The growing number of organizations that bring groups to the border combined with the shift in focus has begun to have a negative effect on the Mexican churches. (Palmatier 228).

Clearly, there was a gap between the mission statements for service trips that were commonly philanthropic, and the perspectives and practices with which many participants engaged in them.

Missing the Other in Pursuit of Personal Comforts Such testimonies led to examination of the implicitly and explicitly expressed motivations and goals at each stage of varied mission and service trips—those I led myself and those of others I interviewed. It was like putting on x-ray glasses that revealed innumerable threads of consumer appetites woven throughout a pleasant Norman Rockwell scene: Service application essays describing a desire for tourism. Volunteers articulating hopes for personal transformation. Accommodation and transportation preferences eclipsing concerns for the needs of those being served. Rushing to the familiarity of McDonald's on arrival in a foreign country. Complaining about the quantity or quality of local food. Jesting about civil infrastructure, within the hearing of nationals. Talking artisans down to rock-bottom prices in order to multiply souvenirs. Agonizing over the amount of a small personal donation after fundraising thousands for airline tickets. Assuming expertise for projects in which one has little training or earned authority. Scaling back time in community in order to take in attractions. Upon returning home, presenting stories and images that showcase the volunteers, and sometimes feature hosts as foils—grateful beneficiaries or the bedraggled poor. Evaluating the success of the trip more by the enthusiasm of those sent rather than by any benefit expressed by the hosts.

The orientation toward personal comfort as primary is so influential that it will steer our thoughts and actions in directions that contradict our professed values.

Beneficence, it turns out, can be deceptively self-serving. Even in endeavors framed as helpfulness, the pursuit of comfort for the body or the ego can linger in disguise. Sadly, the disguise is thin to many host communities, which may feel obligated to humbly ignore power differentials and accommodate tourist expectations in order to be hospitable and maintain some semblance of relationship. A veteran

missionary in Honduras observed, "North Americans often come seeking the emotional rewards of hands-on involvement rather than a way to make an investment in long-term empowerment" (Jeffrey 5), When personal desires govern the approach and conduct of volunteers, there is diminished likelihood that the relationships or even the work will benefit the receiving community. In fact, harm can be done, represented in the indignation of the leader who pointed out that his home community was used more than served.

Missing the Other in Pursuing Personal Experiences Interestingly, unchecked "self-serving service" can stall the growth of compassion or empathy in volunteers. A celebrated 1990 study of short-term mission included data that was initially interpreted as demonstrating that volunteers gave more generously and prayed more for the world after their travel service experience (Peterson and Peterson). However, subsequent analysis that accounted for the natural increase in income that accompanies the move into adulthood debunked the conclusions. While volunteers may have felt that they had grown more generous or spiritually engaged in the world, their practices were unaffected (Priest et al. 439).[2] There may have been value in the participants' deepened sense of personal gratitude and warm regard for others. But is that value negated by the net effect of service travel if it led participants to more deeply cherish their material comforts or overrate their interest in others? The belief that one has become more generous, without having done so practically, is lost ground in terms of the formation of character and compassionate relationships.

Another study examined in depth how the heightened expectations youth held for their own formation made their mission trip particularly powerful. However, a side note—this personal existential interest also shaped their views of those they had set out to serve in mission (Linhart). Developing a sense of identity and enjoying formative experiences are good. But personal motivations and a lack of time and support for growing true knowledge about the people they met contributed to an ethically problematic aspect of their service. In fact, much of what the youth concluded about their hosts was not true. Linhart observed, "When students essentialize and generalize the observed gestures of others to hold significant meaning, they reduce their knowledge of the 'Other' to that particular encounter" (455), and

the (ethical) "problem comes when the 'raising of awareness' results in no action and people only *feel* connected to missions, or that they have performed their duty but continue in normal cultural patterns without a nod toward a new direction for service and mission" (454). He noted that the group was primed to focus on their own becoming, but not to gain "new knowledge about cross-cultural communication or about the culture" (454). Without intentional preparation and re-orientation to the other, such missions are at risk of becoming tourism, and participants might be moved toward entrenching stereotypes (458) and celebrating self, rather than relating authentically to others with an engaged sense of compassion or justice.

Riding the Escalator Up and Away The examples given may reflect the importance of cross-cultural education, guidance toward maturity, or thoughtful coaching by leaders of service trips. And the research examines the formation of identity and worldview. But among other conclusions, these illustrate how a governing assumption that ease, fun, or even personal formation be requisite elements of service would skew perspectives and practices. Though it be called "outreach," the flag of personal wants is still firmly planted as the desired destination.

David Brooks in *The Road to Character* traces the narcissistic shift in recent generations to "the big Me" as being "from a culture that encouraged people to think humbly of themselves to a culture that encouraged people to see themselves as the center of the universe" (6). This shift means that in our contemporary context, rather than staying grounded and significantly engaged with the people who surround us, we are increasingly likely to remove ourselves as we pursue ever-refined self interests. It is like stepping onto the department store escalator to be lifted up, up, and away from the crowd. As we are transported to the quiet music and cushioned sofas of the second floor, we might look down and observe others, but their voices grow indistinct and we are removed from them as we step into the home furnishings displays.

So What?

Service should not remind us of Goldilock's quest—to eat the porridge that is neither too hot nor too cold but just right, and settle down for a

nap on the bed that is neither too hard nor too soft but just right. Preoccupied with finding the most pleasing conditions in her personal expedition, she gave passing or no thought to the bears whose porridge she had eaten, whose chair she had broken, and in whose bed she had napped. The story concludes with her running away, afraid. It is strange that common "morals" to the story might be to cultivate discriminating taste, or to stay closer to home, or to not engage in breaking and entering. But there is also the lesson that her quest was all wrong.

Service is not about finding the most pleasing conditions for one's work.

Human beings are not constituted to seek personal comfort as an existential end. Any attempt to cultivate a satisfying sense of self when detached from significant relational commitments will lead to a dead end. It is granted that unless we have basic needs such as food and shelter and safety, we cannot attend to deeper pursuits of meaning and purpose. Assuming the need for and right of each person to such necessities of life, to what end then are we designed to spend our lives?

We Were Made for This An excellent ultimate mission statement from the Judeo-Christian tradition would be Jesus' summary: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength; and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (NRSV Luke 10.27) . Martin Luther King Jr. put it this way: "Love is not emotional bash; it is not empty sentimentalism. It is the active outpouring of one's whole being into the being of another" ("King Quotes on War and Peace").

It is telling that this call to relationship—named "love" even—is identified as fundamental by prophets of diverse faiths. Mahatma Ghandi said, "The purpose of life is undoubtedly to know oneself. We cannot do it unless we learn to identify ourselves with all that lives. . . . The instrument of this knowledge is boundless, selfless service" ("Purpose of Life"). Muhammad is quoted in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī: "None of you has faith until he loves for his brother or his neighbor what he loves

for himself" (Elias). And the Dalai Lama describes that "[u]ltimately, the reason why love and compassion bring the greatest happiness is simply that our nature cherishes them above all else. The need for love lies at the very foundation of human existence. It results from the profound interdependence we all share with one another." Regardless of one's faith perspective, how can we expect anything to end well in the absence of love among people?

So here is the problem with comfort-seeking as our basic aim—it does not merely distract us from our neighbor. Unchecked, it ultimately turns us against our neighbor. Orchestrating life toward this end, we will inevitably need to push our neighbor away—either out of our way as a nuisance, or behind the scenes to support our pursuit. We become agents of marginalization or even exploitation directly or in larger systems. Our singular pursuit of comfort costs others fullness of life. Joyce Rupp observes, "The greater the gap we put between ourselves and others, the less likely we will empathize with their situation and act on their behalf" (105). On the other hand, if we are willing to build relationships with others and engage in community with commitment, identification and empathy and solidarity are able to grow. Compassion and justice become natural fruit, but they require the relational commitment that we have been calling love. A very simple definition of justice could be *lovingly doing right by others*.

The Paradox of Finding Our Selves as We Love Others As we turn to the other and spend ourselves in that relationship, the queasiness that attends grooming "the big Me" starts to pass and we feel stronger on the level of the soul. The Bible describes that to lay down one's life for God and others is to find one's life. Father Boyle is a priest known for his love and sacrificial work among gang members in Los Angeles. He observes, "It should not surprise us that God's own dream-come-true for us—that we be one—just happens to be our own deepest longing for ourselves. For it turns out, it's mutual." The Dalai Lama puts it this way: "From my own limited experience, I have found that the greatest degree of inner tranquility comes from the

A very simple definition of justice could be lovingly doing right by others.

development of love and compassion. The more we care for the happiness of others, the greater our own sense of well-being becomes."

Pushing Back—To Make Room

Disempowering all that would erode devotion to community can be as simple and as demanding as becoming conscious of the desire(s) holding center stage in our lives. This allows us to then make the guiding question of each moment not "What do I want?" but "How can I love?" This is not about extroverted sociability but about deliberately pushing something(s) out of the way to make room for a worthy center of gravity for our lives.

The Place of Self-Care Claiming love of others as central to our vocation, or life purpose, does not require that we forego being true to self or the practice of self-care. If we do those well, we then have something to offer others. The loving, compassionate, just person does care for self, and considers: "What is needed to live with faithfulness as the person I am meant to be? What would those who love me wish in order for me to be whole and to meet my potential and purpose? Does a particular choice build me up—for the good of all?"

The Place of Comfort What if the comforts of life were put in their place—to provide support, refreshment, energy, celebration—for the main substance of life, a life in which comforts *serve* our vocation rather than *become* our vocation? Again, the governing question for daily thoughts, choices, and actions is no longer "Do I like this?" or "What do I want right now?" but rather, "What serves love?" or "What makes me and others whole?"

A life centered on others is guided by the question, "What serves love?"

Just as self-neglect is not our aim, neither is discomfort the goal. Rather, love for others or community should dethrone comfort as our primary pursuit in life. In seeking the nurture of good relationships as a life

calling, there will be comforts and pleasure, and there also will be discomforts and suffering. But without dethroning comfort as a primary determinant of our way of life, we will never get to community. And without being willing to sustain some discomfort along the way, we will never find our neighbor.

In the Bible, an early Christian leader describes such acceptance of both comfort and discomfort for the life calling he experienced from God: ". . . I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need" (Phil. 4.11-12). This insightful wisdom guides us to not make an idol of particular circumstances.

The Place of Discomfort Re-centering others in our commitments does not leave us stationary—we are not inviting others to orbit around us ("I've even invited those people into my home!"). Re-centering will send *us* out to others—true outreach. This will lead us to the margins in our communities and our world.

Committing ourselves to our neighbor makes us vulnerable in ways fulfilling and painful—the "shared suffering" of compassion. Common commitments of love reveal that compassion is part of love. The love that leads people to the altar results in couples not making claims but promises—to pour themselves out for the care of the other in times of sickness and health, wealth and poverty. Parents continue and will continue to choose to bear and adopt children with whom they will share delightful moments and happy days, but also times of helpless pain, and aching sacrifices. People do not marry or bear children in the pursuit of comfort, but rather in the pursuit of loving relationships, accepting the accompanying pain.

