
Some Thoughts on the Current Tumult

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‘There is a time to keep silence, and a time to speak.’ (Ecclesiastes 3.7)

Duke University has spent the last week naming its silences. It began with strongly-denied allegations of a horrifying nature about events at an off-campus party. We are an institution that seeks the truth, in a culture that cherishes due process, and our President has consistently reminded us to be patient and withhold judgement until the facts are forensically established. Speculation about this disputed case has nonetheless brought to attention a host of other stories that are undisputed, but have hitherto remained in the shadows, and together explain why these allegations have catalyzed such anger. These portray a disturbingly extensive experience of sexual violence, of abiding racism, of crimes rarely reported and perpetrators seldom named, confronted, or convicted, of lives deeply scarred, of hurt and pain long suppressed. The activists among us shout loudly about reckless drinking, the reputation of particular sports teams, the sense of entitlement, the need to reassess what it means to be a man, and the urgency of rules and penalties and enforcement; meanwhile the skeptics amongst us mutter darkly about human nature, mob spirit, and personal responsibility.

Surely this is not the experience or lifestyle of all or even most students? Surely this is not just a Duke issue? Surely we are talking about an issue for our culture as a whole, and not just our universities? Maybe so. But this has not been the week to fall back on such defenses. It has been the week for naming our silences.

I have only three things to add to the cacophony of opinion. The first concerns the character of the university. It sometimes seems a university has no law – that it is an open playing field for everyone to use – or abuse – once they have the privilege of membership. I disagree. The university does have a ‘law’, and that law is seldom explicitly articulated, because it is assumed everyone knows it. But recent events suggest there may be good reason to break silence and state it simply. The law goes something like this.

Learning and discovery require imagination, and that imagination is formed by disciplines of loving attention to detail, rigorous but generous dialog with a wide range of voices, deep but undaunted respect for traditions and those that uphold them, earnest searching for goodness, truth and beauty, and constant vigilance in regard to the social significance and embodiment of knowledge. Such disciplines train our desire.

The second thing I have to say is that this ‘law’ isn’t just about the classroom. It’s about every habit and practice of campus life together – for learning and discovery lie in every aspect of college life, even emerging from moments of regret and shame. The task of a university is to help its members so to internalize the law that they come to take it for granted – that it becomes their desire. But the subculture of reckless ‘entitlement’, sexual acquisitiveness and aggressive arrogance goes against every aspect of this law. It commodifies and consumes the bodies of others, with no generosity, no patience, no searching for truth or beauty, and no regard to its social significance. It undermines the university because it corrupts the imagination on which the whole university rests. It breaks the university’s law. It debases desire.

And the third thing I want to say is about sex. If I were a Duke undergraduate today the thing I would be most confused about would be intimate relationships. Student culture is often described as ‘work hard, play hard’. But who says in what sense a personal relationship is part of the ‘play’? I’d like to suggest that what I’m calling the ‘law’ of the university – loving attention, generous dialogue, deep respect, beauty, and social benefit – may have something to offer to the conduct of visceral, intimate, and physical relationships – the conventional realm of desire.

The last week has exposed the reality that sexual practices are an area where some male students are accustomed to manipulating, exploiting and terrorizing women all the time – and that this has been accepted by many as a given. The ‘law’ of the university, as I have described it, might mean that sexual relationships,

currently understood by many to be about not just desire but also learning and discovery, may, further, fulfill a 'law' of loving attention, generous dialogue, deep respect, a search for goodness and truth, and a regard to the wider social affects of one's actions. Thus loyalty to the university might mean that even sex becomes part of a more significant project – the education of desire.

For Christians, sexuality is (in large part) about learning to be desired by God. Sexual encounter is a gift when it becomes a context in which we learn how much God desires us, where we have the privilege and great responsibility of showing the beloved how much God desires them. The lifting of the veil of sexual violence in the last week may provoke each of us to ask ourselves, what do we desire? How are we allowing our desiring to be educated? Why are our desires twisted? And for Christians, What practices can we perform that demonstrate and display for one another God's infinite desire for each one of us? How would we have to change so that our encounters revealed this extraordinary desire to others?

This is what Christians strive for. But in the last week, Christians have once again been humbled by being part of a university. Many members of this university have named some of our most uncomfortable silences. And many more have responded with an extraordinary outbreak of loving attention, generous dialogue, deep respect, a quest for goodness, and an acute regard to the wider social affects of their actions. Duke has, tentatively, been articulating more of what it means for a university to have a 'law'. It could take this opportunity to help other universities begin to name their own silences. This week has not, fundamentally, been about the disputed facts of an ugly evening. It has been about renewing all who care about Duke in their loyalty to the fundamental law of the university: and that law is about the education of desire.