

Celebration of the Graduates of the John-F.-Kennedy Institute for North American Studies of Freie Universität Berlin

November 28, 2015

Speech by the Chair of the Institute Council, Prof. Irwin Collier, Ph.D.

Dear Graduates, Parents and Friends, Colleagues, Staff and Students of the JFK-Institute and Freie Universität, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am taking the opportunity to speak directly to our graduates, knowing full-well that the rest of those present here will monitor this communication much as the NSA filters the constant flow of communications across the world. Let me just assure the non-graduates here today that you are most welcome to listen in.

Dear graduates, I am sure you can't remember for yourselves (nature knows how to filter our early childhood memories for us) you have no doubt witnessed the moment for younger siblings or cousins or nieces and nephews when the collective of loving and doting parents, aunts and uncles, grandparents, neighbors and friends express in words their collective relief when the small-fry before them finally succeeds in clearing that first hurdle in the race of social life with a heart-felt, esteem-building cheer: *Gut gemacht! Das hast Du aber fein gemacht!* I am quoting from the bilingual potty training used decades ago in the family in which I was cast in the father role of rearing a boy and girl (in that order). But you know what I mean, the little creature can talk and walk, has displayed a will of its own but yet is still a player not-yet-ready-for-prime-time. And that moment of control and mastery of bladder & bowel calls for cries from the highest mountain tops. The feedback to the parent when seeing a grin from ear to ear of that child hearing those words, "You're a such big [insert parental gender designation here]", helps to cement the lifetime bond between parent and child.

So dear graduates as elected representative of all the faculty and staff of the John-F.-Kennedy Institute of North American Studies of Freie Universität Berlin on this day, Saturday November 28, 2015, let me express our heart-felt cheer to you. Yes...*Gut gemacht! Das habt Ihr aber fein gemacht!* Of course, as befitting the solemnity of the occasion you will be given a proper handshake and another piece of paper (once made of sheepskin) and a photo will be taken to document this stage in your mastery and control of mind and expression. Congratulations to our new Bachelors and Masters of Arts, welcome into the community of scholars new Doctors of Philosophy!

What you all share in common is that you have entered the ranks of the distinguished alumni of this 52 year old Institute, one that has managed to maintain its intellectual "Vim and Vigor" in the performance of its educational and research missions. An alumni organization is there to help you stay in touch with each other, to facilitate face-time, not the App, I mean actual face-to-face time. The alumni organization is there to provide a framework to support those who come after you. This I remind you this celebration is a private-public partnership of Alumni and staff and current students. Do join, participate and contribute. Keep the Institute a special place not just in your hearts and memories but here and in the future.

For old-times-sake I'd like to provide you, the graduates, and your families and friends (still listening in) with a JFK-Institute moment: An observation of a trend observed on the other side of the North Atlantic; I'll comment briefly on what it is we think we are observing; and I'll wait to hear your reaction, but that part of the seminar can wait for the reception outside this hall arranged by the alumni after we end our ceremony.

The topic I have chosen is current, deals with higher education and touches upon the realization of the ideals captured in the triad from the seal of this Freie Universität: Truth, Justice, Liberty.

Your time at the JFK-Institute coincides with an historical time when the fault-lines of "civilizations" appear to shift, front-lines of armed conflict have become increasingly ambiguous, populations are on the run, and it has become increasingly clear modern information technologies enable both barbarians and civilized peoples alike to implement reigns of terror from land, sea and sky—all these have posed new challenges to stability, much less genuine peace. As we have most recently seen, killing innocent infidels in the name of God is an ugly reality, still. Persecuting others for their sexual identities in the name of God too. And the assassination of abortion service providers in the name of the protection of life continues. We live in an era where understanding what others mean when they speak to us and among themselves and what intentions lie behind their actions is critical for social stability at home and mutual security in the global context.

But identifying the importance of a multicultural or social awareness is a bit of a no-brainer. The point is to achieve such awareness in the practice of university life without unnecessary sacrifice to what we hold to be "self-evident truths" as expressed in the Declaration of Independence of 1776.

I read to you now excerpts from a letter written to the Columbia University student newspaper, The Columbia Spectator, by the advocacy group Multicultural Affairs Advisory Board on Literature from April 30 of this year:

"...a student shared [the following] experience with an audience of instructors and fellow students. This experience, she said, came to define her relationship to her Lit Hum class and to Core material in general.