Commitment that risks and even assumes pain can be extended in other relationships, even and perhaps especially in regard to injustices sustained by callous divisions. The truth that commitment to another makes us vulnerable to both pain and joy, challenge and growth, holds in the small things of life as well. There is both cost and promise as we spend ourselves toward others—forgiving rather than resenting, giving

rather than hoarding, listening rather than telling, apologizing rather than blaming, stepping alongside rather than running away.

Hope: This Can Be Done

In choosing to turn to others, we allow our experience to be influenced by that of another in a way that grows compassion and informs justice. Joyce Rupp quotes Gail Straub in observing honestly and beautifully, "The gift of the awakened heart is that all suffering in some way belongs to all of us. Here we experience the mysterious intimacy that connects us to everything that lives" (165). Some might value the spiritual connection included here. Most should appreciate the worthwhile experience of awe that comes with beholding and belonging to something greater than one's self. But there is a practical manifestation of this connection that holds great promise for the development of just character in individuals and just practices in society.

Settling Love at the Center With personal comforts sidelined to a supportive role with particular entrances, and discomforts received as having a necessary role also in our commitment to relationship, love can take center stage. Being willing to experience both comfort and discomfort in the commitment to others greatly expands the means by which we arrive at our human calling. We are freed to take risks, endure some pain, accept suffering even. It may sound odd to describe the acceptance of discomfort as freeing, but how small our perspective, our experience, our agency in the world become when confined within the bounds of the comfortable. It becomes isolating, suffocating, even anxiety-producing when every discomfort is framed as a threat to be avoided or eliminated, or refining our experience of life requires successive purges of the discomforts that our neighbor and the world might cost us.

Volunteers and hosts in the Dominican Republic rehearse a song together to present to children at Vacation Bible School.

It is possible for us to re-center—to deliberately and routinely free up bandwidth in our hearts and minds to attend to and care for others. Some of the same researchers who documented the false starts in empathy and regressions in ethnocentrism in volunteers also demonstrated that deliberate formation—accompanying engagement with the other—can lead to growth (Priest et al. 444).[3]

Intentionally devoting ourselves to relationships and embodying community will start to order our choices and make our commitments to others more routine—compassion, justice, even love can become more and more our habit.

Returning to the case study of service trips and short-term mission, we can find encouraging examples of re-centering others and growing increasingly just as engaged members of community and the world. Anthropologist and missiologist Hunter Farrell has documented the workings of justice resulting from a significant "Joining Hands" relationship between 19 churches in the United States and 15 churches in Peru. Together they have addressed development and aid in the face of poverty. Invited to witness a pressing concern, partners from Lima and the U.S. came alongside leaders and community members in La Oroya in the Andes. A U.S.-owned mining operation was generating pollution that was dramatically poisoning the community with lead. Ninety-seven percent of the children were affected and some measured off the charts.

Community members and volunteers make a powerful impact when they jointly address the community's needs.

The partners who traveled to La Oroya moved into a relationship in which they took to heart the needs of "these children" as "our children." This kind of compassionate relationship and understanding of missional vocation led to significant shared action that made a difference. Volunteers from the U.S. did not file away their travel

experiences like photos in personal scrapbooks. Rather, with a committed sense of relationship over several years, they engaged in activism to successfully compel the corporation based in their home country to engage in cleaner practices that would not poison the mine workers and families with whom they had "joined hands." Many factors contributed to the powerful impact of this shared movement for justice (Farrell). But for our purposes it is a powerful story of turning toward the other and standing with the other in a way that promotes justice and wholeness on multiple levels—for the individual, community, world, environment. It is a story of the volunteers' de-centering their comfort, embracing the discomfort of encountering injustice and responding in love.

In my own research and coaching of short-term mission and service-learning participants, I have seen enduring shifts to other-centeredness manifested in daily practices of justice during and beyond "the trip": Negotiating justly with local artisans. Owning personal weakness and blind spots. Shifting daily personal practices. Participating repeatedly in hunger relief efforts in hometowns. Becoming restless about racism to the point of listening, speaking, acting. Exercising consumer power for the good of laborers and the earth. And practicing the very small bits that are in the cement of habitual other-centeredness—staying behind to wash dishes, stopping to listen to the answer to "how are you"—while habitually asking, "What serves love?"

Back to the Ship *Axiom*—Or Not?

At first glance it may seem odd to devote an essay to the argument that it is important to try to love our neighbors and our world. But the alarm that was sounded by *WALL-E* is justified when we take time to examine where our inner susceptibilities, along with the tides of our culture, can carry us. It is encouraging and helpful to realize that we *can* choose God and neighbor as the objects of our life's devotion. But there is *trying* involved, sometimes uncomfortable or even painful trying—in the sense that we must exercise our commitment rather than be carried along passively by currents that swirl comfortingly around the self. If we do not, these currents will churn endlessly until love is wrung out of us and we are bundled onto the shuttle for the *Axiom*. Each day we can determine: "What will be the center around which the rest is arranged?

What will be the default consideration as we go through our days? Will we give up the avoidance of discomfort and the endless pursuit of personal comforts in favor of re-centering love?"

As we start weaving threads of relationship, we are drawn into experiences of empathy, solidarity, justice. And as the tapestry takes shape, there is a particular kind of satisfaction. Not of appetites, as with a filling meal. But on the level of the soul. An experience of wholeness—spirit and character whole. Maybe touched by moments of awe. Because we are created for relationships. We flourish along with the flourishing of those we are inescapably, necessarily, and blessedly connected to. Rather than losing ourselves, we discover who we are in relationship with others. The mutuality of needs and strengths, the variety of gifts and skills, the expansion of our worldview help us to understand who we are and the unique contributions we can make to the world we share.

We flourish along with those we are connected to.

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Thank you to Evelin Ortiz, Wendt Character Scholar, for the illustration, p. 10.
Photo credit pp. 17, 19, 21, 22 24: Beth McCaw
Photo credit p. 13: Timothy McCaw

Notes

[1] The Latin root for the word "integrity" is related to wholeness.

[2] "[W]e found . . . no statistically significant difference in missions giving between those who had participated in STM and those who had not" (Priest et al. 439).

[3] "[T]he sheer fact of encounter with cultural difference is as likely to increase ethnocentrism as decrease it. But when the immersion experience is connected with the right sorts of orientation and coaching, significant change is possible" (Priest et al. 444).

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Discomfort, Attention, and Character

Adam Benjamin Smith

Abstract

Does your capacity to "pay attention" have anything to do with your moral character? What does studying for exams have to do with becoming a good person? In this essay, I argue that these things are connected: paying attention is about getting comfortable with uncomfortable things, and this "comfort with discomfort" is a mark of good character.

0. A Very Brief Introduction, Which Does Not Try to Grab Your Attention

I'm going to talk about three things. These are (1) attention, (2) discomfort, and (3) moral character. My goal is to catch a glimpse of what these things are, and how they might be connected. Along the way I will talk about some not-so-serious things, like studying for exams, and some very-serious-things, like snuff films.

1. Many Uncomfortable Things

Many things make us uncomfortable. We might have a rock in our shoe, or a mosquito bite, or a crick in our neck. If we stretch the meaning of physical discomfort, from the slight to the serious, we can talk about the discomfort of terrible pain: the suffering of the cancer patient or the torture victim. We can also talk about the wide range of emotional discomfort, from the slight embarrassment of an awkward interaction to the deep wound of a profound humiliation.

It may seem strange or wrong to call the more serious experiences "uncomfortable." And it's true that we don't want to diminish them or pretend them away. At the same time, we don't want to tell the sufferer that she has no power to diminish the pain by understanding it differently. Because this is clearly something that human beings can do. Our imaginations can make things more serious than they are. The same imaginative power, properly controlled, can take some sting out of serious things. Seneca, the Stoic philosopher, believed that "[p]ain is slight if opinion has added nothing to it . . . in thinking it is slight, you will make it slight. Everything depends on opinion. It is according to opinion that we suffer" (78, 13).

Within limits, we might learn to feel differently. We might learn to make ourselves more comfortable.

No doubt there is a breaking point where our abilities fail, and the pain overtakes our perspective. Even the Stoics knew this. Marcus Aurelius thought that even in the midst of chronic pain "the mind maintains its own tranquility by retiring into itself," but also that "the pain which is intolerable carries us off" (7.33). Perhaps the extreme pain of cancer or torture cannot finally be "managed." Perhaps there are emotional wounds that you can't just "get over." And none of this means that since it's partly within people's power to experience them as more or less "bad," then there's nothing wrong with torturing or humiliating or otherwise inflicting discomfort on them. The point is that discomfort is not just sitting there, waiting to be suffered. If something makes us *feel* uncomfortable, it might be partly (or even entirely) because we have *made* it uncomfortable. "It is not events that disturb people, it is their judgments concerning them" (Epictetus, book 5). This means that, within limits, we might learn to feel differently. We might learn to make ourselves more comfortable.[1]

But this isn't about "creating your own reality." It's not about pretending that what's painful is pleasant. It's about getting more comfortable with what makes us uncomfortable. And that's how we should think about one of the hottest topics of the day: our capacity to "pay attention." Paying attention is about *getting comfortable with discomfort*.

What does that mean? I'm going to start with an easy example, which is the simple act of studying—the familiar experience of preparing for an exam, reading for class, or writing an essay. It's easy to understand that when we're "studying" we're supposed to be "paying attention" to something. It's also easy to understand that studying is often uncomfortable. If we can think carefully about studying, then maybe we can better understand how attention is related to discomfort. The philosopher Simone Weil will help us here.

Paying attention is about getting comfortable with discomfort.

But remember: I said that I also wanted to show how attention is related to moral character. Since we don't usually think of studying as a serious "moral" issue, that example might seem a bit odd. So, after I talk about studying, I'm going to lead us through Weil's bracing claim that "[t]here is something in our soul that loathes true attention much more violently than flesh loathes fatigue. That something is much closer to evil than flesh is" (111). To try and explain what she means, I'll introduce a second example of "paying attention" where the moral issue seems very serious indeed: the viewing of snuff films on the Internet.

2. "Study Hard"

If you want to do well in school, people might tell you to "study hard." The Internet offers you "40 powerful quotes to help you study hard for your upcoming test or exam" (Wong), and there's a guidebook for students titled *Study is Hard Work* (Armstrong).[2] Now: if it's so important to "study hard," you'll need a clear picture of what it is. You need to be able to see what it actually *looks like* to study hard. Otherwise, how will you know if you're doing it right?

So: what picture does the phrase "study hard" put into our minds? What does a person look like when they're studying hard?

