Coddling of the American Mind

Drawing on the book The Coddling of the American Mind*, Kerby Anderson examines the insanity on college campuses where students cannot handle ideas and people they disagree with.*



In this article we will talk about what is happening on college campuses, and even focus on why it is happening. Much of the material is taken from the book, *The Coddling of the American Mind.*{1}

Greg Lukianoff was trying to solve a puzzle and sat down with Jonathan Haidt. Greg was a first amendment lawyer working with the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE). He was trying to figure out why students (who used to support free speech on campus) were now working to prevent speakers from coming on campus and triggered by words or phrases used by professors.

Greg also noticed something else. He has suffered from bouts of depression and noticed some striking similarities with some of the comments by students. He found in his treatment that sometimes he and others would engage in "catastrophizing" and assuming the worst outcome. He was seeing these distorted and irrational thought patterns in students.

After a lengthy discussion they decided to write an article about it for *The Atlantic* with the title, "Arguing Towards Misery: How Campuses Teach Cognitive Distortions." The editor suggested the more provocative title, "The Coddling of the American Mind." The piece from *The Atlantic* was one of the most viewed articles of all time and was then expanded to this book.

That book used the same title: *The Coddling of the American Mind*. Jonathan was on *Point of View* last year to talk about the book. The authors believe that these significant

psychological changes that have taken place in the minds of students explain much of the campus insanity we see on campus today.

They point out that two terms rose from obscurity into common campus parlance. Microaggressions are small actions or word choices that are now thought as a kind of violence. Trigger warnings are an alert the professors now must use if they may be discussing a topic that might generate a strong emotional response.

Before we talk about some of the insight in the book, it is worth mentioning that though there is a psychological component to all of this insanity, there is also an ideological component. When the original article appeared, Heather MacDonald asked if "risk-adverse child-rearing is merely the source of the problem. For example, why aren't heterosexual white males demanding safe spaces?"{2} They all had the same sort of parents who probably coddled many of them.

It would probably be best to say that the mixture of psychological deficits also with the liberal, progressive ideological ideas promoted on campus have given us the insanity we see today. We have had liberal teaching on campuses for a century, but the problem has become worse in the last decade because of the psychological issues described in the book, *The Coddling of the American Mind*.

Three Untruths (Part 1)

The book can easily be summarized in three untruths that make up the first three chapters of the book. The first is the "Untruth of Fragility: What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Weaker." Nietzsche's original aphorism was, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." The younger generation has turned this idea on its head.

It is true that some things are fragile (like china teacups), while other things are resilient (and can withstand shocks). But they also note that some things are *antifragile*. In other words, they actually require stressors and challenges to grow. Our muscles are like that. Our immune system is like that. And university education is supposed to be like that. Students are supposed to be challenged by new ideas, not locked away in "safe spaces."

Unfortunately, most young people have been protected by a culture that promotes what they refer to as "safetyism." It has become a cult of safety that is obsessed with eliminating threats (whether real or imagined) to the point where fragility becomes expected and routine. And while this is true for the millennial generation (also called Generation Y), it is even truer for the iGen generation (also called Generation Z) who are even more obsessed with safety.

Part of the problem in these untruths is what they call "concept creep." Safety used to mean to be safe from physical threats. But that has expanded to the idea that safety must also include emotional comfort. In order to provide that comfort, professors and students a few years ago introduced the idea of creating "safe spaces" for students. And in order to keep those students emotionally safe in the classroom, professors must issue "trigger warnings" so these students don't experience trauma during a classroom lecture or discussion.

The second untruth is the "Untruth of Emotional Reasoning: Always Trust Your Feelings." You can get yourself in some difficult circumstances quickly if you always trust your emotions. It is easy in this world to get frustrated, discouraged, and even depressed. Psychologists have found that certain patients can get themselves caught in a feedback loop in which irrational negative beliefs cause powerful negative feelings. We are seeing that on college campuses today.

Psychologists describe “the cognitive triad” of depression. These are: “I’m no good” and “My world is bleak” and “My future is hopeless.” Psychologists have effective ways of helping someone break the disempowering feedback cycle between negative beliefs and negative emotions. But very few adults (parents, professors, administrators) are working to correct mistaken ideas.

Three Untruths (Part 2)

In a college classroom, students are apt to make some sweeping generalization and engage in simplistic labeling of the lecture or reading material. In that case, we would hope that a professor would move the discussion by asking questions or even challenging the assertion.

Instead, many professors and colleges go along with the student comments. In fact, many even argue that any perceived slight adds up to what today are called “microaggressions.” In many cases, slights may be unintentional and actually wholly formed from the listener’s interpretation.

Here is how it develops. First, you prevent certain topics from being discussed in class. Next, you prevent certain speakers from coming to campus because they might present a perspective that aggrieved students believe should not be discussed. In the book is a chart illustrating how many speakers have been disinvited from universities. Five years ago, the line jumps up significantly.

The third untruth follows from that assumption. It is the “Untruth of Us Versus Them: Life is a Battle Between Good People and Evil People.” The authors argue that “the human mind is prepared for tribalism.” They even provide psychological research demonstrating that. But that doesn’t mean we have to live that way. In fact, conditions in society can turn tribalism up, down, or off. Certain conflicts can

turn tribalism up and make them more attentive to signs about which team a person may be on. Peace and prosperity usually turn tribalism down.

Unfortunately, in the university community, distinctions between groups are not downplayed but emphasized. Distinctions defined by race, gender, and sexual preference are given prominence. Mix that with the identity politics we see in society, and you generate the conflict we see almost every day in America.

The authors make an important distinction between two kinds of identity politics. Martin Luther King, Jr. epitomized what could be called "common-humanity identity politics." He addressed the evil of racism by appealing to the shared morals of Americans using the unifying language of religion.

That is different from what we find on college campuses today that could be called "common-enemy identity politics." It attempts to identify a common enemy as a way to enlarge and motivate your tribe. Their slogan sounds like this: Our battle for identity and survival is a battle between good people and bad people. We're the good guys and need to defeat the bad guys.

