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Can Truth and Tolerance Coexist? | Beyond the Forum Edition

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The Veritas Forum

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- A dialogue between Dr. Miroslav Volf of Yale University and Dr. Vijay Pendakur of Cornell University discussing truth, tolerance, and safe spaces. From the Veritas Forum at Cornell University, a discussion titled *Can Truth and Tolerance Coexist?*.
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Transcript

Hi, this is Carly Echevin, the assistant producer of *Beyond the Forum*, a new podcast available now from the Veritas Forum and PRX. The Forum you're about to listen to is featured in *Beyond the Forum*'s first season on *The Good Life*. We interviewed Dr. Mearsloff-Bolf, one of the presenters you're about to listen to, for episode six of our first season, and we talked with him about the role of forgiveness and suffering in a life-worth living.

You can listen to our interview with Mearsloff, access full show notes, and learn more about the rest of our first season by visiting BeyondTheForum.org. Thanks for listening and enjoy the Forum. Welcome to the Veritas Forum. This is the Veritas Forum Podcast.

A place where ideas and beliefs converge. What I'm really going to be watching is which one has the resources in their worldview to be tolerant, respectful, and humble toward the people they disagree with. How do we know whether the lives that we're living are meaningful? If energy, light, gravity, and consciousness are in this street, don't be surprised if you're going to get an element of this in God.

Today we hear from Dr. Mearsloff-Bolf, theologian and founding director of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture, and Dr. Vijay Pindacore, the Robert W. and Elizabeth C. Stanley Dean of Students at Cornell. Together they discuss truth, tolerance, and safe spaces. In a talk titled, "*Can Truth and Tolerance Coexist?*" hosted by the Veritas Forum at Cornell University.

Good evening to everyone. It's wonderful to be here at Cornell. This is my first time.

What an incredible place. And thank you for coming out to this blustery. Is it? Still? Evening.

We have been instructed to give a kind of a personal account of where we stand with regard to the issue at hand. So a kind of spiritual, intellectual journey. That's obviously very difficult to do in five minutes that we each have.

What I thought I might do is just give you four vignettes that for me summarize a kinds of commitments that I have and you'll see where I come from. I was born in former Yugoslavia and I was born at the time when this country was a communist country. My father was a Pentecostal minister.

And it was not a very good thing to be a Christian. It was even worse to be a Pentecostal. It was worse to be a priest and it was even worse to be something like a Pentecostal minister because nobody knew what those Pentecostals were doing.

Nobody could even pronounce the name Pentecostal. And for a while I was quite a rebellious kid and I swore to God that I will never do to my children what my father did to me. I haven't become a Pentecostal minister.

And I was about 16 when I somehow found my way. It's a long story to describe. Found my way back to faith.

Then I found myself as the only openly professing Christian kid in a high school of 3,500 students. Everybody wanted to know why is it that I believed, how it is that I believed. And suddenly I was enmeshed in all sorts of very significant intellectuals, and I was in the spiritual debates which was absolutely great.

But I was definitely a small minority. That actually led me to study philosophy and study theology to become a theologian. And I must say that I've been now a theologian for about 40 years if you count studying for it.

And I have not regretted one moment the decision that I made to be a theologian, partly because I'm very happily committed not just to my discipline, but to what this discipline is actually about. It's about the search for the truth of human existence. The second little vignette that I want to give you is I ended up with Yugoslavia broke up as a communist country and broke up in inter-ethnic strife where you had ethnic groups belonging, three ethnic groups belonging to different religions or denominations of religions at war with one another.

Identities hardened and the war was going on, and the first victim of war often becomes truth. Fake news is what started that war in former Yugoslavia in many ways, or at least what fueled it for quite some time. Commitment then to truth.

Truth that isn't defined internally by what a particular group sees to be true, but transcendent meaning of truth became for me one of the fundamental commitments that I have and ability also to speak that truth publicly was absolutely foundational, both on the basis of the communist experience and also on the basis of my later experience with the breakup of former Yugoslavia. Scroll up a little bit. I have done as a result of the work of thinking about the war in former Yugoslavia, written a book that was mentioned called Exclusion and Embrace, in which I think about reflect about nature of identities, their relationship to the other, and in that context also reflect about the question of the truth.