Simone Weil says it probably looks like this: they're hunched over a book; they're straining their eyes; their forehead is creased; they look "determined," and "serious," maybe even "grim." They don't look

relaxed or at ease. They don't look *comfortable* (109–10). They look a little scared, a little nervous, worried that their concentration might break and they'll lose focus and forget everything and start thinking about that bug on the window or that thing that happened yesterday or that alert on their phone what happened is my friend texting me is she still mad at me maybe I should look (no! I'm studying) maybe I should just look for a second oh look at that funny picture of a cat I should find some more funny pictures of cats because they're so relaxing I need to relax (I need to study!) I'm pretty stressed look at this cat man I'm bad at focusing (need to focus!) this is frustrating look at those cats man cats are boring maybe more cats will be less boring nope yep nope yep swipe left swipe right scroll down down down down down down down might be something interesting at the bottom . . . [3]

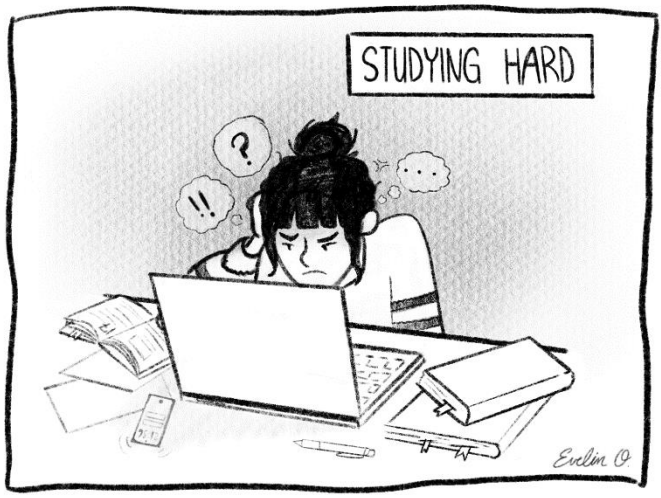

Illustration by Evelin Ortiz

Question: is this person

a. failing to study hard because she's gotten too comfortable to pay attention?

   or

b. failing because she's studying so hard she can't get comfortable with paying attention?

The correct answer is “b.” Let me show you why.

3. Don’t Think About An Elephant

If I come up to you and say, “don’t think about an elephant,” what will you immediately start thinking about?

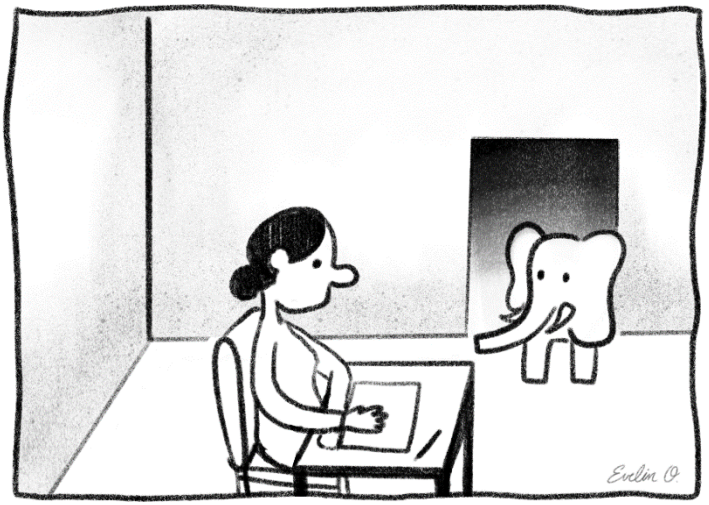

Illustration by Evelin Ortiz

4. Pay Attention!

Suppose I’m your teacher and you get distracted in my class and I say, “Pay attention!” What do I want you to do, exactly? Do I mean:

a. “don’t think about what you’re thinking about”

or

b. “do think about what you’re not thinking about”

The correct answer is “b.” “Don’t think about what you’re thinking about” is like saying “don’t think about an elephant.” So that’s not what I mean.

5. Try Not to Think About The Elephant

Suppose you can't stop thinking about the elephant. You're thinking about the elephant all day, everyday, and it's interfering with your life. You can't sleep, you can't work, you can't enjoy anything, because the elephant is always on your mind. So you come to me and ask what you should do, and I say, "try not to think about the elephant." Will that help?

6. Try to Pay Attention!

Suppose I'm your teacher and you're still distracted in my class and I say, "try to pay attention!" If you try to pay attention, what will you be thinking about? Will it be:

a. the thing you want to pay attention to

or

b. yourself, trying to pay attention to the thing you want to pay attention to

The correct answer is "b." If you are "trying" to pay attention to a thing, you are not paying attention to the thing. Instead, you are paying attention to what it feels like to try to pay attention to the thing. So you are still distracted, and you are still not paying attention.[4] This is why Yoda told Luke: *There is no try. There is only do. Or do not*.

Everything I know, I learned from *Star Wars*.[5]

7. Pay Attention.

This time you are distracted and I say "pay attention," but there is no exclamation point. I'm not angry or frustrated with you. And I don't mean that you should *stop* thinking about the elephant, or that you should *try* to stop thinking about the elephant. I mean that you should *start* thinking about the mouse, or the mountain, or whatever it is. Attention is positive, not negative. Attention is not about saying "no" to that. It's about saying "yes" to this.

If you're distracted, the solution is not to fight the thing that distracts you. That just makes you think more about it. Nor is the solution to "try" to pay attention to the other thing. That just makes you think about the trying—how hard it is, how frustrating, how *uncomfortable*, how you might fail, what will happen if you fail, how you can't wait till the trying is over. It makes you think about how nice it would be to be perfectly comfortable, instead of making you comfortable with thinking about the thing. And so "[w]e are never fully content and the image of contentedness, which serves as our guide, always seems to keep true pleasure at bay" (Pezeu-Massabuau 8).

Instead, the solution is to let the other thing attract you. Then you're actually thinking about the other thing. You're thinking about the mouse, or the mountain, and you've forgotten about the elephant. Because you can't think about two things at once (No: there's no such thing as "multitasking" (Rosen).). So if you need to stop thinking about one thing, the solution is to start thinking about another thing.

But how do you do it? How do you really "pay attention"? Just wait: we're getting there.

8. Let's Step Outside.

Illustration by Evelin Ortiz

Suppose you could step outside your mind, like you're stepping outside your front door, and then look back in through the windows so you can watch what's happening inside. What do you see? Fragments of feeling, words and phrases and sentences, images, flashbacks and flash-forwards, things you can name and things you can't, floating and darting back and forth. You watch yourself shopping at the

mall with your friends and you see what you're thinking and feeling as you're walking and talking. You see pictures of fashion models leaving window displays and settling inside your brain, making you want the clothes that they're wearing, or the bodies they're flaunting. Standing now outside your mind, you're paying attention to what you're paying attention to. You watch for a while and eventually you notice patterns: what you tend to think about in certain situations, around certain people, during certain activities. You notice *what you're thinking about* when you're in those situations. What do you see?

That's what paying attention is like: stepping outside yourself, looking back into yourself, and noticing whatever there is to notice. No judgment; no reaction. Just *notice*.

Let's talk some more about Simone Weil, and about the difference between "studying hard" and "studying well." Weil can help us understand better just how serious this question about attention really is. For Weil, attention isn't just a skill that helps you do better on tests. It's a skill that that you need if you are going to become a good person. Attention is an ethical matter. It's about your character.

9. Weil says: "There is something in our soul that loathes true attention much more violently than flesh loathes fatigue. That something is much closer to evil than flesh is. That is why, every time we truly give our attention we destroy some evil in ourselves" (11)

If we say we're "uncomfortable," we're usually talking about physical discomfort ("this chair is uncomfortable"). Almost as often we use the word to describe emotional discomfort ("that conversation was uncomfortable"). But the philosopher is talking here about something that goes deeper than both the physical and the emotional levels of experience. It's much harder to describe this level with words, and it's easy to get confused.

Weil knows that for some reason we usually conflate attention with a physical or emotional experience. "Most often attention is confused with a kind of muscular effort. If one says to one's pupils: 'Now you

must pay attention,' one sees them contracting their brows, holding their breath, stiffening their muscles. If after two minutes they are asked what they have been paying attention to, they cannot reply. They have been concentrating on nothing. They have been contracting their muscles."

Attention is an ethical matter. It's about your character.

It's like when we're learning to do pull-ups. Your trainer will tell you to use your *lattisumus dorsi*—the large muscles in your back. But if you've never done a pull-up you might not know how to feel it in your back, and you'll rely completely on your arms. You'll think "doing a pull-up" feels like "pulling your body up with your arms." But if you're doing that, you're not really doing a pull-up. It's the same with "paying attention." If you're straining your body to do it, then you're not really doing it. If you feel stressed, then you know you're doing it wrong.

This seems odd, though. None of us *wants* strain and stress, do we? Weil makes it sound like "doing it wrong" is hard, while "doing it right" is easy. She says "tiredness has nothing to do with work." She says "will power . . . has practically no place in study . . . there must be pleasure and joy in work." So: if true attention is relaxing and fun—if true attention is more *comfortable*!—then why is there "something in our soul" that loathes it? What is this "something"? And why does she say that this something is almost "evil"—as if our ability to pay attention has something to do with our moral character?

10. Something Wicked This Way Comes.

Remember, paying attention is like performing a physical movement. It's hard to learn how to correctly do a pull-up; but it's easier to do a pull-up when you know how to do it correctly. There's discomfort at first; but then there's comfort. Of course, you experience "discomfort" even when you're doing pull-ups correctly, because pull-ups are hard and your muscles get sore. But it's not the same *kind* of discomfort you experience when you're first learning how to do pull-ups. When you're learning, you're uncomfortable with the discomfort of sore muscles. You might even mistake the sore muscles for something you ought to

avoid. And what you feel most of all is probably "frustration." You can't do it yet, and that makes you feel bad about yourself, which you resent. If you're at the gym, learning in front of others, it might make you feel embarrassed, which you resent even more. But, once you've learned what it's like to do the pull-ups correctly, you get more and more comfortable with being sore, with being tired. You don't feel resentful. You get *comfortable with discomfort*.

So "true attention" isn't necessarily "relaxing" and "fun" in the sense that binging on Netflix or playing videogames is relaxing and fun. It's not that kind of comfortable. It's a more complicated kind of comfort. And "something in our soul" doesn't *want* to be comfortable in this more complicated way. We resist it. We resent it. And that, Weil says, brings us close to "evil." It's a mark of bad character. Or it's an obstacle to developing good character.

Weil says that "attention consists of suspending our thought . . . our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything . . ." (111). It is "a special way of waiting upon truth, setting our hearts upon it, yet not allowing ourselves to go out in search of it" (113). She says this is how we should study for tests, how we should do our work, how we should do *everything* that we have to do. We can't force an unused muscle into action. We have to relax and wait patiently for it to click, or the connection to snap into place. We have to get comfortable with the process. "Attention is an effort, the greatest of all efforts, but it is a negative effort" (111). And—here's the key point—this attitude of true attention is indispensable not only to studying well but to loving our neighbor. "The capacity to give one's attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing. . . . Nearly all those who think they have this capacity do not possess it. Warmth of heart, impulsiveness, pity are not enough" (114). Instead, we have to "know how to look at [another person] in a certain way. This way of looking is first of all attentive. The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth" (115).

This attitude of true attention is indispensable not only to studying well but to loving our neighbor.

Simone Weil is a Christian. If you want a similar thought from another tradition, here is the Tao Te Ching, as translated by Ursula Le Guin:

> *So the unwanting soul*
> *sees what's hidden,*
> *and the ever-wanting soul*
> *sees only what it wants* (Lao Tzu 2)

The "something in the soul" that loathes true attention is what we sometimes call *selfishness*, although this word is too simple to really capture the evil that Weil has in mind. Maybe "self-centeredness" is better. But whatever word we use, it's clear that we've started talking about ethical questions, questions about right and wrong ways to live our lives. In other words, we've started talking about "character."