An Example: Evergreen State College

One good example of how these untruths play out can be found at what happened on a college campus in Olympia, Washington. The entire story is described in chapter five but also is featured prominently in the opening chapter of the book *No Safe Spaces* and in the movie with the same title.

Just a few years ago, Evergreen State College was probably best known as the alma mater for rapper Macklemore and Matt Groening, the creator of *The Simpsons*. That all changed with an email biology professor Bret Weinstein sent.

In the past, the school had a tradition known as the “National Day of Absence.” Usually, minority faculty and students leave the campus for a day to make a statement. But in 2017, the college wanted to change things and wanted white students and faculty to stay away from campus.

Professor Weinstein argued in an email that there is a difference between letting people be absent and telling people “to go away.” And he added that he would show up for work. When he did, he was confronted by a mob of students. When the administration tried to appease the demonstrators, things got worse.

Weinstein has described himself as a political progressive and left-leaning libertarian. But his liberal commitments did not protect him from the student mob. The campus police warned him about a potential danger. The next morning, as he rode his bike into town, he saw protesters poised along his route tapping into their phones. He rode to the campus police department and was abruptly told: “You’re not safe on campus, and you’re not safe anywhere in town on your bicycle.” Weinstein and his wife eventually resigned and finally received a financial settlement from the university.

The Evergreen students and faculty displayed each of the three great untruths. The Untruth of Fragility (What doesn’t kill you makes you weaker) came from a faculty member who supported the protesters and addressed some of her faculty colleagues in an angry monologue. She warned, “I am too tired. This [blank] is literally going to kill me.” A student at a large town hall meeting verbalized her anxiety and illustrated the Untruth of Emotional Reasoning (Always trust your feelings). She expressed, “I want to cry. I can’t tell you how fast my heart is beating. I am shaking in my boots.”

And the whole episode illustrates the Untruth of Us Versus Them (Life is a battle between good people and evil people).

The students and faculty engaged in common-enemy identity politics by labeling a politically progressive college and liberal professors as examples of white supremacy. One student (who refused to join the protest) later testified to the college trustees, “If you offer any kind of alternative viewpoint, you’re the enemy.”

What Can We Do?

The book, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, identifies many disturbing trends on college campuses that are beginning to spill over into society. What can we do to stem the tide?

Obviously, the long-term solution to the insanity on campus and in society is to pray for revival in the church and spiritual awakening in America. But there are some practical things that must be done immediately.

First, college administrators must get control of their campus. The riots at some of these universities resulted in violence and property destruction. Often the campus police and even the local police failed to take action. Sadly, the university administration rarely took action afterwards.

Some form of deterrence would have prevented future actions on the University of California, Berkeley campus. Instead, the inaction established a precedent that likely allowed the conflict at Middlebury College. Students not only shut down the lecture, but they assaulted one of the campus professors. Once again, no significant action was taken against the students and outside agitators. The problem will get worse if there is no deterrence.

Second, professors must get control of their classrooms. Students cannot be allowed to determine what subjects cannot be taught and what topics cannot be discussed. The authors of this book are concerned about the tendency to encourage students to develop extra-thin skins just before they enter

into the real world. Employers aren't going to care too much about their feelings. Students don't have the right not to be offended.

Third, we need to educate this generation about free speech. One poll done by the Brookings Institute discovered that nearly half (44%) of all college students believe that hate speech is NOT protected by the First Amendment. And since many students label just about anything they don't like as hate speech, you can see why we have this behavior on college campuses. More than half (51%) of college students think they have a right to shout down a speaker with whom they disagree. A smaller percentage (19%) of college students think it is acceptable to use violence to prevent a speaker from speaking on campus.

Finally, the adults need to make their voice heard. We pay for public universities through our tax dollars. Parents send their kids off to some of these schools. We should not tolerate the insanity taking place on many college campuses today.

The authors have identified certain concerns that colleges and universities need to address. They remind us how hostile the academic world has become, not only to traditional Christian values, but also to mere common sense. We need to pray for what is taking place in the college environment.

Notes

1. Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff, et al., *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure.*New York City: Penguin Press, 2018.
2. www.thecollegefix.com/heres-the-9-best-takeaways-from-heather-mac-donalds-new-diversity-delusion-book/

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MySpace: Parents and Kids Wisely Navigating Online Social Networking

MySpace and other social networking sites can be a great boon or a great danger. Byron Barlowe cautions Christian parents of teens to exercise discernment in educating themselves about this important part of life, and look for a redemptive view of this social technology.

Very Big and Very Hip

MySpace.com: *It's big, it's growing, it's controversial for good reasons, and it's probably touched your family—and you may not even know it. In this section, we answer the questions, "What is it and why do you as a parent need to learn more about protecting your kids without cutting them off?"*

Is *MySpace* a harmless teen hangout or a treacherous trap? Should parents forbid your kids from using *MySpace* or similar social networking Web sites? Kids, do your parents, like, *even* have a *clue*? And could Christians legitimately use *MySpace* as a mission field?

Controversy about *MySpace* still abounds, even in the fast-moving online world.

Imagine this: Your straight-A, straight-laced teenaged daughter Lori met Aaron online when he visited her *MySpace* profile, a Web page about her. Now she wants to go to the concert with Aaron and his online buddy, "PartyCrasher." "But mom, we've been 'friends' for weeks!" she whines. Mom and Dad,

what do you do now?

This may not happen to your family, but something similar happened to a Michigan family whose previously trouble-free sixteen-year-old daughter sneaked a flight to the Middle East to rendezvous with a *MySpace* "friend"![{1}]

So, what is *MySpace*? According to one top ranking site, in August 2007 it became the sixth-most-visited Web site on the Internet,[{2}] with over 100 million accounts.

A "perfect storm": millions of people—many of them in their teens and twenties—are connecting with friends, meeting new ones, producing Web
pages and video and music, chatting, inviting back and forth to events—even
doing business and art—all within virtual communities.

Think of it as a microcosm of the World Wide Web, only much more easily connected and organized, even by kids. If the Internet was the Wild West, social networking sites—sites like *MySpace*—are becoming its boomtowns.