How can one find the truth that transcends each of these groups, but nonetheless in such a way that each group can, from perspective, from the vantage point where they find themselves, start and pursue a journey toward the truth that can bind the two together. And finally, I want to mention a course that I teach at Yale, that I've started teaching at Yale, at whose heart is what we described as truth seeking conversation. And it's a course called Life Worth Living, and in that course we take six, seven, a number doesn't matter that much.

Various overarching interpretations of life, visions of life, some of them are religious. Generally we do Buddhism, we do Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Some of them are not religious, we do utilitarianism, we do Nietzsche, maybe another secular as well.

And then we ask the hard question for each one of these. Namely, we put all seven, six of them in mutual conversation with one another. I tell my student first day.

Each of these philosophies, religions, makes claim to be true. Now they all can be true, right? We know that, because they say contradictory things to one another, but in this class we will take seriously their claim to be true. We will treat them their claims as truth claims, and we will engage in open and vigorous discussion about the nature of truth in conversation with these traditions.

Class has been now taught for five years at Yale, it is mainly for college students. It is meant not just to be an intellectual journey through various options, but also existential journey through these various options. And I can say it has been a fantastic experience.

We can at the universities engage truth questions seriously, and truth questions across the fairly stable lines of difference and end up enriched. As a rule, we get top ratings for our class because students love both the existential and the intellectual side of it, and I can tell you it is more of my favorite classes that I teach. Thank you very much.

[Applause] Thank you so much for your time. DJ. Text does with your questions.

I wish I could take Maris Love's class. That sounds fascinating. My name is Vijay Penderkor, and we were given the opportunity to talk about what kind of life experiences

led us to having our academic interests, particularly connections with truth, tolerance, inclusivity.

Similarly, I will borrow a page from the idea of vignettes. I think that is a great way to try and communicate about the life experience. I will share two quick vignettes that I think when I look back on my lived experience led me to my academic interests in these concepts.

One is growing up biculturally. My parents are immigrants from India, and me and my sister had a lot of really wonderful experiences as all children, being fortunate enough to be able to travel back to India repeatedly with my parents sometimes for long periods of time because my dad was doing his PhD when I was born. He was doing his master's when my sister was born, and he was in his first job as a faculty member, as a junior faculty member when we were little, very little, and coming of age.

He was really ambitious doing his research trying to get anywhere, and his research area is in India. He would get a grant, and we would go. We got to go back to some villages in southern India where my parents are from in the early to mid 1980s for three months, six months, nine months at a time.

So I had the fortune of missing a fair bit of school, which was great at the time, but I got to experience a way of life that was so dramatically different than life in 1980s Chicago, where our home was. And all these things were happening in my childhood brain and heart that I didn't have answers for. I would go to a place where all of a sudden my body, my physical form, was critically normal, which wasn't the case in Chicago.

I was hyperminoritized in the place I was growing up in. There were not a lot of other Indian kids, and I felt that a lot. And I would go to this other place, and everyone was an Indian kid, or adult.

But I really only interacted and cared about the kids. But my brain, my language, the way I used my hands when I talked, my rough Chicago accent, all of that didn't fit. There was a schism, there was this dissonance.

I had my parents telling me and my sister, we're going home. We got a grant, we're going to go home. I was like, oh, is that home? No, what's Chicago? Oh, that's home too.

Okay. And as I got older and these trips happened with less frequency, but they still happened by fifth grade, sixth grade, the trip's got a lot more angsty and complicated. And I remember thinking being very frustrated about not being able to locate a sense of home very easily.

And for any of you who have parents who are immigrants and have lived this bicultural experience, you might be able to identify with parts of this. So for me, from a very early age, because of this visceral experience of dislocation, relocation, otherness, and

belonging, I'm really interested in how people, particularly young people, come to belong and thrive in new spaces. So as the Dean of Students here at Cornell, and in my research, but also more heavily in my practice, I'm really concerned about how people and students come to belong and thrive here at Cornell.

