

We Don't Like What You Say or How You Say It



Michael J. Joyner, M.D.

by Theodore Dalrymple

An exercise physiologist at the Mayo Clinic, Dr. Michael Joyner, has been admonished by the Clinic in part for having suggested in public that testosterone gives transgender women a lasting and unfair advantage when they compete in sports against ordinary women. He has been threatened with dismissal if he doesn't desist from making such remarks in public: He's henceforth only to say what the "Communications" department of the Clinic permits him to say.

A few years ago, Joyner's suggestion would have been regarded as so banal that it would have been regarded as not worth making. It would have been as if an astrophysicist had suggested that the world went round the sun. But we live in strange times: Obvious truths have become dangerous to those

who utter them. If the truth doesn't accord with "our values," as the Mayo Clinic puts it, so much the worse for truth.

After Joyner's latest comments in a [media interview](#) about COVID treatment guidelines, the chairman of Joyner's department, Dr. Carlos Mantilla, sent the miscreant [a letter](#) that made Joseph Stalin or Leonid Brezhnev's style seem like Oscar Wilde's:

"Your use of idiomatic language has been problematic and reflects badly on Mayo Clinic's brand and reputation. ... The fact your selection of idiomatic expressions continues has caused the institution to question whether you are able to appropriately represent Mayo Clinic in media interactions."

Therefore, demanded Matilla: "Cease engagement in offline conversations with reporters. Discuss approved topics only and stick to prescribed messaging; eliminate use of idiomatic language. If an interview request is declined [by the Public Affairs team], eliminate unnecessary push back or combative communications."

Then came the threat: "Failure to comply with the expectations outlined above or any additional validated complaints from any staff, including, but not limited to, the issues noted above, or any form of retaliation will result in termination of employment."

This is the language of the true apparatchik who, in other times, and circumstances, would have risen high in the hierarchy of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. What Mantilla meant was: We don't like what you say or how you say it. From now on, say only what we permit you to say. If you disobey, we will sack you.

One of the "validated complaints" to which Mantilla refers seems to have come from the LGBTQ "community"—that is to say, some member of it who uses the taking of offense as a justification for suppressing the right to free speech. An

LGBTQ “advocate” [told](#) a Rochester, Minnesota, television channel that Joyner’s language was “at best insensitive, at worst transphobic.”

The truth of a statement is a defense against an accusation of libel, but not, apparently, against an accusation of causing offense. The latter, of course, is in the mind of the offended: I am offended if I say I am, and I am the sole judge in my own case. Therefore, either all speech that could offend someone—which is to say all speech beyond good morning and goodnight—ought to be suppressed, or alternatively, some people, but not others, have the right to suppress the speech of those who offend them. What, then, of equality under the law?

About 30 years ago, I wrote an article that offended a well-organized pressure group. This pressure group wrote an angry letter to the chief executive of the hospital in which I was working (in Britain’s fundamentally socialist health care system, be it remembered), calling for my dismissal.

The chief executive wrote back that he was sorry that what I had written upset them, but it was a free country, and I could write what I liked.

This was an answer with no ifs and buts. It quite clearly terminated the correspondence and indicated that there was no point in continuing it. To do the complainants justice, they took the hint, and no more was heard of them. The chief executive (who was of an age to remember the war against one of the worst dictatorships in history) didn’t go into the question of whether what I wrote was right or wrong. As far as he was concerned, I had the right to my opinion and to express it in public, and that was the end of the matter.

This was only 30 years ago. How the world has changed since then! I doubt that there’s a chief executive in any hospital in the world now who would write with such clarity and

concision in defense of freedom of opinion. A chief executive would more likely obfuscate, snivel, euphemize, soft-soap, grovel, dissemble, and otherwise mislead, rather than come straight out with it, as my chief executive of the time did.

He has remained a hero in my memory, though at the time, I took his unequivocal reply for granted, considering it perfectly normal and not in the least the last gasp of freedom. I didn't anticipate a world in which any complaint by any person on any grounds might be considered grounds for dismissal: That complaint, no matter how unjustified or absurd, might be used by an institution (which is to say, the persons in control of the institution) to punish individuals arbitrarily.

Anyone who has read anything about the culture of denunciation that existed in Soviet Russia, Nazi Germany, or Vichy France will recognize the atmosphere that Mantilla, consciously or not, seems to want to create or to serve at the Mayo Clinic. Mere tittle-tattle can now be the ruination of a person's career.

Of course, Mantilla isn't alone, far from it: Attachment to freedom of speech is very loose or inexistent in many institutions nowadays, strangely enough in institutions of the highly educated, in which one might have expected attachment to freedom to be the strongest.

But the granting of freedom to those with whom we disagree doesn't come naturally: It requires self-control, for the inclination to suppress the opinion of others exists within most of us. It's this inclination that must itself be suppressed if freedom is to survive, and unfortunately it's the well-educated who can, and now do, best rationalize arguments for not suppressing their own inclination to censor and suppress.