Wired magazine explains, "*MySpace*.Com, the Internet's most popular social networking site…has *helped redefine the way a generation communicates*."[{3}]

One digital culture watcher wrote, "Community-based websites are the fastest growing sites on the Internet. The teen social ecosystem *MySpace*" is the biggest.[{4}]

"According to some," writes Connie Neal, author of *MySpace for Moms & Dads*, "MySpace marks a societal revolution as monumental as the industrial revolution."[{5}]

MySpace owner Rupert Murdoch said, "The average person who is computer proficient is self-empowered in a way they never have [been] before."[{6}]

It's this newfound "empowerment" that rightly concerns

parents.

Let's keep perspective. It's only natural that real life is replicated online. A Roper study found that "online communities represent a real and growing phenomenon, but one that is dwarfed by interest in *real-world* social networks . . . [like] extended family (94% interest), neighborhood or town (80%), religious or spiritual organization (77%), hobby/interest (69%)" and so forth.

The directors of *BlogSafety.com* have written a handy book entitled *MySpace Unraveled: A Parent's Guide to Teen Social Networking.* ("Blog" is short for Weblog, an online diary or commentary page.) They write regarding the rapidly evolving topic of teens redefining blogging into more of a social interaction: "As we adults struggle to find the language that describes this phenomenon, teens are speeding ahead, making it up as they go. . . . To them, these sites are just another tool for socializing."{7} Online and offline distinctions blur into oblivion.

What does this mean for Christian youth and parents?

Dangers and Solutions

MySpace *and similar social networking sites can be intimidating, even dangerous places. Threats like malicious software, cyberbullying, and sexual predators render it risky for the unprepared and unsupervised.* MySpace *is being called to account and is responding, but it's primarily up to parents to protect their children.*

One thoughtful parent and Christian school educator responded to the topic as I first did: "Isn't *MySpace* a waste of time or worse, a place where kids think they're experiencing real relationships but are *only* getting a risky situation?" His observation was that the kind of kids who were drawn to *MySpace* already had deep needs that weren't being fulfilled,

primarily by parents.

As a parent of three pre-teens, I shared his skepticism. Yet, there's a bigger picture, I found. There's hope, too. Nonetheless, it can be scary, especially in light of greater autonomy for kids who naturally lack discretion.

Let's pretend you find your thirteen-year-old son pacing after something hits the wall with a crash. He blurts out, "They put up a site about me with nasty pictures and said I'm fat! Now everybody is messaging about it. I'm not going to school." He's been cyberslammed and feels his young world crashing in.

The sense of public humiliation caused by cyberbullying is coupled with the danger that online threats can spill into real life. *MySpace* and similar sites can be intimidating, even dangerous places. As a parent, you may choose to forbid or restrict use of *MySpace* in your home. But I suggest you choose in an informed, careful way.

Sexual dangers are the best known. Chatrooms and posted messages easily enable such temptations and threats. One recent trip to *MySpace* rendered solicitations to chat online with a sultry woman seeking American servicemen and a gang-type fellow with the screen name "King Pimpin'."

In 2002, fifteen-year-old Katie Canton met John in a live online chat room. Since he lived far away, Katie felt free to send photos and flirt. Soon John was sending Katie gifts and e-mailing.

This story ended well: Katie testified at John's trial where he got twenty years in prison. But it had taken Katie participating in a role-playing video game to realize that her behavior and that of her would-be abuser was becoming a classic case of online predation.{8} This is why parental education and supervision are crucial.

Again, some perspective is in order. It's tempting to view

sites like *MySpace*.com as a monolithic online ghetto. A more accurate word picture may be a high school campus. Enter on one side, see the "dopeheads"; enter another, see the "jocks" and cheerleaders. You can't paint with too broad a brush in assessing it accurately. And students can privately stay in the "nice part of town."

Concern is warranted, of course. The required minimum age for *MySpace* is fourteen. However, age verification is still technically impossible, largely due to lack of a public track record for minors—ironic, as many of them create public records openly on such sites.

Parents have sued on behalf of their abused daughters, and thirty-four state attorneys general are now demanding more age-verification controls.{9} Meanwhile, *MySpace* has reportedly discovered thousands of members who are convicted sex offenders. "The attorneys general of Georgia, Idaho, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Mississippi and New Hampshire joined Connecticut in signing a letter to the company asking it to turn over information."{10}

MySpace has responded. The company deleted two hundred thousand "objectionable" accounts.{11} (A similar move by networking site *Friendster* caused a mass exodus, a sad commentary on many of its users.) *MySpace* also began developing parental tracking software, seen by many as just a start.

After hiring a former prosecutor with experience working on sex crimes against children as chief security officer, in January, 2007, *MySpace* donated a breakthrough national database to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). It features the first-ever method to match faces and body features like tattoos to often-elusive sex offenders. Providing "a way to filter convicted offenders from younger *MySpace* members, the database combines the records of individual state registries, plus allows searches based on

images, which the NCMEC said is important."{12}

A new senate bill would require—for the first time ever—sex offenders to register their email addresses. Donna Rice Hughes, president of the watchdog/activist group Enough Is Enough, says, "While there is no 'silver bullet' for protecting children from Internet dangers, this legislation will help to provide another protective barrier for millions of children. . . . Parents must remain proactive and educated about the safety rules and software tools available."{13}

Child safety experts agree: parental guidance should be the first and strongest line of defense. Technology continues to outrun ethical reflection in a culture marked by the philosophy, "If it can be done, go for it!" Pragmatism, the myth of progress as always good, lack of a biblical understanding of sin's pervasiveness and seriousness and sheer greed, drive many of the developments like the *MySpace* revolution.

