

Second Place - High School

Home of the Free, Land of the Grave: An Elegy for Expression

It is April 15, 2022. Herein lies the remains.

Let us convene to pay this tribute to her body and memory, of the beautiful cacophony in which she triumphed; while we believed in a resurrection two hundred and thirty-one years ago, pause this ugly dream and return it to the silky foundations of hope on which we rest. We will keep it tucked in tightly, preparing for the time when everyone may hear us awaken and roar with discontent. Thus we promise to interrupt with the discordant sounds of democracy in Her name whenever possible, so a legacy may endure and thereby eclipse the danger of unison.

We will now hear an excerpt from one of her descendants commemorating obstacles and sorrows overcome. Please rise, and join us in proceeding with the service.

Is the mark of a pessimist the inability to speak change into existence?

Is it cynical, or cliché, or cavalier to suggest that some things are irreversibly engraved in stone? By virtue of birth, I have been excluded from dreaming big. Do I have to lower my expectations?

It is never cynical to mourn the absence of a peaceful sleep.

Mothers of screaming infants, daughters of loud snorers, and aunts of animated little cousins all know what it feels like to be disrupted from restoration. Checking an artificially blinding iPhone screen at 2:00am to realize sleep only lasted for two hours. Realizing that there is no respite from a living human. *Ding!* “Sunday Recap: 10 different books your child should never be allowed to read. How a second-grade teacher got fired for reading a book about butts. Texas school district apologizes for telling fourth graders story about transgender boy.” If the glare from the phone wasn’t jarring enough, a quick skim of some headlines will get you.

I grew up loving books. The school and public libraries were my most frequented spots, and Sustained Silent Reading periods always sparked joy. In time, the Magic Tree Houses and Nancy Drews of the literary world planted seeds of curiosity within my growing brain, and I consistently maxed out the number of books we were permitted to borrow. Geronimo Stilton and Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler alike transported me to a distant reality where conversation was endless and learning was forever. In the constant pursuit of language, I aspired to become a writer myself. So, in second grade, I wrote a mystery adventure series involving my classmates, printed it (illustrations, inscriptions, and all) and my teacher let me read it to the class one day. It was the second grade equivalent of getting published.

What if those safe havens had transformed into political warzones, governed by conniving adults who forgot I was just curious about stories?

To my ten-year old-delight, a bookstore was in close proximity to my new house. But it was receiving significant backlash for promoting stories of Black and queer people, and two schools with ongoing challenges about books canceled their book fairs hosted by the local store. *Are*

people afraid of their neighbors? I questioned why tales of real people, similar to friends I saw every day at school, were under fire. When we took away *George* and *I Am Jazz*, we took away the opportunity to build cultural intelligence and friendships among students. We stopped implying to students that their stories are worth telling.

Parental “choice” has been commonly cited as a defense for banning books that contain “mature content,” otherwise known as the experiences of underrepresented groups. While parents maintain all control of what is expressed within their home, the First Amendment protects schools’ ability to familiarize students with the world around them. Weaponizing children’s education in the name of a larger political agenda has proven explicitly unconstitutional and detrimental to classrooms. *Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District v. Pico* (1982) asserted that school officials may not remove books from a school library on “narrowly partisan or political” grounds, primarily because it would constitute an “official suppression of ideas” as backed by the First Amendment. With support from the highest judicial stage in America, it’s clear that removal of books *cannot* solely intend to limit the spread of political ideas. Yet, forty years later, hundreds of challenges arise each year at the state and national levels, unabridged by Constitutional processes or standards of law. Have we forgotten the American ideals which we are compelled to teach?

Books like *Heather Has Two Mommies* are neither violent, nor explicit, nor developmentally inappropriate. A quick glance at the 2020 Top 10 Most Banned Books list shows zero traces of brutality, except the cruelty that Black and queer stories are being erased from our classrooms.¹ Public libraries are objective storehouses of information — by principle, they do not dictate what

¹ <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10>

kinds of literature patrons have access to. In the words of one Wisconsin librarian, Jake Wallace Wyrzykowski, “We do not care if our patrons are Christian, Mennonite, Atheists, LGBTQ+, or Straight. It is our duty to keep opinions and judgment out of the library. All we care about is helping patrons find what they are looking for.” Certain books may necessitate context prior to reading, but should never be outright banned.

Democracy incorporates the perspectives of all people. It is not required to exclusively feature them and take their statements as Gospel. But to embody the principles the United States was founded upon, schools, as the primary institution for education, must take it upon themselves to foster free speech in children. Education does not equal indoctrination. Teaching children that gay and transgender people exist and talking about the history of racism in America *encourages* free expression rather than stifling it — to suggest that only certain perspectives are tolerated in a classroom is exactly what qualifies as indoctrination. Children are smarter than we often realize; from *Tinker v. Des Moines (1969)* to *Mahanoy Area School District v. B.L. (2021)*, students are at the heart of free speech. Providing a complete spectrum of sources and stories, while understanding the context and potential flaws in each, will genuinely permit a well-educated class of students.

Continuing the concept of accessing information, free expression is characterized by the right to share information coupled with the right of others to receive it. It encourages diversity of perspective, a concept integral to democracy. In no setting is free expression absolute; we have seen plenty of restrictions online, most notably with former President Trump’s permanent Twitter ban in 2021. While it seems as though sites like Facebook and Twitter have replaced traditional public forums, they are ultimately private businesses. Thus, current legal precedent

definitively states that social media users are not entitled to First Amendment rights on private social media platforms.

Such platforms are infested with disinformation — especially during a pandemic. While it is easier to share facts, it is also easier to spread inaccuracies; the percentage of people saying they had a great deal of trust in the media dropped from 53% in 1997 to 32% in 2016². These developments challenge free speech when new algorithms inadvertently restrict or ban journalists. In 2017, YouTube removed content recording the Syrian civil war³. On an international scale, these censorship processes often ignore the critical roles U.S.-based journalists play in countries where the right to share certain information is unprotected. Thus, we must seek to invest in accurate technologies that support freedom globally.

Conversely, when left unaddressed, hate speech can escalate into violence where parties attack others and thereby limit free expression. Additionally, victims are less likely to speak out in the future for fear of attack. Disagreement without violence is entirely possible, and in fact contributes to a more successful democracy. Citizens should focus on civil discussions and listening to others' viewpoints, and upholding the central tenet of free expression: discussion without retaliation or censorship.

This piece is described as an elegy towards the present state of free speech in America. But it does not suggest that sadness must be idle. Holding space for emotions allows effective communication — humans are not artificially intelligent robots, but rather sentient beings

² Gallup Poll, “Americans’ Trust in Mass Media Sinks to New Low.” 14 Sept. 2016.

³ Kelley, Jason, and Jillian C. York. 30 Dec. 2017.

<https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2017/12/seven-times-2017-journalists-were-censored>

who hold real emotions and experiences. Our perspectives must be purposes for action, for the defense of free speech and democracy, to create a hospitable environment for *all* thoughtful opinions. In any event, however, this environment cannot tolerate hostility or hate. When ideas are civilly exchanged and implemented, everyone succeeds. The burden falls on each of us to follow through.

Let us conclude the service with a few parting words.

Despite the trials and tribulations associated with such an extended and public presence, her undying passion is paralleled by many citizens today. She is survived by a legion of sixteen year olds, one of them present as composer, with scribbled-out books and microphones in their hands. They tightly grip these artifacts akin to stuffed animals, symbolizing what they fight for. In lieu of flowers, please direct your attention to her descendants.

*Forever lives Democracy —
may her soul be laid to resurrect.*