Which is good, since this is supposed to be a journal about character!

11. So: What does attention have to do with character, if attention is about getting comfortable with discomfort?

Let's start by noticing what probably comes to mind if we imagine a person with "good character." Do we imagine a person who gets very upset about minor inconveniences, but never gets angry about genuine injustice? Do we think of someone who often laugh at others' expense but never laughs at herself? Who laughs about serious matters but takes laughing matters too seriously?[6] Do we have in mind a person who refuses to apologize when she's done wrong to others, or fails to stand up for herself when others have wronged her? Someone who easily lets go of her friends whenever the relationship gets difficult, but never lets go of a grudge?

Of course the answer is "no." A person like this has *bad* character. And what makes her character so bad? Well, her reactions are all wrong. Sometimes she overreacts, sometimes she underreacts. In all these examples, she feels the wrong thing. Her emotions don't seem appropriate.

Now, these days we like to tell ourselves that our feelings are "valid," no matter what the feelings are. And in a sense that's true. The sense in

which it's true is that you have to begin with what you've got. You have to start where you are, emotionally. You've got a feeling, which is a way of responding internally to some situation, and you can't just magically change it. So it's "valid" in the sense that it's yours, and you've got to accept that this is where you're coming from.

But acceptance is not the same as approval. You accept where you are so you can move forward if need be. Your feelings are what they are in the moment. But this doesn't mean you couldn't feel differently. And in some cases you *should* learn to feel differently.[7]

Now I can introduce my second and more serious example of "paying attention": the snuff film. We all know that in dark corners of the Internet there are these videos of people suffering terribly. People being tortured and killed. I'm not talking about actors acting; I'm talking real life. And there are people who watch these videos and are entertained by them. They laugh; they get excited and aroused. They are paying attention in a way that somehow makes the snuff film a source of comfort. Are their feelings "valid"?[8]

If "valid" doesn't just mean that you have to accept the feelings you (or others) have, but that the feelings you (or others) have are morally *acceptable* no matter what they are, then of course the answer is "no." Those feelings are not valid. The valid emotional response to a snuff film is extreme *discomfort*.[9]

In some cases you should *learn to feel differently.*

This is why the concept of character is important. We like to think of morality in terms of rules, and we like to think that the only rules that matter are the ones that keep people from actually hurting one another. But those people sitting alone in their basements watching snuff films on the Internet are not hurting anyone else. They are hurting themselves. Maybe we can anticipate that by turning themselves into the types of people who laugh at cruelty when no one's watching, they're making it more likely that if they get the chance to act cruelly toward others, or to not stop cruelty when they see it in real life, then they'll take that chance. And then they will have violated the moral rules.

But the idea of character is the idea that even if they never hurt anyone else in the real world, there's still something terribly wrong with them. The idea of character is that *how you feel in response to things really matters*, in a moral sense. If you want to be a good person and live a meaningful life, it's not enough that you don't hurt people with your actions. To be a good person, to live a really meaningful life, you need to not *want* to hurt people.[10]

That's why we talk about "virtue" when we're talking about character. For Aristotle (and lots of other people), virtue means this: feeling the right feeling, at the right time, in the right amount, toward the right person or thing, for the right reasons (ch.6). Virtue is about striking the target with your feelings, like hitting the bull's eye with your arrow. And virtue is about *practice*. You can get better at feeling, just like you can get better at archery.[11]

Now: what does "paying attention" have to do with "virtue"? What does attention have to do with character, if attention is about getting comfortable with discomfort, and character is about hitting the mark with your feelings?

It's like this: attention is how we practice virtue. We need some way to understand what it's like to "get better at feeling the right feelings," and I'm saying that the concept of "paying attention" is the way to understand what it's like—as long as we also understand "attention" in the right way! So let's make the connection.[12]

The exaggeration, laughing at what's serious and not laughing at what's funny, etc.—this is us reacting automatically, without really knowing what we're doing. We're being driven by what we find uncomfortable. We flee the discomfort of a serious thing by laughing. We don't want to pay attention to the terribleness, because it makes us feel sad, and we're not comfortable feeling sad. So we're bad at paying attention to it, because paying attention to it makes us feel bad. So we pay attention to something else, some other part of the situation, something that might make us feel good.

Now, like I said, we don't really know what we're doing when we simply react in our habitual way. But we're reacting badly, because this tragedy

deserves our attention—the right way to feel about it is *sad*. How do we get to know ourselves better? We step outside our front door and look back in, observe ourselves. But look: if what's going on inside is bad, this might *also* make us feel bad. We might not want to watch ourselves like this. We might not want to watch ourselves watching a snuff film and laughing. So paying attention to what we're paying attention to can also be a source of discomfort, which we might want to run away from. We might want to run back inside the house, where things are comfortable and entertaining. Instead of paying attention to what we're paying attention to, we go back to our old habits of feeling.

So here's how it *is* helpful to think of our feelings as "valid." If we want to change what's going on inside our house, we can't run away from observing what's going on inside our house. We have to be able to stay outside, calm and patient, and simply note what's happening. But we're doing this so we can adjust those feelings, until we are paying attention to the right things, knowing that what we pay attention to has the power to shape us.[13]

Still, what we want to know is this: *how* do we adjust those feelings? Here's the kicker:

12. Paying Attention to How We're Feeling Actually Changes How We're Feeling.

Changes *how* we're feeling—not *what* we're feeling, not necessarily. When you "observe" without judgment, you loosen the hold of the feeling. You think you're just observing the feeling; but by observing it, you're stepping outside the feeling for a moment, and that *changes* the feeling from one that has a grip on you, to one that you have a grip on. The feeling is still what it is; but now you have a relationship to it. Instead of fleeing an uncomfortable feeling for a "comfort," you are getting "comfortable with discomfort."

This gives you room to maneuver. It opens up the space in your mind for you to start directing your attention to something else, some other aspect of the situation, so that you can feel the right way about the situation. Instead of fleeing the uncomfortable feeling of sadness for the comforting feeling of "fun," you step outside your house and you watch

yourself laughing at what should make you feel sad, and when that makes you feel bad about yourself, which makes you feel uncomfortable, you step further out and watch yourself feeling bad about yourself for laughing at the sad thing, and you keep calm, so you can stay honest.

But you don't stop with "I'm gonna be honest"—as if that absolves you of the need to change. Instead, now that you see that you're laughing at the sad thing because you're paying attention to the wrong thing, you can see where you *ought* to be directing your attention, because now you can see what you *ought* to be feeling. Because your feeling is a return on your investment of attention. If you invest your attention elsewhere, then you'll be paid back with a different feeling. And as you get better at putting your attention more precisely where it's supposed to go, you'll get better at feeling: feeling the right feeling, at the right time, toward the right person or thing, in the right amount, for the right reason. You'll get better, in other words, at developing your moral character.

As you get better at putting your attention precisely where it's supposed to go, you'll get better at feeling: feeling the right feeling, at the right time.

And who knows—you might also get better at studying for your exams.

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Thank you to Evelin Ortiz, Wendt Character Scholar, for the illustrations on pp. 30, 31, and 33.

Notes

[1] For an argument in moral philosophy along these lines, see Christine Korsgaard. But it's possible that Korsgaard takes her Stoic argument too far,

and fails to appreciate the limits I want to acknowledge here. For a reply see David Sussman.

[2] Actually, despite the title, *Study is Hard Work*, this is a very fine book, and the message is quite compatible with my argument. Armstrong wants students to learn how to *enjoy* the "hard work" of studying!

[3] See Cohen.

[4] Suzuki explains that in order to correct this mistake, we must become *aware* that we are not paying attention. This means that we must pay attention to ourselves not-paying-attention. But the point of paying attention to ourselves is actually to *forget* ourselves, so that we can pay attention to what is outside us (79).

[5] Among other, more respectable sources. See for example Barret.

[6] Recent interest in the "philosophy of humor" has produced several studies in which a good sense of humor can be understood as a virtue. For example, see John Lippitt.

[7] Mirander Fricker develops at length an argument in "Reason and Emotion" much in line with the one I suggest here.

[8] There is a crucial difference between soberly confronting the recorded horrors of war crimes or police shootings, on the one hand, and consuming images of violent death for pleasure, on the other hand. In these two kinds of viewing, we are "paying attention" to different aspects of our viewing experience. John Bailey explores this in "Viewing Death."

[9] This is a source of moral confusion in our culture. Jennifer Nedelsky similarly distinguishes "being judgmental" (refusing to "accept" that one has a feeling) from "making a judgment" (discerning that the feeling one has is good or bad). Nedelsky says that we have come to believe that one cannot make a judgment without being judgmental: she argues that in fact we can and that we *must* be able to do this, in order to live well together and to build a good moral character. She also describes "mindfulness" as a practice in which we explicitly aim to become less judgmental *precisely in order to* make better judgments.

[10] See Nussbaum on the significance of this view of emotions.

[11] It is useful to think about virtue-as-archery once again in the context of humor. See Brady Wright.,

[12] Jay Garfield draws out the connection in detail in "Mindfulness and Ethics: Attention, Virtue and Perfection." I am drawing on a background of Eastern (generally Buddhist) and Western (generally Aristotelian) scholarship on virtue ethics. Garfield is one of many scholars who are also interested bridging the

two traditions. See also the previous reference (endnote 5) to Barret, "'WuWei' and Flow."

[13] What I'm recommending here obviously has a lot in common with popular notions of "mindfulness." But there's a difference: it matters not only that we're paying attention, but what we're paying attention to. We pay attention to what we're paying attention to in order to refocus our attention, because the object of our attention *shapes us*. See Jacobs and Wallace for more on this.

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The Persecution of Jaelene Hinkle

Sean Benson

Abstract

This essay argues that Jaelene Hinkle, a professional soccer player, was discriminated against by the United States Women's National Team when it required players to wear team jerseys in support of Gay Pride month in June of 2017. Adding insult to injury, numerous sports journalists now routinely describe Hinkle as a homophobe despite the fact that her principled decision not to wear the jersey was based on historic Christian teachings concerning human sexuality. Ms. Hinkle's public statements express both respect and love for all persons irrespective of their sexual orientation, and thus depictions of her character have been manifestly unjust.

"If thou dost marry, I'll give thee this plague for thy dowry: be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny. Get thee to a nunnery."

Hamlet, 3.1.134-36

Perhaps Hamlet is right. No matter what you do, even if you are as pure as driven snow, you will still have those who calumniate, or slander, you. Such appears to be an ugly side of human nature, and thus Hamlet's beloved Ophelia, he suggests, would be better cutting herself off from the world. But if I could insert a few lines into the play, I would tell her,

Whoa there, young lady! The nunnery is a great place to pray, but perhaps you should stand up for yourself as well.

OPHELIA Maybe (whoever you are), but why would I do that?

ME Because if you don't, won't your detractors win?

OPHELIA Yeah . . . I guess.

HAMLET Don't listen to this fool, 'Phe!

Draws sword. I exit stage right pronto.