But so do innately human needs and God-given desires to connect in a disjointed, wired world. Moral panic regarding teens and technology are nothing new. Doomsday prophecies—partially deserved—ensued with the advent motion pictures, television, and the Internet itself, as Internet researcher Danah Boyd points out.{14} Wise adaptation is always essential to being "in the world but not of it."{15}

Hanging Out and Friending

Kids hang out on MySpace *because virtually everyone they know does, even if they would prefer not to. Another big draw: shared interests. But teens need to appreciate the distinction between acquaintances and true friends, as well as appropriate vs. illegitimate public intimacy while being truly "real."*

What can make young men cry? Take away their online "space."

At a conference panel discussion on social networking, four ministry leaders shared nearly identical experiences. Their teens had naturally migrated to *MySpace* with their peers and created profiles there, unknown to these conservative Christian dads. After perusing the site, three of the four outright forbade use of *MySpace*. One by one, they told tales of begging and weeping. One boy sobbed, "Dad, it's the only time I've ever felt cool."

This is tricky. Parents' gut reaction may be to minimize or dismiss such a notion. Yet, socialization at this age happens naturally, inevitably, even critically. But online? Here?

But part of the vital process of adolescent socializing is decoding cues about where you fit into the youth culture and *who* you are perceived to be. If kids are deeply grounded in the love of their God and family, it's just another "place." It's when this grounding is missing that *MySpace* can easily become a platform to present a false self.

Danah Boyd talks about the psychology of publicly viewable social networking: it's performed. "Showing face" becomes key, being "real" has its limits while "friending" online. Note the use of "friend" as a verb there.{16}

Author Connie Neal lists ways *MySpace* meets the needs of teens in uncanny ways, needs to:

- *Communicate with peers*
- *Try on different styles*
- *See what others are like*
- *Explore their generation's music, art, photography*
- *Hear, view, read stories through media*
- *Flirt*

- *Make friends*
- *Feel included in a group{17}*

For a time, *MySpace* also seemed unavoidable (it may be "like, so last year" at this point; *Facebook* is reportedly the social site of choice today among youth). Danah Boyd says, "For most teens, it is simply a part of everyday life—they are [at *MySpace*] because their friends are there and they are there to hang out with those friends. Of course, its ubiquitousness does not mean that everyone thinks that it's cool. Many teens complain that the site is lame, noting that they have better things to do.
Yet, even those teens have an account which they check regularly because it's the only way to keep up with the Joneses."{18}

Social networking relies on clicking to "make" or invite "friends." In contrast, an ancient Hebrew proverb states, "A man of too many friends comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother."{19}

This leads to a deeper question: "What does the term 'friend' really mean?" Certainly more than a popularity contest, which many accuse *MySpace* of becoming. Stephanie Bennett, writing for *Breakpoint,* warns, "In many ways these technologies reduce relationship to a commodity—something one possesses rather than a jointly developed friendship."

Bennett continues:

> *Just as the practice of [slow-paced] courtship . . . gave way to dating and the now common practice of objectifying "the other" [or "hooking up" and casual sex], the rules of relationship are . . . being rewritten, and . . . are being shaped by a distinctly media-centered worldview rather than a Christian one.{20}*

Author C. S. Lewis wrote:

> *Friendship arises out of mere companionship when two or more of the companions discover that they have in common some insight or interest or even taste which the others do not share and which, till that moment, each believed to be his own unique treasure (or burden). The typical expression of opening Friendship would be something like, "What? You too? I thought I was the only one."{21}*

Perhaps herein lies the greatest appeal of *MySpace*—shared interests. This is not lost on teenagers.

In balance, as one participant in a CNN.com forum wrote, "True friends . . . need to learn when to stop blogging and go across campus to help a friend."{22}

C. S. Lewis also wrote, "Eros will have naked bodies; friendship naked personalities."{23} The scantily clad girls parading on certain pages at *MySpace*
reflect our culture. Sex is confused with intimacy nowadays; psychological nudity on the Internet is not so different.

Billed as a place to make friends and connect in community, *MySpace*, *Facebook*, *Xanga* and the like may be having the opposite effect, according to one study at San Diego State. It uncovered "an attitude of 'It's all about me'" prevailing among college students, the *Chicago Tribune* reported, and "blogging and social networking are 'playing a big role' in this."{24}

Nonsense, says tech educator Andy Carvin. Social networking largely entails "communities where people reinforce interpersonal relationships through sharing and creating content. . . . [They] want to be a part of something bigger than themselves."{25}

Social sites should reflect and enhance relationships, not

define them. Challenge the presumption of *instant-friendship-by-mouseclick* with your kids as necessary. Guard against not only physical but "psychological nudity."

This presents one more important conversational topic for parents training their kids in a biblical worldview marked by serving others, not by parading themselves or sending false signals.

Parents and Teens Cooperating

Picture yourself or your child in a situation like this: "We're sorry, Caitlyn, but we just cannot hire you. Your online history isn't in keeping with our company's standards." A growing host of those among the Internet generation with online regrets have walled off their online socializing from prying parents and ended up miring their futures in controversy.

Another problem with *MySpace* and social sites is what Boyd calls *persistence in digital publics*. Unable to envision the future, kids don't grasp the lasting ramifications of their youthful foolishness, often captured publicly and permanently in cyberspace. "Without impetus," Boyd says, "teens rarely choose to go private on *MySpace* and certainly not for fear of predators or future employers. They want to be visible to other teens, not just the people they've "friended." They would just prefer [that] adults go away. All adults. Parents, teachers, creepy men."{26}
Natural teenage feelings indeed.

Boyd continues:

> *While the potential predator or future employer doesn't concern most teens, parents and teachers do. Reacting to increasing adult surveillance, many teens are turning their profiles private or creating separate accounts under fake names. In response, many parents are demanding complete*

control over teens' digital behaviors. This dynamic often destroys the most important value in the child/parent relationship: trust.{27}

While hers may sound like a throwback to the 1960s "Question authority!" mantra, Boyd raises a good point. She points out that nowadays adults control youth environments as never before due to fear of abduction and safety issues. "Teens have increasingly less access to public space. Classic 1950s hang outs like the roller rink and burger joint are disappearing while malls and 7-11s are banning teens unaccompanied by parents."{28} Balancing the imperative to protect against the need to let go is tough.

