

Freedom of Speech...

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Freedom of speech... is a valuable right to students and people of any age. It is an intrinsic part of being American. Without fear of oppression or retaliation we can express our mind audibly, visually, and on paper. We are not required to conform to Authority's one and only version of what's right. So, "Why would we want limits on something that seems like such a great thing?" Idealistically we would stick to our principles. We would say, "Never and in no way should that right be diluted."

Yet through living in the real world of abrasive discrimination, we are taken aback by the other edge of the free-speech sword. It is a weapon. A weapon that can undermine a person's race, religion, or gender and make them feel mentally and physically unsafe.

The notorious example is Kansas's Reverend Fred Phelps whose hate group is founded on an anti-homosexual theology. He pickets, faxes, emails, and pukes his blasphemous vulgarity that I cannot even begin to repeat here. Almost all religious groups and individuals oppose his lunatic propaganda, yet there he is, travelling across the nation with his followers, allowed to picket any street corner, theatrical performance and civil rights march. He dishonors fallen soldiers and homosexuals by cursing them to damnation at their funerals, and gets media attention. He is a plague to these families and to the community. I have never witnessed him in person, but even through a screen he makes me feel extremely uncomfortable. He exemplifies the power of words. It makes me consider their capacity for good or for evil.

Unfortunately, turning off the tv does not make these things go away. An occurrence that hit close to home for me this year was when I entered a school elevator and discovered its walls and ceiling had been marked up with ink and carvings. Graffiti is vandalism, it is tangible crime, but it was not what bothered me. The doors closed behind me. The claustrophobia and descending motion were not what made my stomach jerk. Bold and thick, the arms of a swastika stretched across the paneling. It was as if they were going to reach out and engulf my mind and

constrict my soul. I remembered learning about the 'sacrifice by fire' from the fourth grade onward; we saw images of mass genocide; we read about humanity's darkest hour in history. For a few moments, I was trapped alone with the terror of that symbol. Someone, here in my public high school in our free-American society in the 21st century, had shouted a speech without a single word. They had also added to it, incase their message was not clear enough, scrawling "Heil Hitler," "Jews=Gay," and "Kill the Jews".

The traversing of one floor never felt so long. I remember the sound of that ding I was so grateful to hear, as the doors slid open and allowed my escape. It was my escape with new eyes into the world where people desired to hold the power of fear, and anger, and oppression over others.

Wherever the law does or doesn't apply, it seems inherently to the affected individuals that there must be some line dividing personal expression from interpersonal attack. It gives me a sick feeling when that moral value is flagrantly violated. The lashing tongues of malicious words would argue that they have the freedom to disregard another's morals. They trumpet, "Do you like censorship? Do you want to live in a dictatorship? Do you hate democracy!?" I respond, "No, of course not." I just don't know if there is anything that can be done to combat hateful free speech except to inundate the world with more free speech that promotes kindness.

This is our avenue of protest, not to retaliate with more cruelty against those who show public animosity, but to persuade the world to pay these insensitive extremists no mind. We must try to enlighten ignorant prejudice, but we cannot force them to take back their offensive words. And when they do not, when they continue to spew noxious epithets, we must stay strong and forever use our right to disagree with their opinions. We can take punitive action only when they reach for sticks and stones, while in defiance, inside we know the pain of their wrathful words.