In his fear of human evil, Hamlet asks Ophelia to close herself off from the very possibility of calumny, and—absent the voice of a better angel—she takes his advice in the only way she knows, shutting out everyone and eventually taking her own life. By means of his repeated exhortation—"To a nunnery go, and quickly too" (line 139)—Hamlet would have her withdraw into a convent. But mere retreat from the false accusations of others often solves nothing.

As Hamlet suspected, the "malicious misrepresentation" of calumny[1] is an enduring problem, and it has recently been used to silence and disenfranchise an American soccer player, Jaelene Hinkle, who holds a politically incorrect view on homosexuality. Political correctness—"the attempt to reform thought by making certain things unsayable" (Dalrymple 39; Scruton 127)—is being employed against Hinkle to malign her, to prevent open-minded discussion of homosexuality, and to intimidate her from dissenting to LGBT *orthodoxy*—their community's standard of right or correct belief. That orthodoxy comprises a host of issues (nondiscrimination in access to health care and housing, for instance) which are as unobjectionable as they are just. Yet the argument that the expression of homosexual desire leads to human flourishing is both the lone facet of LGBT orthodoxy at issue in this essay, and one that *can* reasonably be contested by persons of goodwill. The LGBT community and its supporters in the national sports media implicitly deny this possibility, and for this reason they label Jaelene Hinkle as a *homophobe* in order to defame her. Unlike Ophelia,

however, and to her credit, Hinkle has shown the moral courage to stand by her equally orthodox convictions.

Go Courage!

Jaelene Hinkle, left back for the North Carolina Courage

An African-American, Hinkle currently plays professionally in the National Women's Soccer League for the North Carolina Courage. In 2017, she received the coveted distinction of a call-up to play for the United States Women's National Team (USWNT), but she eventually turned down the invitation. As she publicly disclosed only months later on the evangelical *700 Club* television program, Hinkle objected to wearing rainbow-colored numbers that the USWNT placed on team jerseys in support of gay rights. She explained her decision not to accept that chance to play for the U.S. team:

> I just felt so convicted in my spirit that it wasn't my job to wear this jersey. . . . I gave myself three days to just seek and pray and determine what He was asking me to do in this situation . . . I knew in my spirit I was doing the right thing. I knew I was being obedient. (qtd. in Buzinski)

Her statement was calm, and her decision not to play those two international games in June of 2017 was equally measured. As one of the best left backs in the country, Hinkle received a second call-up a year later. Because she had explained on television her decision not to play a year earlier, the response of the national sports media was swift and negative. One reporter opined that Hinkle

> appeared on "The 700 Club" this spring to reaffirm that her decision was motivated by homophobia. . . . Many people—myself included—assumed Hinkle would never be given another chance. What she did was a bad look not just for herself, but for U. S. Soccer. . . . For her to not just refuse the call-up on the grounds of her religiously motivated homophobia, but then go on television

> and publicly discuss that decision, framing herself as brave for doing so, was embarrassing for the team. (Best)

Katelyn Best mischaracterizes Hinkle's decision as being "motivated by homophobia"; Hinkle affirmed no such thing, let alone "reaffirmed" it. For Best, as for other reporters, one either supports gay rights or one is a homophobe. Best appears unable to imagine that there could be principled reasons not to wear a jersey in support of a political position with which Hinkle disagrees. Such incapacity to imagine principled opposition to one's own beliefs constitutes in effect a triumph of political correctness: thought has been reformed so as to make certain things unsayable and, worse, unimaginable. In this case, Best fails to see that someone can disagree with LGBT orthodoxy on homosexuality and human flourishing and still love persons with deep-seated same-sex desires. Unless reporters are careful, they can be as much victims of politically correct thought as its proponents.

Best further misrepresents Hinkle as "framing herself as brave," when she merely said she thought and prayed about it for three days, and only then decided not to accept the call-up as a result of what she believed was obedience to God. Such talk of God makes some people in our culture uneasy (Rorty 171), but she's perfectly entitled to it even—perhaps especially—when it is unpopular. "Liberty is meaningless," as Frederick Douglass knew from experience, "where the right to utter one's thoughts and opinions has ceased to exist" (qtd. in Mac Donald 19).

The USWNT would no doubt claim that in asking players to wear the rainbow-colored numbers, they are merely supporting their LGBT fans and players such as Megan Rapinoe, the team's star midfielder. This is admirably well-intentioned. I imagine they would further stipulate that sexual orientation is such a basic human right that it is simply not up for discussion, just as slavery is no longer (in the civilized world, at least) an issue about which one need argue. Indeed, most people who have thought deeply about same-sex attraction now agree that it is involuntary, that "the number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible" (*Catechism* sec. 2358).

At the same time, the undeniable inclination or predisposition towards same-sex desire does not settle its propriety—the goodness or badness—any more than that of a host of other human desires, some of which lead to human flourishing, while others do not.[2] Let's stipulate, however, for the sake of argument, not only to the naturalness of same-sex desire, but also to its expression as a human right (and good) that we ought to support. Now the free exercise of religious belief is also a basic human right, and is acknowledged as such in the First Amendment to our Constitution.

Hinkle refused a prestigious USWNT call-up based on her religious beliefs.

The question then is whether Jaelene Hinkle should be prevented from playing on the national team merely because she holds a dissenting view—one well within the bounds of historic Christian teaching—on the expression of same-sex attraction. It would be one thing if Hinkle were actually a homophobe who ranted about the LGBT community and expressed her utter contempt for it. She might then cause a rift within the team and deserve to be sent packing. But she is not calling out her teammates, trying to embarrass them, or anything of the sort. She is instead asking not to be required to wear Pride jerseys as a symbolic expression of support for the LGBT community. One wonders why that community, which has encountered stifling dissent and persecution throughout history, would want for one moment to stifle the dissent of Jaelene Hinkle?

Hinkle is not suggesting that people with same-sex desires be denied access to health care or housing, but she is unwilling to support the team's symbolic support of same-sex expression because, as is clear from her public comments, she does not believe it leads to human flourishing. Hinkle is not, in the media's crudely reductive formula, "anti-gay," nor do her beliefs in any way hinder her teammates from playing soccer. She may have hurt some feelings, but grown women who play professional soccer do not always agree with other teammates

on every issue under the sun, and yet are able to perform on the field. That's what professional athletes do.

The USWNT's decision also contravenes a fundamental tenet of American sports: neither your color (witness Jackie Robinson), ethnicity, social background, nor creed matters. Sports are a meritocracy based on athletic prowess. Teams are free to penalize poor performance, but not belief. Imagine how Jaelene Hinkle, a superlative soccer player, feels because she does not hold the right creed?

What is at stake here, in essence, is a conflict between competing rights. Does one outweigh the other? People of goodwill will of course disagree on this issue, but do we even need to take a side? Common sense would indicate that we ought, insofar as possible, to accommodate the assertion of both rights. Even if one human right were more properly basic, if there's no compelling reason to quash the other, why would we do so? We certainly would not want to keep off the team, for instance, married gay players and coaches, several of whom are in fact on the team. But here's the rub: in this case, the USWNT imposed a positive duty on Hinkle, if she wished to play on the team, to forgo her religious beliefs for the duration of the games and participate in the team's symbolic expression of solidarity with the LGBT community. That crosses a line.

The USWNT imposed a positive duty on Hinkle, if she wished to play on the team, to forgo her religious beliefs.

Why even put Jaelene Hinkle or any other player in such an untenable position? Wouldn't it be more inclusive (not to mention patriotic) to have the team wear jerseys saying in bold red, white, and blue *E Pluribus Unum*, even if only in translation so that the world could see that gay and straight players can play side by side in unity, as they do every day in WoSo, the popular abbreviation for women's soccer? Why, in other words, affirm one human right to the exclusion (or suppression) of another? There were surely less intrusive, noncoercive ways to express support for gay rights: put a message on the USWNT website, allow players to wear rainbow-colored warmup gear if they wish, or any

number of accommodations. But team jerseys all have to be identical so as not to confuse the other team, and thus the USWNT gave no alternative to Jaelene Hinkle.

That is not fair play.

Perhaps even more surprising is the USWNT's inability to imagine that any reasonable human being could possibly object to wearing Pride jerseys. LGBT orthodoxy holds that same-sex expression is a civil rights issue that trumps what they believe to be Hinkle's misguided religious beliefs. To be sure, religious beliefs that involve violence (e.g. child sacrifice) can be discriminated against, as can what I call pseudo-religious beliefs such as an interdiction on interracial marriage. A ban on miscegenation is more properly a race issue—it's just racist—and although people have alleged this as part of their religious beliefs, there is no compelling evidence in any of the three great monotheisms (as well as other religions) that this is a serious teaching of any sacred texts or traditions—quite the opposite, in fact.

The expression of same-sex attraction is distinguishable from interracial marriage because there is scriptural warrant for the latter in both testaments as well as longstanding theological opposition to same-sex acts in numerous (though by no means all) traditions. People can and do reasonably disagree on this issue, but Hinkle's views, it needs to be said, are well within the ambit of traditional Christian religious belief and teaching. A reasonable person can object to being forced—coerced, really—into supporting LGBT orthodoxy on this point. Because there was no compelling reason to require Jaelene Hinkle to adopt a position (even if only a symbolic one) on gay rights that had nothing to do with her soccer skills, the USWNT appears to have unfairly discriminated against her based on her religious beliefs.

Jaelene Hinkle's religious views on homosexuality may be politically incorrect, but their incorrectness is largely unargued and merely assumed by the LGBT community and its supporters. They assume that because same-sex desires are natural, their expression is also good; most people would agree to the former; a reasonable person can disagree with the latter. People have any number of natural desires; expressing every single one of them helps neither them nor others

flourish as human beings. One can certainly disagree with this position, but these are issues that deserve open discussion and the expression of goodwill on both sides. We need the civility to talk with one another so that we can cultivate intellectual tolerance of those with whom we disagree on the question of same-sex expression. Such tolerance—not to be confused with indifference or apathy—is the intellectual virtue of open-mindedness, a willingness to engage ideas with which one might disagree and even find uncomfortable to talk about, and yet find a way to do so respectfully as a way of becoming a person of thoughtful and caring reflection.[3]

Homophobic Rating—PG-13: Strong Language

Harmful language on a subject as sensitive as homosexuality can damage people to the core. Consider the notorious Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas, whose "outreach" routinely involves protesting any group they believe is doing something sinful. They even occasionally show up at military funerals to proclaim God's judgment on service members who have died in action because they consider America to be an ungodly country. Westboro, which is not affiliated with any Baptist denomination (let's face it, no one would have them), would rather condemn others than extend God's love to them. Westboro also reserves an especial vitriol for homosexual persons and the entire LGBT community, which is evident in the malice of their URL: *godhatesfags.com*.

We need the civility to talk to one another so that we can cultivate intellectual tolerance of those with whom we disagree.

The Christian community has had to become more open-minded as to the naturalness of homosexual desire, and sympathetic to persons with such deep-seated attraction. The LGBT community, for its part, has to learn to be more open-minded to those who assert that the naturalness of a desire does not mean its expression is necessarily good or healthy. Unfortunately, what we see happening in America is the antithesis of a civil exchange of ideas: *homophobia* in current usage now has the same pejorative effect as the use of *fag*.