At the same time, parents, teachers, and youth leaders need to inculcate and model a biblical respect for God-given authority. When kids disrespect this, their Internet privileges should be at stake. Some practical safety tips for parents:

• Make sure your kids profile themselves online privately, only to well-chosen friends.

• Ask your kids to invite you online as a "friend"—but don't embarrass them!

• Openly discuss your concerns about social networking with your child.

• Tour their online space and those of their friends.

• Be alert to kids who are very secretive about their Internet use.

• Use the computer in a common area of the house.

• Monitor mobile online use and set up accountability with meaningful consequences. Yet, too many rules could exasperate older kids.{29}

Remember the story of the crying kids who had *MySpace* privileges revoked? One dad took a different approach. He entered into his daughter's online world and began exploring how to safely navigate and do ministry outreach together. Connie Neal describes *MySpace for Moms and Dads* how she participates with her daughter's willing friends as spiritual and relational advisor.{30}

The eventual goal of child-rearing is increasing autonomy and decreasing dependency. Social networking allows kids some autonomy, but they need to be careful in such a public arena. We as parents do well to act knowledgeably, not react out of sheer emotion.

Redeeming *MySpace*

MySpace has effectively tapped into youth culture *and* human nature. Teens are riding a culture-wide wave of self-expression.

But adult audiences there—and especially at other networking sites—are even bigger. Companies are now glomming onto the model for business purposes. *AnimalAttraction.com*, a social networking site for people who love pets, started as a dating service. Now, you can create a tailor-made social network through services like *Ning*.

Up to ten thousand Virginia Tech students conversed on social sites the day thirty-two were murdered in a shooting rampage.{31} Presidential candidates are leveraging networking sites today.

Why is this idea so powerful? Could it be that self-expression is a sign of *imago dei*, the image of God imprinted into the soul of everyone? God spoke the world into existence, and we, his highest creatures, create ideas in much the same way. We seem to have an insatiable need to be heard, especially as we emerge into young manhood or womanhood.

What if we're really after much more—eternally satisfying relating that nothing on earth can compare to? For many folks, online "friends" or a bigger-than-life Web identity are just new ways to reach out for what's unreachable in this life. As C. S. Lewis wrote, "If we discover a desire within us that nothing in this world can satisfy . . . we should begin to wonder if perhaps we were created for another world."{32}

MySpace can be surprisingly redemptive. It served as a clearinghouse of mourning for Anna, murdered in cold blood while working at a McDonald's. A youth-led movement to help Ugandan orphans is building to huge proportions.

The head of Internet outreach for one of the world's largest ministries encourages viewing *MySpace* as a mission field. He tells kids, "It's where your friends and *their* friends are already. Jesus called us to be smart, not safe." As Paul wrote to the Roman church, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."{33}

If you decide that *MySpace* is not for your family, there are Christian alternatives created for fellowship, evangelism, and discipleship; *Meetfish.com* and *MyPraize.com* are two.

Rather than "circle the countercultural wagons," why not explore the frontier of online social networking with your child? In a few years, the choice will be theirs, and they will likely default to socializing online as well as offline. They need to learn how to:

- ***Be discerning online****, asking things like, "Do I know and trust this person? Will this help me or hurt me?"*
- ***Reflect Christ online:*** *"How am I coming across? Does it honor my family and God? Am I teasing with moral compromise?"*
- *Ask themselves "Who seems lost, alone, afraid? Who needs the gospel?"* ***That is, see their online life as a calling of***

Christ.

Dr. Kathy Koch of *Celebrate Kids* offers a real-life prescription for healthy self-esteem: "Parents and teachers who pay attention to children and teens for who they are and not just what they do, believe in kids' present value and not just their future potential, and encourage kids by celebrating them on more than their birthdays."{34}

Do this while teaching discernment and a thoroughly biblical worldview, and social networking may not be a problem. It could be a blessing in disguise.

Notes

1. "'MySpace' teen back from Middle East," *USA Today*, www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2006-06-09-jordan-MySpace_x.htm (accessed August 14, 2007).

2. Alexa Top 500, www.alexa.com/site/ds/top_sites?ts_mode=global&lang=none# (accessed August 14, 07).

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Sheep Among Wolves

What's the Problem?

In Colossians 2:8, Paul states that a Christian should . . .

> See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.

Paul's words have particular application for the Christian student who is about to engage in the intellectual and social combat that can be found on many of our college campuses. Our higher educational institutions are often incubators for non-Christian thought and life. Christian students must be advised to be prepared. Too many of them are "taken captive." Consider these few examples:

> • A sociology professor asked her students, "How many of you believe abortion is wrong? Stand up." Five students stood. She told them to continue standing. She then asked, "Of you five, how many believe it is wrong to distribute condoms in middle schools?" One was left standing. The professor left this godly young lady standing in silence for a long time and then told her she wanted to talk with her after class.

During that meeting the student was told if she persisted in such beliefs she would have a great deal of difficulty receiving her certification as a social worker.

• During the first meeting of an architecture class at a large state university the students were told to lie on the floor. The professor then turned off the lights and taught them to meditate. (Be assured they were not meditating on Scripture.)

• At a church-related university a professor stated, “Communism is definitely superior to any other political-economic system.”

• In an open declaration on the campus at Harvard, the university chaplain announced he is homosexual.

• When asked how he responds to students who confess strong Christian convictions, a professor stated, “If they don’t know what and why they believe, I will change them.”

• In a university dormitory crowded with over 100 students I declared that Jesus is the only way to God. Many of the students expressed their strong disagreement and anger. One student was indignant because he realized my statement concerning Christ logically meant that his belief in a Native American deity was wrong. Even some Christian students were uncomfortable. They had uneasiness about it because it seemed too intolerant.

These are but a few of many illustrations and statistics that could be cited as indication of contemporary college life. The ideas that are espoused on many of our campuses can understandably bewilder the Christian student. What can be done to help them in their preparation? In this article I will offer some suggestions that can serve to give them guidance.

