

DIVERSITY AND IDENTITY *

Keynote Address by Henry H. Bauer,
49th Annual Meeting of the American Conference of Academic Deans,
Seattle (WA), January 1993

I appreciate this very much. Among the things that former deans miss — among the *very few* things we miss — is easy access to captive audiences. On the other hand, active deans may have captive audiences, but they rarely feel free to speak their minds; usually they just say what everyone expects deans to say. It's been suggested that the closest thing to real freedom of speech is enjoyed by tenured full professors approaching retirement. Former deans, too, can feel that sort of freedom: no longer hampered by administrative policies or administrative loyalties or by wondering how the student newspaper might garble what was said.

When I stopped being dean, I made an excellent resolution: not to criticize publicly any administrative actions at my university. That resolution held good for half-a-dozen years; but it crumbled in the fall of 1991, when racism and sexism were made institutional policy. We were told to label by race and gender prospective members of search committees so that committees of the right "diversity" would be selected.

I'm going to argue that much of what's being said about "diversity" is sadly misguided. One reason that people get away with that is because they're allowed to talk in high-falutin abstraction and generalization. I want rather to talk about actual experiences of actual people.

I owe this opportunity to my identity as Josef Martin, author of a dean's memoirs. But — like every other human being — I've got more than one identity. I'm an Austrian, by birth. By education, I'm an Australian. By choice — as well as great good fortune — I'm a citizen of the United States. I'm also a chemist, and I'm a professor. I've been a competitive chess-player. I'm a True Believer in the existence of the Loch Ness monsters. And so on.

Each of those identities tells you something about me; none of them tells you *all* the *significant* things about me. That I'm a professor tells you that I'm inclined to talk rather than to act; yet at times I've been a man of action. My belief in the Loch Ness monsters shows me to be downright peculiar; yet in many ways I'm conventional, even stodgy. That I'm a chemist tells you that I recognize the existence of a real world about which we can gain true knowledge. But that I'm a chemist doesn't tell you whether or not I believe in God.

Such identities characterize a class or group. They're stereotypes as well as identities. Applied to human beings, stereotypes are both right and wrong. They're valid to the extent that every member of an identifiable group does indeed have the characteristic that defined the group in the first place. But stereotypes are usually also *invalid*, when *other* attributes — correlated only statistically — are assumed *inevitably* to go along with the defining characteristic. Above all, though, stereotypes are wrong when applied to individuals because, like me, no one has just one groupie identity, everyone has a lot of them.

We hear incessantly about "the woman's viewpoint" or "what Afro-Americans want" or what's right for "Native Americans." But there *is* no opinion or viewpoint that's shared by all the people who happen to be female by contrast to all the people who happen not to be female. There *is* no thing that *all* Afro-Americans want or deserve, by contrast with those people who are *not* Afro-Americans. Every human being, be it a woman or a member of a protected minority, or a member of an *un*protected minority or of a so-called majority, is very much more than just a member of that one group; and it's demeaning, dehumanizing, simply wrong to deal with anyone, not as *who* they are but as what one of their stereotypes happens to be.

The "diversity" movement does explicitly treat people in terms of one of their stereotypes. Members of underrepresented groups must be brought in, it's said, because of the special viewpoints they allegedly hold, inevitably and uniformly, by group-definition.

The civil-rights revolution that culminated in the 1960s was phenomenally successful in a phenomenally short space of time in a phenomenally peaceable fashion. No one's been able to tell me of anything like that in any other country or era, where the morally right thing was done, where society opened its doors to previously excluded people, so quickly, so completely, with so little violence. Surely that was because the aims of the movement were so clearly moral and the tactics of the revolutionaries so non-violent. One couldn't gainsay what Martin Luther King said; one could hardly fail to admire his willingness to accept the consequences of practicing non-violent civil disobedience.

American society was *shamed* into doing the right thing. That right thing, of course, was to treat all people as "created equal ... endowed... with certain unalienable rights." What's sauce for the goose, in other words, has to be sauce for the gander too.

But that's not what those who press for diversity and multiculturalism want; they're determined that all individuals shall *not* be treated equally. We're acting out the satires of George Orwell — *Animal Farm*, and *1984*, the nightmares of Franz Kafka, the simplistic scenarios of Ayn Rand, especially *Atlas Shrugged*. On every pamphlet put out by my university it says, "Virginia Tech does not discriminate ... on the basis of race, sex, handicap" etc. That's a lie.

