

Free Speech is More Important than Bruised Feelings

The first time I felt threatened by someone else's free speech, I was a freshman in college. My college was plagued by a young man who would stand outside the library and use the word of God to belittle and harass students, especially young women.

Once every few months, this man would show up to call us adulterers, witches, sluts, and sinners while professing to represent a religious viewpoint that enriched the lives of many of my classmates.

When he turned to me I was wearing a skirt, a turtleneck shirt, and leggings that covered any exposed skin of my legs. He decided that even this relatively chaste outfit was reason enough to condemn me. Emotion welled up within me- fear, yes, but mostly a desire to fight this terrible man. I could see that my classmates, especially my gay and lesbian classmates, felt unsafe around him.

We wanted him off our campus, and so we protested. Theology students grabbed their Bibles and yelled counterpoints to his scripture. LGBT couples openly displayed their affections as a way to fight hate with love. And me? I checked out the first Harry Potter book and read the first chapter aloud to the crowd loud enough to drown him out. I lost my voice for a week.

An hour into the counter protest, the police were called. We begged them to remove the man from the premises. They looked apologetic but informed us that the sidewalk we were standing on was public property even though it ran through the campus. Therefore, this man was protected by free speech laws.

This Was "Hate Speech"

I believed in free speech in theory, but not for this guy. This guy was attacking students verbally on a place where they deserved to feel safe. His words made us feel angry, hurt, less than human. His words were damaging. How could they be protected?

For years, I campaigned for the college to privatize that sidewalk to protect our students from this monster. While I was campaigning, I spoke to a fellow economics student. He begged me to reverse my position.

I had no intention of giving this up. Time and time again, my friends and I had been called every nasty name in the book for the crime of being women in shorts in the Florida heat. I had no intention of backing down, until this student made a point that stuck with me.

What if one day, we needed to protest the administration?

My administration was fairly competent, but they had botched an on-campus sexual assault case the year before. What if they did it again? What if we lost the one place on campus where our free speech was more important than their feelings?

The Student Government charter was written in such a way as to give no power to the students to challenge the administration. There was no formal process by which we could change the institution from within. Without that sidewalk, we would be powerless if the tables should turn.

Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

The point of free speech is to rebel when those with more power are wrong. Abolitionists needed free speech. Suffragettes needed free speech. Civil rights activists needed free speech. While today we applaud all of those movements, in their day they were considered radical loonies that should be silenced. Sometimes the right thing is unpopular and the right people have less power. Sometimes, the good guys are the

minority.

That hate preacher was wrong to attack the character of strangers. I do not believe the tide will ever turn so thoroughly for me as to see him as anything more than mean-spirited and cruel. But the same laws that protected Martin Luther King protect him. The First Amendment will be rendered impotent when we pick and choose who it protects. As much as I despise that man, his free speech is more important than my feelings.

Your free speech is more important than my feelings. Your right to say whatever you want is more important than my right to feel safe. Your right to be awful is more important than my right to feel accepted. Your right to condemn my choices is as sacred as my right to make those choices.

It is not fun to prioritize the rights of strangers, whose words upset us over our comfort. It is, however, necessary. One day, you may need that same right to do good in this world. Therefore, we cannot suppress the right of others to challenge our beliefs. We can only work to advocate for ideas that are better than those that advocate for hate and destruction because, in the long run, good ideas win.

—

Tricia Beck-Peter is a graduate of Flagler College, with a B.A. in Economics and a minor in International Studies. She serves FEE as our Outreach Associate, and deals primarily with alumni relations and the Campus Ambassador program. When Ms. Beck-Peter is not in the office you can find her swing dancing, enjoying fine gins, or binge-watching *The Gilmore Girls* on Netflix.

This article was originally published on FEE.org. Read the [original article](#).