Develop a Christian Worldview

A critical component in the arsenal of any Christian heading off to college is to develop a Christian worldview. Everyone has a world view whether they have thought about it or not. To understand how important a worldview is consider a jigsaw puzzle with thousands of pieces. In order to put the puzzle together you need to see the picture on the box top. You need to know what the puzzle will look like when you finish it. If you only had the pieces and no box top, you would probably experience a great deal of frustration. You may not even want to begin the task, much less finish it. The box top gives you a guide and helps you put together the "pieces" of life.

The box top in a Christian worldview is provided by the revealed truth of the Bible. The Bible contains the correct picture to help us assemble the individual pieces we encounter in life. Other world views will always get some portion of the picture right, but a few important pieces will always seem out of place. It's important for a young Christian college student to have some idea of which pieces are out of place in other worldviews as well as a foundational understanding of a Christian worldview.

Essentially a worldview is a set of assumptions or presuppositions we hold about the basic make-up of our universe that influences everything we do and say. For instance, within a Christian world view we wake up in the morning assuming that God exists and that He cares about what happens to you.

There are four essential truths that help us evaluate different worldviews.

The first truth is that *something exists*. This may seem obvious, but many people aren't sure. Many forms of pantheism argue that the material world is just an illusion. The only reality is spiritual. If this were actually the case, then

physical consequences wouldn't matter. However, I have yet to find a pantheist who is willing to perform their meditation on a railroad track without knowing the train schedule.

The second truth is that *all people have absolutes*. There are always some things that people recognize as true, all the time. For Christians, God is the ultimate reference point to determine truth. Even the statement, "There are no absolutes!" is to declare absolutely that there are no absolutes.

Third, *truth is something that can't be both true and false at the same time*. This is critical in our current time. A contemporary idea is that all religions are the same. This sounds gracious, but it's nonsense. While various religions can often have some elements in common, if they differ in the crucial areas of creation, sin, salvation, heaven, and hell, then the similarities are what is trivial, not the differences.

Last, we need to realize that *all people exercise faith*. What matters is the object of our faith. We all use faith to operate through the day. We exercise faith every time we take medication. We assume it will help us and not harm us. Carl Sagan's famous statement that "The cosmos is all that is, or ever was, or ever will be" is a statement of naturalistic faith not scientific truth.

Take Ownership of Beliefs

Parents need to help their student headed off to college to take ownership of their faith. Too often Christian young people spend their pre-college years repeating phrases and doctrines without intellectual conviction. They need to go beyond clichés. A few of us at Probe have questioned Christian high school students about their faith by posing as an atheistic college professor. When pressed to explain why they believe as they do, the responses get rather embarrassing. They'll say, "That's what my parents taught me," or "That's

what I've always heard," or "I was raised that way," or "That's what my pastor said."

If this is the best a student can do, they are simply grist for the mill. They are easily ground down to dust. Paul wrote to young Timothy saying, "Continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them" (2 Tim. 3:14). Timothy was taught by his mother, grandmother, and Paul. He not only learned about his faith from them, but he became convinced that it was true.

This means you are to know not just what you believe but also why. Ask yourself or your student why he or she is a Christian? If this question stumps you, you've got some thinking and exploring to do. The apostle Peter said to always be prepared to give a defense to anyone who asks for an account of the hope that is in you. (1 Peter 3:15)

Peter wrote that we are always to be ready, and we are to respond to everyone who asks. These are all-encompassing words that indicate the importance of the task of apologetics. If the student is going to live and think as a Christian on campus he will be asked to defend his faith. Such an occasion will not be nearly as threatening if he or she has been allowed to ask their own questions and have received answers from their home or church.

For instance, how would you answer these questions if someone who really wants to know asked them of you? "Is there really a God?" "Why believe in miracles?" "How accurate is the Bible?" "Is Christ the only way to God?" "Is there any truth in other religions?"

Such questions are legitimate and skeptics deserve honest answers to their tough questions. How they receive the answer is between God and them. Our responsibility is to provide the answers as best as we can in a loving manner. To say, "I don't know, I just believe," will leave the impression that

Christianity is just a crutch and therefore only for the weak and feeble-minded.

The Mind Is Important

A student needs to understand that the mind is important in a Christian's life. In fact, a Christian is required to use his mind if he desires to know more of God and His works among us. The acts of reading and studying Scripture certainly require mental exercise. Even if a person can't read, he still has to use his mind to respond to what is taught from Scripture. For example, Jesus responded to a scribe by stating the most important commandment:

> Hear O Israel; the Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. (Mark 12:29-30)

The use of our mind refers not only to Scripture. We need to abolish the sacred/secular barrier many of us have erected. Colossians 3:17 says, "And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to Him through God the Father." Paul pretty much covers it. It's hard to come up with anything additional after using the words "whatever" and "all." This includes our academic studies.

The first chapter of Daniel offers amazing insights into this issue. Daniel and his friends were taught everything that the "University of Babylon" could offer them; they graduated with highest honors and with their faith strengthened. God honored them in the task and even gave them the knowledge they needed to grapple with Babylonian ideas. (Daniel 1:17, 20)

If Daniel's situation is applied to a contemporary Christian student's life, there is an important lesson to be learned. That is, the young Jewish boys learned and understood what they were taught, but that does not mean they believed it.

Many students have asked how to respond on papers and exams that include ideas they don't believe. As with Daniel and his peers, they should demonstrate their understanding to the best of their ability, but they cannot be forced to believe it. Understanding and believing are not necessarily the same thing. But a certain level of understanding is crucial in knowing where these ideas fail to meet reality.

If Christian students have also been allowed to ask questions at home and at church, then they can apply the lessons learned by asking questions of those of differing faiths. This will allow them to expose the inconsistencies of these competing worldviews in a respectful manner.

Many Christian students enter an ungodly educational arena every year. They should be encouraged with the understanding that God's truth will prevail, as it did for Daniel and his friends. For all truth is God's truth.

How Do We Teach these Things?

Coming to the end of our discussion on preparing students to defend their faith in college, you may be asking, "How can I apply some of these suggestions in my life with students?" The following ideas are offered with the belief that you can use your imagination and arrive at even better ones.

