

Swarthmore Collection Speech at Sesquicentennial Reunion, 6/7/14

by Jed S. Rakoff

When one reaches a certain age - whether it be 150 years for the College, or a measly 70 for me - one feels free to speak from the heart. So let me say from my heart, however trite it may sound, I really, really, really love this College. And I know you do too.

What this College has given us is a sense of purpose. For many people, a college education is simply a tool for personal advancement. To some, it is an introduction to new and challenging ideas. But at Swarthmore, we were taught to value intellectual rigor only so as to be better fit to contribute to social progress.

This, of course, is the Quaker tradition, something to which I was largely oblivious when I attended Swarthmore 50 years ago. The College, after all, has been composed overwhelmingly of non-Quakers for many decades now, and those few who are members of the Society of Friends - and who have every reason to be proud of the glorious Quaker tradition, not just at Swarthmore but in the world - tend to keep their pride in their hearts but not wear it on their sleeves. When I was at Swarthmore, I thought the Quaker tradition largely consisted of the slogan we used to cheer at

football games - you remember football games, don't you? - The cheer went: "Kill, Quakers, Kill!"

But now I know better. To the brave Hicksite Quakers who, in the middle of the Civil War no less, founded this little College, their purpose was to help their children "mind the light," that is, to fan the spark of the divine buried deep in every individual so that it would burst forth in "lives that speak" through precept and example. And there has never been a time in the succeeding 150 years when that linkage of intellectual toughness and social consciousness has not permeated this College, - or failed to provide its alumni with a sense that, in ways small and large, in ways heralded and unheralded, we can fulfill that mission. You are the Quaker tradition, and, in a quiet and gentle way, you too should be proud.

I worry, though, that some of us, myself included, may sometimes depart from that tradition and wear our sense of moral rectitude too much on our sleeves: that we may, consciously or unconsciously, affect a kind of smug arrogance that we know what is true and right, even if others are blind. On a day when we are remembering a century-and-a-half of history, it is well to remember how many beliefs that were held by educated men and women just a few decades ago now strike us as misguided or even absurd. To give just one example, even in the early 1960s, when I

was at Swarthmore, people who thought of themselves as "enlightened" regarded homosexuality - not as a sin, to be sure - but as a psychological disorder that could and should be rectified by psychiatric treatment. This, indeed, was the official position of the American Psychiatric Association from 1952 until 1980. Is it not likely that some of our current "enlightened" beliefs will be someday regarded as examples of ignorance and closed-mindedness? If Swarthmore has taught us anything, it is that we must be ever watchful that our social consciousness is, indeed, the product of rigorous and continuing intellectual scrutiny, and not just passionate feelings or personal preferences.

This requires an open mind, a respect for free speech, and a tolerance for diversity of ideas. To me, one of the most telling examples of what Swarthmore stands for occurred toward the end of my sophomore year, when a student group called SPAC - I think a couple of its members are here today - invited Gus Hall to speak on campus. Gus Hall was the long-time Chairman of the Communist Party, U.S.A., a convicted felon, and an unswerving apologist for the atrocities of the Soviet Union. The "Cold War" was still in full force, and the College was subjected to intense outside criticism for permitting him to speak. After all, the argument went, even free speech has its limits, and to permit the

College's facilities to be used as a forum for vile rhetoric by a supporter of a tyrannic government that had murdered millions of innocent people and enslaved millions more was simply beyond the pale. But Swarthmore President Courtney Smith - a man of immense integrity and resolve - would have none of it. Though he unquestionably detested Hall, he made no self-serving statements to that effect, but, rather, met Hall at the train station, escorted him to the meeting on campus, and then, the next day, issued a short statement that read in pertinent part: "We are not afraid of freedom. We have faith in the validity and strength of our Constitution. We have faith that our students will not buy any wooden nickels."

In contrast to that heroic stance, let me describe the scene a few years later at Harvard, where I was then a law student. It was 1968 and student sentiment against the Vietnam War was at its peak. The University agreed to hold a forum in Harvard Yard, to which both pro-war and anti-war speakers were invited. But as soon as the first pro-war speaker began to speak, the anti-war students in the audience began to shout "murderer" and other nasty names, and this continued without interruption for many minutes, effectively preventing him from speaking or at least from being heard. Although I was personally against the Vietnam War, I was frankly appalled by all this; and what really struck me

was the fact that the numerous faculty members who were present, both on the dais and in the audience, made not the slightest attempt to quiet the crowd. It seemed obvious that, to them at least, free speech at Harvard was simply a slogan, and not something worth fighting for.