The *Urban Dictionary*, a crowd-sourced site, offers one definition of *homophobia* as "a severe condition, usually prominent in Republicans and most of American culture, leading one to . . . inaccurately use bible quotings (sic) for the justification of killing homosexuals . . ." (def. 6). What is one to say of such a definition, popular not despite but because of its lack of charity towards those who disagree with the expression of same-sex attraction? Such ridicule has the effect of silencing dissent by characterizing it as malice. Political correctness is the attempt to shame those who hold "incorrect" views, to render dissenters such as Jaelene Hinkle voiceless and powerless.

We need to step back for a moment to understand the evolution of the word *homophobia* because its denotation is often misunderstood. Originally it meant, "fear or hatred of men or the male sex," and the *OED* cites as an example the *Des Moines Daily News* from June 1904: "Young women of America have homophobia, you know, just as children have measles." That innocent usage, as much from a different mental universe as from a different era, is now obsolete.[4] *Homophobia* came about in its original sense following the 19th-century craze for identifying various phobias—hydrophobia, arachnophobia, claustrophobia, gynophobia (fear of women)—and is probably used today because of its quasi-scientific aura of classification. To be a homophobe in contemporary usage is *as if* to suffer from (without actually experiencing) a psychological malady, complete with the implicit idea that one could seek counselling to lessen one's irrational aversion to homosexuality in the same way another might her aversion to spiders. But make no mistake: *homophobia* is used for political rather than clinical ends.

The Westboro Baptists are homophobes and fairly described as such. But it is unfair to label as a homophobe one who neither hates nor fears homosexual persons (and may in fact love them), but who nonetheless believes the expression of *opposite*-sex attraction best leads to human flourishing. The indiscriminate use of *homophobia* to apply to all persons who do not support LGBT orthodoxy is in some ways understandable: having been besieged and persecuted for millennia for their same-sex desire, it is no surprise that the LGBT community remains wary of those who oppose their beliefs. Yet two wrongs no more make a right than vengeance does. To slander Jaelene Hinkle, someone who is

respectful of her teammates and also holds traditional understandings of human sexuality, is a moral evil. We need to call it that because to persecute her for her religious beliefs is an egregious wrong to her person, and people of goodwill on both sides of this issue need to stand in her defense.

To persecute Hinkle for her religious beliefs is an egregious wrong.

Less educated speakers who use *homophobia* today misunderstand its acceptation, or commonly accepted meaning: "Hostility towards, prejudice against, or (less commonly) fear of homosexual people or homosexuality." *Time* first used *homophobia* in its current sense in October, 1969: "Such homophobia . . . involves innumerable misconceptions and oversimplifications" ("Homophobia" [*Oxford English Dictionary*]). Note that even in this first recorded instance, the homophobe is already characterized pejoratively as one who has "misconceptions and oversimplifications" of homosexuality. Unfortunately, because *homophobia* is in wide use today, people who do not know its meaning pick it up almost unconsciously and apply it indiscriminately to anyone who does not agree with LGBT orthodoxy.

Moreover, as one reporter insisted to me, *homophobia* merely means *dislike* when she and her friends use it. The OED has not yet picked up on this secondary meaning of the word. Yet to use it in this emerging sense is to overlook the "phobic" root of the word. Claustrophobes, to take one example, don't merely dislike enclosed spaces—they have emotional, irrational aversions to them. Such overlooking entails the linguistic metaphorization of *homophobia*, which frequently happens with technical words once they enter mainstream use. That process, however, still appears to be in its infancy with *homophobia*, and one should be careful not to assume that its secondary meaning has replaced its more hostile and primary meaning.

The online blogger Gaby Alejandro, for instance, has said of Hinkle's decision not to wear the Pride jersey, "You can't hide behind religion when it comes to something like homophobia. This isn't just an opinion. This is hate . . ." (qtd. in Gruskoff). Alejandro is not attributing to Hinkle

mere dislike. She assumes that Hinkle is a malign actor, even though her measured and initially non-public response to the team's decision to wear Pride jerseys suggests she is hardly malicious. The claim that *homophobia* only means "dislike" is a bit like Humpty Dumpty's declaring, "When I use a word . . . it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less." "The question," Alice coolly replied, "is whether you can make words mean so many different things" (Carroll 161, italics his).

Irrespective of a speaker's intention, *homophobia* is almost always received as a slur. No one wants to be called a homophobe. Thus, the effect of even unwitting use lumps together the Westboro Baptists with the overwhelming majority of Christians (and countless others) who affirm that men and women with "deep-seated homosexual tendencies . . . must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided" (*Catechism* sec. 2358; Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod 3).

An even more egregious problem exists: educated speakers who know the primary sense of *homophobia* and apply it to anyone who opposes LGBT orthodoxy. Surely *homophobia* applies to the two men who tortured and left 21-year-old University of Wyoming student Matthew Shepard to die on October 6, 1998 (Thernstrom), but are we to equate Pope Francis's loving response to persons with same-sex desires to that of the Westboro Baptists? It is crucially important to distinguish between those who persecute and actually hate homosexuals from those who support traditional beliefs on same-sex expression. *Homophobia* now conveniently suggests the psychological state—fear, hatred, misunderstanding—of those who oppose homosexual expression. It is brilliant shorthand for *hater*, as deft a rhetorical move as it is nefarious.

LGBT dissent as thoughtcrime

Particularly in the national sports media, *homophobia* is employed even when the evidence indicates that someone has no animus towards persons with same-sex desires. Too often, and regrettably, *homophobia* is used to stigmatize those who might disagree with LGBT orthodoxy on homosexuality. In his dystopian novel, *1984*, Orwell's character Syme

notes that his country's official language, Newspeak, is deliberately being controlled to reduce its vocabulary: "Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it" (52). That is the point, too, of the calculated use of *homophobia* by educated speakers in the media: to render unmentionable any traditional and principled opposition to same-sex expression, which is by politically correct fiat, to use the language of Newspeak, doubleplusgood. In other words, *homophobia* is invoked to limit thought on homosexuality, just as *fag* and other derogatory terms reduce people to crude caricatures.

The incendiary verbiage of the Westboro Baptists notwithstanding, Christendom has worked hard to eliminate injurious language, and to distinguish people (all of whom the Church values as image bearers of God) from behavior that hinders their flourishing. Should not the LGBT community work to distinguish the true homophobes from those who love them yet disagree with their position on same-sex expression? If not, they will be equating disagreement with hatred, and that is a distinction with a real difference. Unfortunately, the use of *homophobia* elides the distinction—purposely so, in some cases—to make any disagreement unsayable and, as Orwell prophesies, eventually unthinkable. This has already come true for those who, as I've noted, can't even imagine that one could have principled opposition to LGBT orthodoxy. All opposition in such quarters is caricatured as homophobia and is thus, by definition, unprincipled.

Hinkle has been called a "homophobe" for choosing not to wear the rainbow numbers.

Michael Hanby also notes the increasing use of homophobia as political rhetoric to silence opponents: "Dissenters are intimidated by the toxic charges of 'hate' and 'homophobia.'" As we have seen, not all people who employ homophobia intend it as a slur, but the effect of its use creates psychological discomfort in those against whom it is directed. I have said little about discomfort so far, even though it is the topic of this issue of the journal. In fact, however, my essay concerns the

discomfort—physical, psychological, emotional, even spiritual—visited upon those who dissent from the prevailing orthodoxy. Calling someone a *homophobe* is hardly meant to foster debate on same-sex expression; its use, whatever the speaker's intention, intimidates the accused and forecloses discussion. Rest assured that that message has been conveyed not only to Jaelene Hinkle, but also to any other WoSo player who has dreams of playing for the United States.

Unfortunately, as Mary Eberstadt remarks, even "inside parts of the church, and ubiquitously outside it, *homophobe* has become an automatic smear deployed for partisan purposes. . . . *homophobe* is meant to shame, intimidate, and sideline" anyone who disagrees with the LGBT position (italics hers). On Instagram, Hinkle was forthright several years ago in her opposition to the Supreme Court's legalization of same-sex marriage in the landmark *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision: "My heart is that as Christians we don't begin to throw a tantrum over what has been brought into law today, but we become that much more loving" (qtd. in Cauterucci). In what sort of mental universe could Hinkle's measured response and call to love others be considered an expression of hatred?

Reporters routinely use *homophobe* to describe Jaelene Hinkle. The effect, as Hamlet noted of Ophelia, is pure *calumny*: "false and malicious misrepresentation of the words or actions of others, calculated to injure their reputation; libelous detraction, slander" ("Calumny"). Writing in *Slate*, Christina Cauterucci described the USWNT's decision to call Jaelene Hinkle up a second time as "nurturing outspoken homophobia." "Hinkle's addition to the team sends a tacit message to her teammates and the USWNT's fans: Players with poisonous views are welcome here, so long as they help us win." Perhaps fairness requires that we ask who is the one with venom here?

Cauterucci further chastises Hinkle for "bigotry," and the piece's title, "Kick Her Off," sums up her opinion that such people cannot be debated and should be ostracized. This is hardly objective journalism even if one shares some of Cauterucci's less extreme views. She got her wish, too, as Hinkle was later cut from the team despite the consensus view that she is "probably the best left back available to the United States women's national team" (McCauley). Were it for her skill alone, Jaelene

Hinkle almost certainly would have been on the USWNT for the World Cup.

The national sports media, and perhaps the relatively circumspect USWNT itself, fails to imagine a reality—love and principled disagreement—different from the artificial one constructed by denigrating Hinkle's motives. Their doing so is less a form of collusion than of groupthink, the political correctness that Theodore Dalrymple identifies as

> the conspicuous, not to say intimidating, display of virtue (conceived of as the public espousal of the "correct," which is to say "progressive," views) by means of a purified vocabulary and abstract humane sentiment. To contradict such sentiment, or not to use such vocabulary, is to put yourself outside the pale of civilized men. . . . (39)

The use of *homophobia* is a shibboleth among much of the media and intelligentsia, the purified vocabulary that signals that her views are beyond the respectable pale, the contours of which they alone define. But their doing so is merely the projection of a wish fulfillment: the sentiment or feeling that their position is so self-evidently correct that it needs no proof. Hinkle's brand of toxicity must not be tolerated; open-mindedness need not apply here.

It takes great moral courage to stand up to false charges.

To be sure, persons with deep-seated same-sex desires have been and still are oppressed—no reasonable person denies this. But in the West the pendulum also swings in the other direction, with the discomfort of calumny leveled against those who, like Hinkle, disagree with LGBT orthodoxy on the lone issue of same-sex expression. It is no exaggeration to say that in soccer as in other spheres of American culture today it takes great moral courage to stand up to false charges of *homophobia*. One hopes that the USWNT would be open-minded enough not to require a religious test for soccer players, and let Hinkle serve as a model for young women who are unafraid to stand on their convictions—just as many LGBT players admirably do. The USWNT

needs to put their eleven best players on the pitch, and leave personal beliefs and disagreements to be debated in a more appropriate venue, and on a level playing field.