We *do* treat women differently from men, and blacks differently from everyone else. Segregation by race used to be bad, but now it's supposed to be good. My university has separate minority study-halls and recreational centers, and separate housing is just around the corner. It was wrong in the past to fill positions by word of mouth, without open advertising, and to restrict appointments by race or gender; nowadays our administration makes available positions to be filled on the condition that only a woman or a black be appointed, and that's not stated openly in the advertisement, it's made known by word of mouth only.

Let's be quite clear about it. The claim is made that women, blacks, Native Americans, and all people of any color know significant things or understand deeply important matters or feel emotions or have viewpoints that I, as a white male, do not or cannot.

That's utter nonsense. Some things are common to every human being, and those are truly the most important: wanting to live; wanting to be secure; wanting to belong; wanting to know who we are. Other things are contingent, different for different people, matters of happenstance. *Various* are the particular dangers that threaten our various individual lives; *disparate* are the things that make different individuals feel insecure; *many* are the specific barriers that stop people from feeling that they belong; *innumerable* are the ideologies and individual neuroses that can block a sense of personal identity. Our lives may be threatened in war, or by abusive parents, or by criminals; we feel insecure for many and much more subtle reasons than those; we may feel left out through being black in a white society, or Jewish in a Christian society; or white in a black community; or for countless other reasons — being too small to succeed at basketball or football, say; or having siblings who seem able to do everything better. Yet under those contingent skins, all human beings are the same: if pricked, we all bleed, no matter what caused the wound; when excluded, we all hurt, irrespective of the basis for the exclusion.

"Nothing human is alien to me," said Terentius the Roman two thousand years ago; and the literature of the world illustrates that insight. As a writer describes *particular*, contingent experiences authentically, he also speaks universally; for the authenticity enables us to *empathize*. Drawing on our own experiences, superficially different but fundamentally similar, we can translate into our own personal idioms what other human beings experience. What Terentius thought and felt is not alien to us, here and now.

If the claims of the diversifiers — the dividers-by-groups, the stereotypers — were true, if I were barred by my white maleness from empathy with blacks or women, how then could it happen that the two books that have, in the last couple of years, most moved me, were written the one by a woman and the other by a black man?

Over the years, I've occasionally read books I thought so good that I bought several copies to distribute among family and friends. Most recently, I did that with Jill Ker Conway's *The Road from Coorain* and Shelby Steele's *The Content of Our Character*.

Jill Ker, an Australian-born girl, grew up in the outback; I, a refugee to Australia out of Europe, was raised largely in cities. But we both became intellectuals under the same unfriendly, intellectually primitive, even anti-intellectual conditions; so that we both felt impelled to leave our families and the country in which we'd lived the couple of decades of our youth. Our striving toward individual identity was akin. I'd come to read Conway's book quite naturally, through seeing it mentioned in the University of Sydney's magazine; but I came to read Shelby Steele for altogether the wrong reasons.

I've already mentioned breaking my resolution not to criticize happenings at my university. When I did make an open protest against political correctness, it led to public interviews and debates. I needed to survey what others were saying about these things. Important sources for me, obviously, were the dissidents among the to-be-protected groups: women like Midge Decter, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Carol Iannone; blacks like Stephen Carter, Glenn Loury, Thomas Sowell, Shelby Steele. So I thought it my duty to read Steele's book — for ammunition, not for edification let alone pleasure. Which made it all the nicer when I found myself thoroughly engaged by these conspicuously honest, insightful essays about a human being's struggle for individual identity in a society that insists he cannot be himself, that he should be a stereotype in order to satisfy some higher, abstract goal of social justice.

That's an entirely universal human story. The *particular* high, abstract goal that people are told they must serve can be almost anything at all: familial, religious, social, political. Those who try to impose it might be parents, the government, terrorists, or well-meaning pressure groups.

Everyone, of course, *means* well. In the name of freedom, the Irish Republican Army kills and maims people at random. To save souls, the Inquisition tortured specific individuals. On October 25 of last year, the television show *Sixty Minutes* showed how loved and loving little children had been torn from loved and loving foster parents — just because the parents were white and the children black.

No matter what the particular abstract goal may be, no matter who tries to impose it, it's *wrong* to treat people not as individuals but as symbolic units, ciphers, statistics. It demeans and dehumanizes — and it doesn't even bring that abstract, desirable goal any closer. The ends never justify the means because the means you use determine what ends you'll actually reach. It's just as wrong now for self-anointed black leaders to tell Shelby Steele what his place and role in society must be, what it's permissible for him to feel, think, and say, as it was wrong when Jim Crow laws told each black person what his place and role had to be.