During the week spent on Ovid's "Metamorphoses," the class was instructed to read the myths of Persephone and Daphne, both of which include vivid depictions of rape and sexual assault. As a survivor of sexual assault, the student described being triggered while reading such detailed accounts of rape throughout the work. However, the student said her professor focused on the beauty of the language and the splendor of the imagery when lecturing on the text. As a result, the student completely disengaged from the class discussion as a means of self-preservation. She did not feel safe in the class. When she approached her professor after class, the student said she was essentially dismissed, and her concerns were ignored.

Ovid's "Metamorphoses" is a fixture of Lit Hum, but like so many texts in the Western canon, it contains triggering and offensive material that marginalizes

student identities in the classroom. These texts, wrought with histories and narratives of exclusion and oppression, can be difficult to read and discuss as a survivor, a person of color, or a student from a low-income background.”

The article goes on:

“Students need to feel safe in the classroom, and that requires a learning environment that recognizes the multiplicity of their identities. The MAAB has been meeting with administration and faculty in the Center for the Core Curriculum to determine how to create such a space. The Board has recommended three measures: First, we proposed that the center issue a letter to faculty about potential trigger warnings and suggestions for how to support triggered students. Next, we noted that there should be a mechanism for students to communicate their concerns to professors anonymously, as well as a mediation mechanism for students who have identity-based disagreements with professors. Finally, the center should create a training program for all professors, including faculty and graduate instructors, which will enable them to constructively facilitate conversations that embrace all identities, share best practices, and think critically about how the Core Curriculum is framed for their students”

By itself these suggestions might have remained obscurely buried under the accumulation of daily information layers that settle to the bottom of the internet sea. But instead the piece drew great comment and discussion, a fact that makes it interesting and worthy of our attention.

Let us presume that indeed as claimed the professor “dismissed” the student in the manner of Col. Jessup, Jack Nicholson’s character in the movie *A Few Good Men*: “You can’t handle the truth.” Not good, prof! To sneak in an Obama quote made in other contexts: “That’s not who we are.”

What troubles me and many who have commented on the Columbia University discussion is the underlying presumption that the classroom should or even could be used to address the needs of a victim of an abominable crime. My first comment is that you don’t have to be the proverbial weatherman to know which way the wind blows—the slightest awareness of the range of human suffering would lead one to the conclusion that a victim of sexual assault unable to read Ovid without incapacitating reaction needs a professional therapist. I remind us all that providing proper therapy is not in the skill set of the instructor. Further the notion of your alma mater re-educating the awareness-impaired university instructor is a step down a road to a Cultural Revolution. Ask the Chinese people, what could possibly go wrong with the state ordaining re-education? The demand for (this really is not a joke, not even an exaggeration) “Trigger warnings” in the syllabi of a course can only appeal to university lawyers anticipating possible legal action: the racism depicted in *Huckleberry Finn* might trigger the trauma of oppression in a reader. Trigger warning turns a required reading into an optional reading...and I don’t have to tell anyone here how seriously “optional reading” items are studied then in the classroom.

Jerry Coyne wrote the following in the New Republic (May 14, 2015)

The pathway of such trigger warnings—not just for sexual assault but for violence, bigotry, and racism—will eventually lead to every work of literature being labeled as potentially offensive. There goes the Bible, there goes Dante, there goes Huck Finn (loaded with racism), there goes all the old literature written before we realized that minorities, women, and gays weren't second-class people. And as for violence and hatred, well, they're everywhere, for they're just as much parts of literature as parts of life. Crime and Punishment? Trigger warning: brutal violence against an old woman. The Great Gatsby? Trigger warning: violence against women (remember when Tom Buchanan broke Mrs. Wilson's nose?). The Inferno? Trigger warning: graphic violence, sodomy, and torture. Dubliners? Trigger warning: pedophilia.

Like the American writer Elbert Hubbard said "Life is just one damn thing after another." You all will be confronted with claims that offend your sense of good taste and go over the top even to threaten the legitimacy of the foundations of your identity and interests. The response of seeking the "Safe Space" where only the "Good" will be heard and the "Bad and Ugly" are excluded has led to the following incident at my own alma mater, Yale University, last month.

In anticipation of what could go wrong on Halloween night, thirteen administrators (that's right, I said 13) in the Yale administration sent out an advisory email encouraging students to not wear costumes that other students might find offensive.

On the one, hand this seems like a harmless reminder that yes, Virginia, a Hiawatha costume for Halloween will be looked at differently by a member of the North American indigenous populations than your prep-school roommates.

On the other hand, how many emails should the conscientious administrator of the alma mater send out reminding fellow citizens with the right to vote, marry, drive a motor vehicle and own a gun (the last item in need of checking, it's been a long-time and I am sure I didn't know decades ago the fine print regulating my right to bear arms).