First do role-plays with your students occasionally. This can be done either with an individual or a group.

For example, as alluded to previously, find someone from outside your church or school that the students don't know. This person should have a working knowledge of the ways non-Christians think. Introduce him to the group as a college professor researching the religious beliefs of high school students.

The "professor" should begin to ask them a series of blunt questions regarding their beliefs. The idea is to challenge

every cliché the students may use in their responses. Nothing is to be accepted without definition or elaboration. After ten minutes or so, reveal who the professor really is and assure them he is a Christian. Then go over some of the answers and begin to reveal what they could have said.

This would also be good time to implement a second suggestion, and that is to teach a special course on apologetics for upper high school students. You've definitely got their attention now and they will be much more attentive.

Another idea is if you live near a college or university, ask to be put on their mailing list for upcoming lectures from visiting scholars. After attending one of these lectures, discuss it with your student. See if they can identify the speaker's worldview and where what they said conflicts with a Christian worldview. This would also be a good place to model asking good questions if a question and answer period is allowed.

When considering a college or university, the student should not only visit the campus to investigate campus life but also the intellectual atmosphere. Visit with representatives of a local college ministry or a Christian faculty member and inquire of their opinion of the likely intellectual challenges they can expect to find. This would also be a good opportunity to ask about resources available for Christian students who face challenges in the classroom.

Finally, consider sending your student to a Probe *Mind Games* Conference. A schedule of all our upcoming conferences is available on our website at www.probe.org. Just click on the *Mind Games* tile on the home page to open a menu of information on our conferences. Or better yet, organize one of these conferences in your own community. Probe travels around the country in order to help youth, college students, their parents, and the church at large prepare for contemporary life.

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Preparing Students for College

In Colossians 2:8 Paul states that a Christian should

> *See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.*

This verse has particular application for the young person who is about to engage in the intellectual and social combat that can be found on many of our campuses. Our colleges and universities are often "hotbeds" for non-Christian thought and life. The following examples bring this to our attention.

A sociology professor asked her students, "How many of you believe that abortion is wrong? Stand up." Five students stood. She told them to continue standing. She then asked, "Of you five, how many believe that it is wrong to distribute condoms in middle schools?" One was left standing. The professor left this godly young lady standing in silence for a long time and then told her she wanted to talk with her after class. During that meeting the student was told that if she persisted in such beliefs she would have a great deal of difficulty receiving her certification as a social worker.

During the first meeting of an architecture class the students were told to lie on the floor. The professor then turned off the lights and taught them how to meditate.

At a church-related university a Christian student was

surprised to learn that one requirement in an art class was to practice yoga.

At another church-related university a professor stated that “communism is infinitely superior to any other political-economic system.”

In an open declaration on the campus at Harvard, the university chaplain announced that he is homosexual.

As part of the resident assistant training at Cornell University, students “were forced to watch pornographic movies of hard core gay and lesbian sex.”(1)

At St. Cloud State University in Minnesota, students who believe that homosexuality is an unhealthy behavior are actually discouraged from applying to the social work program.”(2)

In a nationwide survey of adults, 72% of the people between the ages of 18 and 25 rejected the notion of absolute truth.(3)

George Keller, chair of the graduate program at the University of Pennsylvania, has described many college professors in the following manner.

Most scholars have lost interest in the fundamental questions about character, people’s deepest beliefs, moral sense and values. They have become procedural and instrumental and many believe that they are value-free. They carry around all sorts of “faiths”—in the basic goodness of human nature, in humankind’s ability to master all of Nature’s processes and secrets, that more knowledge will result in a more harmonious society, that people can be made better by restructuring institutions or by smaller or larger government—without acknowledging the existence of these deep faiths.(4)

These are but a few of the many illustrations and statistics

that could be cited as indications of contemporary college life. Are your students ready for such things? The following suggestions may be applied to help them in their preparation.

Develop a Christian Worldview

The first suggestion is to help them develop a Christian world view. A worldview is a system of beliefs about the world and ourselves that influences the way we live. What system of beliefs do your students embrace, and does that system influence their total life? For example, if young people claim to be a Christian, that assertion implies that they believe certain things and those things should influence all aspects of their lives, including their intellects.

College campuses are “hotbeds” for a multitude of worldviews. This does not necessarily mean there is an “openness” to the variety of ideas. Academic and religious prejudice are very much alive. But it does mean that students should be prepared for the reality of this diversity. For example, they need to realize that the majority of their professors will be naturalists who leave God out of everything and have contempt toward those who think otherwise. So how can students begin to think with a Christian worldview? James Sire has suggested a series of questions that can help determine what your students’ worldviews may be.(5) These questions are unusual and challenging, but my experience has shown me that once students begin to concentrate, the majority of them respond.

1. Why is there something rather than nothing?

> *Some say that something came from nothing. Others believe in an impersonal beginning. Or some assert that matter is eternal. Christians believe in a beginning caused by a personal God.*

2. How do you explain human nature?

One answer is that we are born neither good nor evil. Another answer is that we are born good, but society causes us to behave otherwise. Or others contend that we are evolved social animals who have instinctive traits that cause internal conflict. The Christian faith affirms that we are created in the image of God—but have a fallen nature.

3. What happens to us at death?

Some believe that death brings individual extinction. Others presume that we are reincarnated. Christianity affirms that believers will spend eternity in heaven with God.

4. How does one determine right and wrong?

Among the views held by non-Christians are these: ethics are cultural or situational; there is no free choice; "oughts" are derived from an "is"; or might makes right. The Christian position is that standards of conduct are revealed by God.

5. How do you know that you know?

Many trust in the mind as the center of knowledge. Others trust in the senses; we know only what is perceived. The Christian understands there are some things we know only because we are told. God has revealed Himself.

6. What is the meaning of history?

Some say there is no meaning. Some believe history is progressing to a heaven on earth. The Christian sees that we are being prepared for life with a loving and holy God.

If you can encourage your students to consider such questions, they will be much more secure in the college environment.