There's no basis in logic for forcible, group-wise diversification. And there's no basis for it in facts, either. Evidence offered is unsound in the same way that the logical and ethical bases are unsound: statistics about *groups* are applied to the treatment of individuals.

Every competent statistician knows that valid statistics requires proper sampling and *dis*-aggregation; even then, no correlation in itself proves a cause-and-effect relationship. The diversifiers, the dividers-by-group, ignore that routinely. For example, they'll cite the fact that the median annual salary for bachelor's graduates in science and engineering in 1990 was \$26,100 for whites and only \$24,000 for blacks: obviously just another illustration of continuing discrimination. But the median for Asian-Americans at \$30,000 was much higher than both; so it would be just as valid to conclude that whites are improperly discriminated against in comparison to Asian-Americans.

Those who want to bring us group diversity also want to bring us group sensitivity: no member of any protected minority should ever feel offended by anything that any non-member of that group might say. Again I'm going to deal in anecdotes rather than abstractions, but I can't resist making one snide general comment first. We've proved ourselves as a society, as an educational establishment, incapable of producing universal literacy. What possible reason is there to imagine that we have the wisdom or the know-how to produce universal sensitivity? At least *some* societies, if not ours, *have* been able to instill universal literacy; none has ever been able to establish universal sensitivity.

But beyond that, even if we could get it, who would want it? What would it be good for?

In the Australia of my youth, foreigners or immigrants were "Chinks," "Dagos," "Frogs," "Pommies," "reffos," "Wops"; in fact "*bloody* Pommies," "*bloody* reffos," and so on. Those were not usually terms of affection or respect. But it was at the same time true that some people who used those terms were singularly kind and helpful to *individuals* within all those groups, as they dealt with them in day-to-day life. I suspect it was very good for me to learn that people who make stereotypically denigrating remarks about refugees, Jews, people with accents, intellectuals, people who don't play football, and so on, might still be kind and helpful to me personally even though I belong in all those despicable categories.

"Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names will never hurt me," we said in those days. I think it helped me put things into perspective so that, for instance, I've liked and respected and conversed comfortably with some people who use the phrase, "getting jewed down." What would my life be like if, whenever I heard such a phrase, I felt obliged to rush to the nearest EO/AA Office to report the culprit? What sort of person might I have become if I'd been drilled, coached, trained to be ever on the alert and to feel insulted by such idioms?

Football coaches are permitted to tell student-athletes that learning to discipline themselves under physical stress is good for them because it builds character. Why can't we tell *all* students that learning to discipline themselves in the face of bad manners by others helps them to build their individual characters and to learn about the diversity of human behavior?

Babies are entirely dependent on how others treat them. Growing up means realizing that you *don't* depend entirely on others. To be adult, to be self-reliant, you have to know that your emotions are under your own control, not at the mercy of what anyone happens to say to you or how anyone happens to look at you. By indoctrinating women and blacks to believe that their emotional states are at the mercy of what others say to them, the sensitivity propagandists train them to feel perpetually helpless, to be perpetually *reacting*, to be *voluntarily* dependent on others.

People who talk insensitively are not necessarily bigots. I have a friend who tells me Jewish jokes, and he tells our mutual friend Corio Italian jokes, and our friend Huang he tells Chinese jokes; to our faces, not behind our backs. He's no bigot. The best criteria I've so far found to identify bigots is their total lack of humor and their taboo against seeing that their emperor isn't wearing any clothes.

We've all heard many times about how often, in this modern scientific age, people are going to have to retrain to new jobs and adjust to new technologies; but what about having to learn a new language every few years? When I first came to the States, "Negroes" was a word that could be used in polite, mixed company, though "colored people" was perhaps preferred. Then it had to be "black," that soon became "Afro-American," and now apparently it must be "African-American." And why is it now very chic to talk about "people of color" but insulting to talk of "colored people"? Must we make the English language ever more illogical?

I've got a modest proposal to make. When philosophers argue, they distinguish "Theory 1," "Theory 2," and so on. Why don't we just call different groups of people "Humans-1," "Humans-2," and so on? To be quite fair, we could use a lottery to determine which group gets to be number 1 and we could rotate that distinction every year or so.