Getting back to the story, a Yale professor of early childhood education, Erika Christakis, took to her email and reflected "out loud" whether the university really should be in the business of treating their grown students as though they really needed help in social map-reading? (Though now that I think of it, what has GPS done to the ancient art of orientation in 2 dimensional space by means of a printed map...maybe we will all have to rely on e-nagging).

I wonder, and I am not trying to be provocative: Is there no room anymore for a child or young person to be a little bit obnoxious... a little bit inappropriate or provocative or, yes, offensive? American universities were once a safe space not only for maturation but also for a certain regressive, or even transgressive, experience; increasingly, it seems, they have become places of censure and prohibition. And the censure and prohibition come from above, not from yourselves! Are we all okay with this transfer of power? Have we lost faith in young people's capacity—in your capacity - to exercise self-censure, through

social norming, and also in your capacity to ignore or reject things that trouble you?

This second email provoked a letter signed by hundreds of students and protests calling for the resignation of Professor Erika Christakis and her husband, the Master of Silliman College, Professor of Sociology (and MD and MPH) Nicholas Christakis.

Mr. Professor Christakis (here the “German” *Mr.* Professor turns out to be useful) took to the yard to engage in dialogue with the student critics of his wife and a video of that exchange is easy (now) to find on YouTube. For my colleagues here: Trigger Warning: Students acting badly and fiendishly disrespectful.

“In your position as master,” one student says, “it is your job to create a place of comfort and home for the students who live in Silliman. You have not done that. By sending out that email, that goes against your position as master. Do you understand that?!”

“No,” he said, “I don’t agree with that.”

The student explodes, “Then why the fuck did you accept the position?! Who the fuck hired you?! You should step down! If that is what you think about being a master you should step down! It is not about creating an intellectual space! It is not! Do you understand that? It’s about creating a home here. You are not doing that!”

In the open letter to Professor Erika Christakis signed by the hundreds of Yalies it was written:

Your email equates old traditions of using harmful stereotypes and tropes to further degrade marginalized people, to preschoolers playing make believe,... This both trivializes the harm done by these tropes. We are not asking to be coddled..The real coddling is telling the privileged majority on campus that they do not have to engage with the brutal pasts that are a part of the costumes they seek to wear and infantilizes the student body to which the request was made.”

For excellent reporting on this and other matters relating to American academic politics, I refer you to the set of excellent articles on this affair and related matters by the journalist Conor Friedersdorf in *The Atlantic*.

Your time today is precious so that I will simply truncate these two reports from the elite universities hoping you will reflect on the notions of Trigger Warnings and Safe Spaces in the context of your own experience here at JFK-I. Would it have been a better educational experience for you had we been in the vanguard of Triggerwarners or Safe-Space architects. In my personal opinion the failing is much more likely to be found in not at least having simulated the rough and tumble and genuine ugliness. We probably need to have gotten into your faces, I mean in a respectful sparring-partner sort of way, more often.

The reason I can celebrate with you today, is that I know the Kennedy Institute in its current constitution would not survive an accreditation as a “Safe Place” should such self-proclaimed multicultural champions ever become entrenched in the administrative bureaucracy that decades of painful experience in the US and Germany have taught me would enforce the letter of any regulation.

Dear graduates, my parting word of advice to you is to seek your safety in your family and friends. But be trigger-happy seekers of truth, justice and liberty in a world of agenda-driven bearers of information (“news” is so 20th century!). But also take with you a humility from knowing that far smarter and wiser people than yourselves have “known” or believed genuinely “crazy-shit”—that is why we have had you read wing-nuts and have served you fruit-cake (seasonal reminder: “fruitcake” is used here in the sense of a Thanksgiving staple consisting of a significantly heavier portion of nuts than fruit) along with the wholesome fare (without trigger warnings) from the “canon” of American Studies. Such humility makes it easier to recognize one’s own fallibility and move on. Besides humility there is considerable virtue in the practice of manners. The point is to facilitate meaningful discourse across paradigmatic and cultural divides, much as practicing civil lawyers are there to get to the point of yes in settling a deal between conflicting interests. As long as that discourse continues, you might learn something new or learn to see something differently and you might even change the mind of that poor, less-informed party on the other side of the divide.

You have been a part of the JFK-Institute during the course of your studies. Now we are a part of you. We are happy to have shared the time and space for you where we together thought in so many different ways about so many aspects of Canada and the United States. Your fondness for these past years with us will grow, just as your appreciation of the role played in your life by your parents that started even before hearing your first “*Gut gemacht*”. In this sense, “*Weitermachen*” and Godspeed to you all.