Focusing on Hinkle's absence from the USWNT, sports journalist Travis Yoesting writes, almost as if he thinks he lives in the world of *The Handmaid's Tale*, "Hinkle belongs to a group of Christians who want to deny human rights to a large portion of society." He continues in the same vein: "If you stand for human rights or believe that words have consequences, you probably don't want Hinkle anywhere near a United States national team." Yet even Yoesting—like Best and others who condemn Hinkle's religious beliefs—concedes that "[f]rom an on-field perspective, Hinkle would undoubtedly make the USWNT better. . . . she's what you want in a left back, a position at which the USWNT has little depth. She's certainly among the top three at her position in this country." He even acknowledges the real issue: "Would it be fair to Hinkle to deny her the opportunity to play in the World Cup because of her religious views?" (Yoesting). I hope his question is rhetorical; I fear it is in earnest.

We can, of course, resort to name calling and denigration, but we know how well that works. We can choose to cause discomfort and pain to our fellow human beings, or we can "comfort all who mourn" and are in any affliction (Isaiah 61:2), gay and straight alike. We can and should disagree if we are to live in a vibrant culture, but disharmony is not the goal, just as Jaelene Hinkle's continuing ostracism from the USWNT is scarcely an optimal solution. Divisiveness reigns, and the charge of homophobia at the epicenter of WoSo is mere sign and symptom of a broader malaise in our civic discourse. There are people of faith who disagree with Ms. Hinkle's principled stand, and non-Christians who do not accept the traditions and scriptures she finds compelling—nor should they be asked to. But they should be invited to accept reason as their guide so together we can recognize and affirm that no one should be required to endorse a

Hinkle took a principled stand.

particular religious or political view in order to play on an athletic team. It is time for good people on both sides of the issue to have this uncomfortable discussion so that, together, we can forge a way forward.

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Notes

[1] *OED*, s.v. calumny. I wish to thank for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay Annalee Ward, Beth McCaw, Adam Smith, Jon Barz, and Mary Bryant.

[2] For the record, I take no position in this essay on the propriety of same-sex expression. My subject is the widespread use of the term *homophobia*, which is a separate and distinct issue.

[3] The intellectual virtue of open-mindedness is not one of the character virtues (temperance, prudence, etc.), but it lays the foundation for their development.

[4] Remarkably, the *OED* lists that usage as merely being "rare," when in fact no one uses it in such an antiquated sense, and would be wholly misunderstood were she to do so.

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Learning to Live Comfortably in an Uncomfortable World: A Response to McCaw, Smith, and Benson

Roger P. Ebertz

In her book *iGen* Jean M. Twenge provides an insightful report on the mindset of young women and men who have grown up in the era of smartphones. In one interesting chapter, Twenge tells us that iGen'ers are extremely sensitive about matters of safety. Twenge provides both statistical and anecdotal evidence that young adults and their parents are very concerned about keeping safe. But what is especially interesting is that the concern goes beyond physical safety to emotional and cognitive safety.

Twenge relays a story from a writer who visited a high school in the United Kingdom. Speaking to the students on controversial themes, the author naturally expected students to challenge her. Rather than responding rationally, the students became upset, saying, "You can't say that!" (154). Twenge uses this story to illustrate a trend on college campuses in general. Students demand "safe spaces" where they can avoid ideas they find offensive or objectionable. Twenge surveyed 200 students at San Diego State University and found that 86% agreed that "[i]t is the responsibility of the university administration to create a safe

space for all students to thrive" (155). The key, however, is in how one interprets "safe space." If interpreted to mean that universities should provide places where students are free from physical, verbal, and emotional abuse, it is a reasonable expectation. But more and more, "safe space" refers to a place where students will not encounter ideas with which they disagree, will not be challenged in their beliefs, values, and lifestyles.

Perhaps the reason for this concern is that this generation, iGen'ers, suffer from a high level of anxiety and depression. Maybe they are overly sensitive and need to be protected, like a person with light skin needs to be protected from the sun. But I think it goes beyond this. Twenge quotes a student: "You can always take precautions for someone hurting you physically, but you cannot really help but listen when someone is talking to you" (157). This, Twenge says, is "a distinctively iGen idea: the world is an inherently dangerous place because every social interaction carries the risk of being hurt. You never know what someone is going to say, and there's no way to protect yourself from it" (157). In response to this concern, college campuses have created places for students to retreat, where students who disagree can escape when controversial speakers come to campus. Some universities have even cancelled speakers, judging their ideas too challenging. As Twenge writes, "Protecting students from being distressed is considered more important than having a discussion of potentially uncomfortable ideas" (156).[1]

It is all too easy to strike out, condemn "the enemy," make rules to keep them at bay, and brand them as evil or dangerous.

Twenge's diagnosis applies to more than just iGen'ers. It applies to most, if not all, of us in America. Technology, first in the form of relatively inexpensive and convenient transportation, then in the form of internationally broadcast television, and now in the form of the internet and social networking, brings us face to face with the rest of the world. And the world is very diverse. We are challenged constantly with ideas, values, and lifestyles different from our own. News organizations constantly remind us of, and sometimes even create, social and political

divisiveness, conflict, and name calling. All of this makes us very uncomfortable. How do we respond? An easy response is to create a "safe space," hiding away in our homes and ignoring the news, or creating groups on a social media platform in which everyone shares our ideas. And if we still encounter ideas and lifestyles different from our own, it is all too easy to strike out, condemn "the enemy," make rules to keep them at bay, and brand them as evil or dangerous.

Lashing out may be our natural reaction to threats to our beliefs and values. But character doesn't come naturally. As Aristotle taught over two thousand years ago, developing character requires practice. The goal, according to this approach to life, is to develop into a person with virtues that enable us to flourish as human beings, to be all we can be. Virtues are not rules, not lists of dos and don'ts. They are deep character traits that require effort, just like the virtue of physical fitness requires effort. The essays in *Character and . . . Discomfort* provide food for thought on the kind of effort required to become a person of character, and on just what discomfort has to do with virtue.

Illustration by Mike Moore, www.mikemoorespeaks.com

Beth McCaw describes the "centripetal draw of comfort" in American culture (11). Forces, both internal and external, push us to put pleasure and comfort at the center of our lives. Feeding on our fears and

anxieties, and on our sinfulness, culture pushes us toward individualism and autonomy. We put "me" and me alone at the center. What matters, in our thinking and in our decisions, is how something affects *me*. Unfortunately, in the process of seeking what is good for *me*, we leave others behind.

Even in actions that purport to aim at helping others, we are motivated by the desire to improve ourselves. McCaw sees this in common attitudes to short-term mission trips, a phenomenon that has become very common in American Christianity. While these trips allegedly aim to help others, participants can be quite self-centered in their involvement. They complain about food or accommodations, and haggle in the markets to get souvenirs at the lowest possible prices. They are housed in nice hotels, making daytrips to indigenous villages and providing "expertise" for the poor, uneducated villagers. They return feeling quite good about themselves.

But why? What have they accomplished? They have grown spiritually and explored life's meaning. Trips are evaluated "more by the enthusiasm of those sent rather than by any benefit expressed by hosts" (McCaw 14). McCaw quotes a field facilitator in Mexico, "Today (visiting groups) are much less concerned about the impact they will have in Mexico and more concerned about the impact Mexico will have on them." This phenomenon, the facilitator goes on, "has begun to have a negative effect on the Mexican churches" (Palmatier qtd. in McCaw 13). And an African leader is outraged by teams that come "prepared for novel vacations but not to serve" (13). Self-centeredness harms ourselves as well as others.

We need community to thrive; we need to care for and be cared for by others.

We are social beings, McCaw argues. We are made, according to the Judeo-Christian tradition, to love God and love our neighbors. Even outside of the Christian framework, there is abundant evidence that humans need relationships. We need community to thrive; we need to care for and be cared for by others. Our self-focused lives grate against our very nature. As McCaw writes early on in her essay, "[a]s we focus increasingly on superficial personal

comfort, others are moved to the periphery of our care in life and the moral and vocational fabric of life starts to unravel" (12). McCaw calls us to "push back" against the forces of selfishness. The first step, she suggests, is to become "conscious of the desire(s) holding center stage in our lives" (19). Once we do this, we can begin to push selfishness out of the center, making room for God, for others, and for community. While there is a place for self-care and enjoyment of comfort, these should not be our central focus. "Re-centering will send *us* out to others—true outreach," she writes. "This will lead us to the margins in our community and our world" (20). Having recognized our tendency to put ourselves in the center, we can begin to practice being people of character. "Intentionally devoting ourselves to relationships and embodying community will start to order our choices and make our commitments to others routine—compassion, justice, even love can become more and more our habit" (McCaw 22).

We flourish ourselves when we take ourselves out of the center.

McCaw is calling us to practice character. This is risky. It will bring joy, but it will also bring discomfort and even pain. When we take ourselves out of the center and realize we are united with others, the suffering of others will become our suffering. This is part and parcel of a full human life. Paradoxically, we flourish ourselves when we take ourselves out of the center. We find our lives by giving them up. And this means being willing to be uncomfortable, and even to suffer, for others. "It may sound odd to describe the acceptance of discomfort as freeing," McCaw writes, "but how small our perspective, our experience, our agency in the world become when confined within the bounds of the comfortable. It becomes isolating, suffocating, even anxiety-producing when every discomfort is framed as a threat to be avoided or eliminated. . ." (21).

The first step, McCaw tells us, is to become conscious of our desires. In other words, we must pay attention. Adam Smith helps us understand what this might mean. Smith argues that while we experience many uncomfortable things, our reactions to discomfort are in part up to us. Unlike the student quoted earlier, Smith suggests that we are not passive in the face of words (and other events). Appealing to the

insights of the ancient Stoics, he argues that discomfort involves not just painful or difficult things, but our "judgments concerning them" (Epictetus qtd. in Smith 28). Smith does not mean we create our discomfort out of nothing and can eliminate it with a trick of the mind. The causes of discomfort are not wholly under our control. Rather, "[i]t's about getting more comfortable with what makes us uncomfortable." "Paying attention," he writes, "is about *getting comfortable with discomfort*" (28).

Sometimes, Smith suggests, we have to pay attention to learn something new and valuable. Drawing an analogy from physical training, he points out that while most of us think doing pull-ups is just pulling oneself up with one's arms, doing pull-ups properly involves using muscles in one's back. To do pull-ups well, then, we must pay attention to these muscles. Unfortunately, when we begin, we don't even know these muscles exist. To help us to do the exercise properly, a physical trainer must use metaphors and comparisons. We must open ourselves to experience something new. We must pay attention. We pay attention, and practice, and finally, it clicks. When one learns to do pull-ups well, Smith says, one becomes comfortable with them. Yes, one may experience soreness from the exercise, a sort of discomfort. But one is comfortable with this discomfort.

Our reactions to discomfort are in part up to us.

Like learning a physical routine, studying requires paying attention. To study well requires that one learn to pay attention to what one is studying. But this is not instinctive. Telling a student to "study well" does not help. He must learn to study well. If a student is told to "study hard," the chances are she or he will focus on trying not to be distracted. But this in itself is a distraction. Paying attention is a positive thing. To study well, one must get caught up in what one is studying. When one experiences this, it becomes enjoyable. This is not to say that the work of intellectual activity will never bring discomfort. But a good student becomes comfortable with this discomfort.