The Mind is Important

The second suggestion is to lead young people to understand that the mind is important in a Christian's life. The Bible puts significant stress on the mind. For example, Jesus responded to a scribe by stating the most important commandment:

> *The foremost is, "Hear O Israel; the Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." (Mark 12:29-30)*

John Stott has written that "God certainly abases the pride of men, but he does not despise the mind which he himself has made."(6) Your college-bound students should be encouraged to see their minds as vital aspects of their devotion to God.

Make Christian Beliefs Their Own

Third, help your student make Christian beliefs their own. Too often Christian young people spend their pre-college years repeating phrases and doctrines without intellectual conviction. They need to go beyond cliches. It will be much better for them to do this with you rather than a professor or another student who may be antagonistic toward Christianity.

Paul realized that his young friend Timothy had become convinced of the truth of Christianity. Paul wrote to Timothy, saying "continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them" (2 Tim. 3:14). Paul praised the early Christians of Berea for the way they examined the truth. He wrote, "Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily, to see whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11).

If a student has ownership of his beliefs he is going to be

much better prepared for the questions and doubts that can arise while interacting with contrary ideas.

From the “What” to the “Why”

Fourth, encourage students to go beyond the “What?” to the “Why?” of their beliefs. As young people enter the last few years of secondary education, they begin to think more abstractly and begin to ask “Why?” more frequently. Paul Little speaks to this.

> *“Doubt is a word that strikes terror to the soul and often it is suppressed in a way that is very unhealthy. This is a particularly acute problem for those who have been reared in Christian homes and in the Christian Church.”(7)*

The apostle Peter affirms the need to find answers to tough questions in 1 Peter 3:15. He writes, “Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to every one who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence.” If students are going to live and think as Christians on campus, they will be asked to defend their faith. Such an occasion will not be nearly as threatening if they have been allowed to ask their own questions and receive answers within the home and church.

Breaking the Sacred-Secular Barrier

The fifth suggestion is to help students begin to break down the sacred/secular barrier.

“All truth is God’s truth” is a maxim that should be understood by all Christians. To deny this is to deny a unified worldview and tacitly to deny the truth.(8) Arthur Holmes has addressed this with insightful comments:

“If the sacred-secular distinction fades and we grant that all truth is ultimately God’s truth, then intellectual work can be

God’s work as much as preaching the gospel, feeding the hungry, or healing the sick. It too is a sacred task.”(9)

The first chapter of Daniel offers wonderful insights into this issue. Daniel and his friends were taught all that the University of Babylon could offer them, but they “graduated” with their faith strengthened. They entered an ungodly arena with the understanding that the truth would prevail.

Expose Them to Christian Scholarship

The sixth suggestion is to familiarize your student with Christian scholarship. “Christian students have available many books on Christianity and scholarship; they need to read these if they are seeking a Christian perspective in their studies.”(10) When I began my college career in the early 60s I had no idea there were Christian scholars who had addressed every academic discipline I might study. It wasn’t until many years later that this ignorance was alleviated. Christian students need to know there is help. A Christian scholar has written something that will help them sort out the many issues that come their way.

Admittedly, this is probably the most difficult of the suggestions we have offered to this point. You may not know where to turn for resources. Begin with your pastor. If you don’t get the response you need, call a nearby seminary or Christian college that you trust. Or call Probe Ministries and purchase one of our college prep notebooks. These notebooks contains numerous bibliographies.

Ask First, “Is it True?”

The last suggestion is to teach them to ask first, “Is it true?” not “Does it work?” Of course the truth about any subject should be applied. But the student should first be as sure as possible that it is the truth that is being applied.

There are things that are absolutely true, and the student needs to understand that, especially in a collegiate atmosphere that tends to deny truth. Jesus said, “If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:3132). He also said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me” (John 14:6). The Christian student who is dedicated to Christ has insights to the truth that many of his professors, tragically, may never possess.

How Do We Teach These Things?

In reading the preceding suggestions you may have begun to wonder how you could relate such ideas. The subsequent recommendations may be of help.

First, do role playing with your students occasionally. This can be done either with an individual or a group of youth.

For example, if you are working with a group, find someone from outside your church or school that the students do not know. This person should have a working knowledge of the ways in which non- Christians think. Introduce him to the group as a sociology professor from a nearby college or university. Tell the students you recently met the professor in a restaurant, at a lecture he was delivering, or devise some other scenario. Also mention that the professor is doing research concerning the beliefs of American teenagers and he would like to ask them some questions. Then the “professor” is to begin to ask them a series of blunt questions regarding their beliefs. The six worldview questions we discussed earlier in this pamphlet are apropos. The idea of all this is to challenge every cliche the students may use in their responses. Nothing is to be accepted without definition or elaboration. Within ten minutes of the closing time for the meeting the pseudo- professor should tell them his true identity and assure them that he is also a believer. After the

students gasp, tell them you are planning a teaching series on apologetics so that they can be better prepared for the issues that were raised during the role play.

Second, write to the colleges and universities that are of interest to your students. Ask to receive a catalog that includes course descriptions. Look through these descriptions and discuss the worldviews that are espoused. For example, the majority of course descriptions within the sciences are going to emphasize evolution. Read what is stated and talk about the assumptions that are inherent in the synopses, as well as the things that are left out that a Christian may want to consider.

Third, show your students, by example, how to ask good questions. For instance, if naturalist professors begin to decry the moral condition of society, they are borrowing such a position from a worldview other than their own. Thus it may be legitimate to ask what brings them to the conclusion that rights and wrongs exist and how do they determine the difference? More role playing in this regard can be effective.

Fourth, send your student to a Probe Mind Games College Prep Conference. Or, better yet, organize one in your own community. We at Probe have begun to travel around the country to help older youth, their parents, and college students prepare for contemporary college life. If you are interested in this possibility, simply call us at 1-800-899-7762. God has been blessing this wing of our ministry, and we would be honored to share it with you and help in any way we can.

But whether it is through Probe, or through your energies, let’s do what we can to help our students prepare for the intellectual challenges of college life.

Notes

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