I offer these reminiscences because it seems to me that, even though it is often people with axes to grind who claim that free speech and diversity of thought are being curtailed at many colleges and universities today, there is some evidence that in some instances they are right. For example, all too many colleges and universities have codes of student conduct so stringent that they effectively discourage politically incorrect speech. Yet, while going so far as to inhibit even harmless "dirty jokes" on the ground that they might constitute sexual harassment, many colleges and universities do little, for example, to effectively combat binge drinking, which unquestionably contributes to campus sexual assault. The moral appears to be: let's ban bad words but do little to prevent bad deeds - exactly the opposite of what the Constitution contemplates.

More generally, too many colleges appear to be devoted to every kind of diversity except the one kind of diversity that is most central to their function: the diversity of ideas and opinions. Most recently, as many of you are aware, commencement

speakers at several prestigious institutions either withdrew their appearances or, in one case, were disinvited by the institution itself, in response to student protests. Although some commentators have severely chastised the students, I think the problem is more complicated, and more diffuse. The students who simply protested the invitations were fairly exercising their own right of free speech. On the other hand, the students who threatened to go further and actually disrupt the speakers if the speakers came and spoke showed their ignorance of the fundamental prerequisite to all free inquiry, namely, a respect for the right of others to be heard.

As for the speakers who withdrew, while one can well understand their reluctance to become embroiled in controversy, one might have hoped that they might have given more weight to the pedagogical benefits of their coming to speak in the face of protest and thereby reinforcing the right of free speech. After all, these invited speakers were all public figures, used to giving as good as they got in the war of ideas. In Harry Truman's famous words, "If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen."

Lastly, while it appears that, with the exception of Brandeis, the other institutions involved in these situations - Rutgers, Smith, and, yes, Haverford - did their best to try to

convince the speakers not to withdraw, one has to wonder whether they were reaping the harvest of their more general promotion of "correct" speech, at the cost of free speech.

Our own wonderful President, Rebecca Chopp, put her finger on this problem last summer when, after a series of incidents culminating in the withdrawal of Robert Zoellick as a commencement honoree, she issued a strong statement expressing her own disappointment in "our failure this spring to support, at each and every moment, both the expression and the protection of all forms of speech." That's exactly the point: the expression and the protection of all forms of speech. For without that protection - that is, without a decent respect for the opinions of others and a determination to allow them to be heard - our vaunted free speech is nothing but a sham.

There is no institution to which unfettered free speech is more important than Swarthmore College. And that is because the Quaker tradition - the transmuting of intellectual rigor into socially conscious behavior - only works when one is open to a wide range of ideas and then applies to all these ideas the same tough scrutiny.

Moreover, both the concept of free speech and the Quaker tradition are grounded in an optimistic faith in the ability of people of good will to find that spark of the divine in

themselves and build a better future.

No Swarthmore class is more aware of this than my own class, the Centennial Class of 1964, for we were students, and often active participants, when the Civil Rights Movement really took hold, when the War on Poverty began to be fought, when employment discrimination on grounds of gender was first banned, and much more. We had much cause for optimism, but also not a little cause for pessimism: the murder of civil rights workers in Mississippi, the assassination of President Kennedy, the growing involvement in Viet Nam, and, again, much more. We were in an almost constant state of ferment. Yet in those magical moments when, sitting on Parrish lawn in the quiet of evening, our world for just a moment stood still, we knew we would overcome.

At the end of every reunion Collection, it is customary to sing the Swarthmore alma mater song, and, even though it is a rather insipid song, we will do so in a moment. But for my class, and perhaps for yours as well, the song that really expressed what we took from Swarthmore was the civil rights anthem, We Shall Overcome. So, with the help of my classmates Peggy Colvin Tropp and Sue Slade, who will lead the singing, and Mike Meeropol, who will accompany us, I would ask all of you to stand, join hands, and join in singing We Shall Overcome.