This obsession with words isn't appropriate to what we like to call a scientific age. It harks back to the times when people believed in magic, that saying the right words somehow causes the right things to happen (abracadabra!); whereas the use of taboo words brings disaster (Yah Weh!). But it's not that easy or simple to improve society. It requires a bit more effort than just using the right words; and we shouldn't let ourselves get distracted by word games from what actually needs to get done.

In California there grows a tree commonly called the Digger pine. How many of you recognize that as a term that demeans Native Americans? I discovered it recently through the newspaper *The Scientist*, in an article titled "Racist relics: an ugly blight on our botanical nomenclature." It also mentions some more obvious transgressions, like "Coonties," "Coon-ties." A follow-up letter pointed out, though, that such searches for offensiveness in language are not for everyone to carry out; a little learning can be a dangerous thing. "Coonties," it turns out, doesn't come from "coons" or from any other English-American word; it's the anglicism of a Seminole word that carries no derogatory connotations at all.

Especially when I lived in Kentucky, I often used to see little black-faced statues, typically in jockey's clothes, with a hand out-stretched as a hitching post. Early last year, there was a great furor in Roanoke when such a statue was discovered at the shooting range used by the city police. The statue was removed forthwith, amid much declaiming against insensitivity and racism. A little while later, a black woman wrote that she herself has such a figure in her front yard because the first one had been created for George Washington, at his request, *in honor* of Jocko, a black teenager who had frozen to death in the line of duty while holding the cavalry's horses.

So maybe the quest for sensitivity will lead people to learn some history and something about languages and linguistics, and about literature. For the moment, though, too many people are being allowed to get away with saying, like Humpty Dumpty, "When *I* use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean."

The theme for your conference this year is "New Realities in the Liberal Arts." Fine; but don't jettison other realities just because they happen to be old, or timeless, or unwelcome. Some things have *not* changed. The theme of the conjoint meeting of the AAC [Association of American Colleges] is "The Discipline(s) we Need Now." Let me suggest that among them, as always, is the self-discipline to put thought ahead of action and evidence ahead of beliefs.

What are colleges for? Surely not for capitulating to poor logic and bad evidence. And they're not for doing social engineering, either. As Richard Mitchell makes plain in his book *The Graves of Academe*, elementary and secondary schools deteriorated when social goals were substituted for academic ones; are we now going to ruin our universities in the same fashion?

Colleges must be first and foremost, in Barzun's phrase, "houses of intellect" — places of learning and scholarship — because those things are necessary to a civilized society and there's no other place where they can thrive. Learning and scholarship require academic freedom, and they require freedom of speech. The only way to keep those freedoms is to exercise them; we must not stay silent under the ranting of the fanatics.

Some people *are* speaking up, and I commend them to you as role models. I offer you Shelby Steele, as honest a writer as you'll find, as courageous as you'll find, saying things that neither pole of extremists wants to hear. I offer you Stephen Carter, whose book *Reflections of an Affirmative Action Baby* exemplifies what it means to be an intellectual.

Recall the confirmation hearing for Judge Clarence Thomas. I offer you as role models the people who were the silver lining in that mess: the men and women who came — on both sides — to give public testimony as character witnesses; people so clearly determined simply to tell the truth as they saw it, even as they knew they'd be publicly attacked for it. I offer you as role model Clarence Thomas's secretary, with whom the senators were so visibly afraid to cross swords. I offer you John Doggett, who challenged and defied the senators and everyone else to treat him as other than the unique individual person that he is.

If you want diversity, take these black women and men as role models. If you want diversity, follow the teaching of Confucius: treat others as you would that they treat you, namely according to your individual identity, not according to one of your stereotypes.

We will have fairness and justice for all only when fairness and justice are defined, not in terms of groups but in terms of individuals, persons, human beings.

* This text was printed in *Proceedings of the 49th Annual Meeting of the American Conference of Academic Deans*, 1993, 27-35, and in *Virginia Scholar* #9 (September 1996) 18-22 (<https://web.archive.org/web/20131030115950/http://fbox.vt.edu/faculty/aaup/index4.html>). It has been reprinted recently: Martin Harlaar (ed.), *Ben ik wel woke genoeg? Een ontdekkingstocht door het land der Social Justice Warriors*, Gompel & Svacina, 2022, pp. 182-189.

The prevalence of politically-correct attitudes among the assembled hundreds of university administrators was illustrated by compliments I received afterwards from several of them, for having the courage to say that individuals should be treated as individuals; but there had been no favorable applause during the talk itself.