Smith draws from Simone Weil. In Weil's view, the ability to pay attention is one of the most important moral virtues. There is

something in us, she suggests, that is more "evil than flesh" (qtd. in Smith 29). There is something within our soul that pushes us not to pay attention. Could this be akin to the inner forces pushing us to self-centeredness that McCaw writes about? I think it is. Smith asks the reader to imagine stepping outside his or her mind and looking back in. "That's what paying attention is like: stepping outside yourself, looking back into yourself, and noticing whatever there is to notice" (34). The goal is not to judge what is going on in one's mind, but to simply observe. Paying attention in this way requires practice. It is a virtue we must learn. But as we do, we begin to observe things we were not conscious of before. We observe our own discomfort, physical, emotional, and even spiritual. We observe thoughts, judgments, and reactions to things that we are uncomfortable with.

Truly paying attention does not give us the comfort we get from pleasurable activities like watching a film or playing a video game. But there is a comfort involved. "It's a more complicated kind of comfort," Smith writes, and "'something in our soul' doesn't want to be comfortable in this more complicated way. We resist it." Weil says this resistance is close to evil. It prevents us from exercising our abilities in the best way. As Smith writes, "it's an obstacle to developing good character" (36). But if we learn to pay attention, we enable ourselves to "push back" and "pull-up" well. Living fully is not pain free. In fact, if we identify with others on the periphery, as McCaw challenges us to do, life can be very painful. There is discomfort as we use our physical, intellectual, and spiritual muscles. But in the end, we become comfortable with the discomfort.

Caring for others requires paying attention, truly opening ourselves to the other.

McCaw and Smith provide similar and complimentary insights on discomfort and character. Both challenge us to become aware, to pay attention, to what is going on inside of us, so that we can become truly aware of others. And both recognize that this is not easy, it can be uncomfortable, and it takes work. Drawing from Weil, Smith explains that truly paying attention to another person is very difficult. "We have to 'know how to look at [another person] in a certain way. This way of

looking is first of all attentive. The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth'" (qtd. in Smith 36). Caring for others requires paying attention, truly opening ourselves to the other.

Smith helps us understand how becoming attentive to our minds and reactions helps us become better people. Our goal, when peering into our minds, is not to judge, but to see what's there. We see who we are at the present moment. But this doesn't imply that we must approve of all we see inside ourselves. We can also realize that not all of the judgments we observe in our minds are appropriate. Some are inappropriate, even morally wrong. Smith uses a very striking illustration. People who enjoy watching snuff films, films in which people are actually tortured and killed, do not respond appropriately. They laugh. They get aroused. These feelings are inappropriate responses toward something that is horrendously immoral. Similarly, people laugh when they see others mistreated or bullied. They experience pleasure on viewing moral wrong. Again, this is wrong. It is morally inappropriate. When we observe inappropriate judgments and feelings within ourselves, as Smith advises us to do, the goal is not to get angry at ourselves. But it is to gain a knowledge of ourselves that enables us to "move forward" (Smith 38).

Paying attention paves the way for growth.

Paying attention paves the way for growth. When we find ourselves experiencing uncomfortable situations, we turn away. We don't really pay attention. It is easier to laugh than to face discomfort. The more we do that, the more habitual our inappropriate reactions become. Paying attention pushes back. It means truly observing our feelings and reactions, not turning away. And this can be very uncomfortable. It is not an easy thing to confess one's sins, even to oneself. As Smith says, "We might want to run back inside the house, where things are comfortable and entertaining. . . . we go back to our old habits of feeling." To continue paying attention is to resist flight from discomfort. But "we're doing this so we can adjust those feelings, until we are paying attention to the right things, knowing that what we pay attention to has the power to shape us" (40). Truly paying attention to one's

feelings opens up a key possibility. "When you 'observe' without judgment, you loosen the hold of the feeling." It "*changes* the feeling from one that has a grip on you, to one that you have a grip on." And all of a sudden one has room to change, "room to maneuver" (40). You can begin to focus your attention somewhere else, and in return begin to feel differently.

> And as you get better at putting your attention more precisely where it's supposed to go, you'll get better at feeling: feeling the right feeling, at the right time, toward the right person or thing, in the right amount, for the right reason. You'll get better, in other words, at developing you moral character. (Smith 41)

This sounds to me a lot like pushing back at the forces that drive us to self-centeredness and making room for the care for others that enables us to flourish as human beings.

Sean Benson's "The Persecution of Jaelene Hinkle" provides an interesting case study on responses to discomfort. Benson describes a series of events involving American soccer player, Jaelene Hinkle, and the United States Women's National Team (USWNT). When the USWNT leadership chose to include rainbow colored numerals on team jerseys, showing support for LGBT rights, Hinkle chose not to accept her invitation to the team, explaining her views to the audience of the evangelical television show, the 700 Club. A year later, when she was again invited to the team, critics responded vehemently. One critic wrote that Hinkle's earlier decision had been based on "religiously motivated homophobia," calling Hinkle's actions "embarrassing for the team." She should never, according to the critic, have been given another chance (Best qtd. in Benson 48-49). Benson's primary point seems to be that Hinkle's critics have not been fair to Hinkle, labeling her a *homophobe*, and describing her actions as motivated by *homophobia* simply to vilify her.

Benson argues that Hinkle's actions were based on carefully considered, and traditionally held, religious views, and should have no impact on whether she is asked to play. In spite of this, Hinkle is being discriminated against because of her religious views, simply because she does accept what Benson calls "LGBT orthodoxy" (49).

The case Benson highlights is fraught with discomfort. He mentions the discomfort felt by Hinkle and others holding her view as a result of the words and actions of critics. This is one discomfort. But I believe there are other discomforts that should be highlighted as well. Although attitudes are changing, there is a high degree of discomfort surrounding homosexuality in the United States. In subcultures and even whole towns across America, people are uncomfortable talking about homosexuality, and more importantly, with the presence of homosexual persons. If a gay man is hired as a secondary school teacher in a small midwestern or southern town, there is likely to be a reaction. People are uncomfortable with gay and lesbian teachers. We might even say they are afraid of them.

We cannot avoid discomfort in today's world. The question is how we will respond.

On the other hand, there are places of discomfort for LGBT individuals in America as well. Many of these places are the same places in which others are uncomfortable with them. In fact, there is often good reason for LGBT individuals to be fearful. The level of violence against, abuse of, and discrimination against these individuals far outweighs the abuse perpetrated by LGBT individuals themselves. I am not talking about the members of Westboro Baptist Church. I am talking about words and actions by thousands of individuals across America. Sometimes these words and actions are the result of ignorance. Sometimes they result from fear or hatred. Whatever their cause, they make those who identify as homosexual very uncomfortable. Although polls suggest growing acceptance of homosexuals in our country or at least the recognition of their civil rights, there are still plenty of people who simply wish homosexuals would go away and who do what they can to make that happen! These are the realities of America.

In short, we live in a nation in which people hold radically different views on LGBT issues. And some people act on those views. The result is discomfort. As the world becomes smaller, as cultures are brought together through technology, social media, and emigration, life will be uncomfortable. How does a person of character respond? Benson rightly points to one response that is unhelpful: describing others with emotionally loaded labels. Sounding like a psychological term,

homophobia has become a catch-all label by which to condemn anyone with views on homosexuality more conservative than one's own. There are many such labels. *Fundamentalist* and *socialist* are two such labels frequently used to vilify others. While both these terms were coined by people to describe their own views, they have become labels used by others to condemn them. I would suggest that *politically correct* and even Benson's phrase *LGBT orthodoxy* are phrases that are actually used to cast a blanket over and reject what is being referred to. If we are going to learn to live with discomfort, one thing we need to do is learn to avoid the use of vague and emotionally loaded language.

This case also illustrates our need to learn to listen to ourselves and others, as we have been encouraged to by McCaw and Smith. Benson demonstrates, I think, the failure of Hinkle's critics to understand the reasons behind her more conservative views. Without listening, they simply attack. But I believe it is true on the other side as well. Benson goes to some length to draw a distinction between the views of someone like Hinkle and those of Westboro Baptist Church. "The Christian community has had to become more open-minded as to the naturalness of homosexual desire, and sympathetic to persons with such deep-seated attraction" (53). This more moderate view, it seems, accepts that the civil rights of individuals should not be violated, no matter what their sexual orientation. It simply argues, according to Benson, that living out one's homosexual inclinations is not the best way for men and women to flourish as human beings.

But just what did the rainbow numerals represent? Did they say, "We support same-sex marriage," or "we believe transsexuals should be free to use the restrooms of the sexual identity they are most comfortable with"? That seems like a stretch. Or did they say something like, "We welcome gays and lesbians to our team; we commit ourselves to treating them fairly and refusing to discriminate against them"? Why did Hinkle respond the way she did? Did she ask what the rainbow jerseys were meant to represent? Perhaps she didn't take the time to think through, or to clarify, what was being said by the jerseys. Perhaps she could have explained to the 700 Club audience why she was willing to wear the jersey, even though she was a Christian. That would have been truly courageous!

The fact of the matter is that we cannot avoid discomfort in today's world. The question is how we will respond. How should we respond? These essays have given us a place to start. First, we must reflect upon the desires, the feelings, the judgments within our minds and hearts as we find ourselves in uncomfortable situations. Are these reactions appropriate? Are there better ways to respond? Second, we should take the time to think carefully about the situations, the words, and the actions, of others. Rather than assuming we understand, rather than lashing out because they make us uncomfortable, we must learn to listen. Third, paying attention, both to ourselves and to others, is not easy. It will make us uncomfortable. It will sometimes be very painful. But it is only when we give up our selfishness, only when we share both joy and suffering with others that we will flourish as human beings. Fourth, I think these essays teach us that growing in character in the face of discomfort requires practice. It requires conscious effort.

Becoming self-aware, caring for others, becoming comfortable in a discomforting world are habits that can only become "second nature" by practice.

The best response to the world around us is not always the natural response. Being self-aware, caring for others, becoming comfortable in a discomforting world are habits that can only become "second nature" by practice. Finally, in a world in which many are seeking safety and comfort, we must find another way. Unlike the universities that create safe places where students can avoid disagreement and discomfort, we must somehow learn to create places where we can safely engage in dialogue, think opening and critically in search of the truth, respect one another when we differ, and treat all people justly. These are the elements of true character, as individuals, as communities, and as a nation.

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United States: North Dakota, Oregon, Iowa, Kansas, Wyoming, Minnesota, California, Nebraska, West Virginia. He and his family then settled down in Dubuque, IA, where he has lived for the last 27 years, although he will probably never feel quite at home in any one place. As he has moved around both geographically and intellectually, he has frequently felt uncomfortable. But he is thankful for the life of growth and change that has resulted. He has particularly learned to enjoy the rich and diverse cuisines of other cultures, discovering that "comfort food" comes in many delicious forms.

Thank you to Mike Moore for permission to use the illustration on p. 66.

Notes

[1] Notice the assumption that the words automatically cause harm, as if the hearer is entirely passive in the effect words will have. I am not sure this is true. Critical thinking skills can help protect one from ad hominem and false ideas. And we cannot always protect ourselves from physical threats.

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