How do we make this place a viable home for our heterogeneity? And on the other side of things, in terms of my interest in diversity, inclusion, and social justice, which really ground a lot more of my research and writing, me and my sister grew up in faculty housing in Northwestern, and she grew up in a community college. And she grew up in a community college, and she grew up in a community college. And she grew up in a community college.

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And she grew up in a community college. And she grew up in a community college. And by the time I got to college, I was really obsessed with questions of how poverty is created and maintained, how racial divides are created and maintained, what systems are at work that teach us how to interact with each other, or that structure different

outcomes for different communities.

I went to elementary school with a bunch of kids that all seemed pretty sharp. Pretty good people. But by junior high and by early high school, some of them were already serving their first terms in prison.

How does that work? And any of you who have first-hand experiences with those kinds of things know that, you know, you can, even before you have the intellectual language for it, you can know in a more spiritual level that something's really wrong here. And that questions of fairness and inclusion, meritocracy, need to be troubled and investigated more closely. And so those are two personal sets of experiences and vignettes that have led me down the road that led to my academic interest and my work.

[applause] So as we stated in the beginning, the form today is, it's on the topic and truth intolerance coexist. In the dialogue, we're going to have with the two speakers and later on with your questions, we'll center on the intersections between truth convictions as well as tolerance within the context of inclusivity, the role of safe spaces, the role of safe spaces within the university, as well as beyond the university. This is why we have the opening remarks, because their experiences professionally and personally will actually frame their responses.

So the first question, I will start with you, Vijay, and the question I have, and each speaker will have about five minutes for this question. How does truth relate to your social and cultural interactions? And within this question, if you could also define what is truth to you. You know, we were, the Veritas Forum was kind enough to actually provide us with a snapshot of some of the questions we'd be asked ahead of time.

So you think I'd have, you know, an amazingly glib answer for you here. [laughter] And this is the hardest question for me tonight. How does truth shape my social and cultural interactions? I'm not a philosopher, right? So you're going to get a way better answer from Miroslav on this one.

A couple of things that come to mind for me. You know, I think, for me, I think about my social and cultural interactions when I was a teenager and when I was in college. And even in my years after college, in my early 20s, a lack of truth, I think shaped a lot of my social and cultural interactions.

A lack of surety as to who I was really shaped a lot of the friends I was making or not making. I went to college at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. And so I left a complex situation in which I kind of came of age in a black other binary with my own identity being the other and went to an extraordinarily white homogenous space in the mid 90s.

And in trying to find a sense of self at the University, I remember, and I didn't have a very strong sense of self. You know, those experiences by culturalism, of moving into the

Howard Street neighborhood, there was a lot of rich seeds that had been sown, but they hadn't germinated yet by the time I got to college. So it was kind of a hot mess as a freshman and really searching.

And my social and cultural interactions were oftentimes spent trying to figure out how to balance my political commitments to social justice work and to advocacy work for communities of color, which was really important to me as an undergraduate student activist, with the pressures I felt from those communities to not be friends with white people. There was a real divided experience at the University of the time that if you were going to ride or die in communities of color, if these are the communities you're going to show up with, then you were not going to be friends with white people. But white people were 91% of the undergraduate student body.

So I really struggled with that delimiting my opportunity to just experience why I had gone away to Wisconsin. It just didn't make sense to go to Wisconsin and try and pretend I wasn't in Wisconsin for all the years that I was going to be at school. But when I would take different classes or join a club sports team or do something that would put me in contact with white people, that I was really like, "Oh, we have a lot in common.

We like to say movies, we should hang out," or whatever. And then the gaze of judgment from the student of color activist community of like, "You see each other in the quad or in the cafeteria." And it was like, the authenticity checking that I felt was so intense. And I wish I could give you this heroic story of where I was like, "But I found my truth and I just pursued my true friendships." And I didn't.

My lack of an internal truth really led me to then start to doubt, like, "Well, maybe I shouldn't be friends with these folks." I know we have these things in common, but maybe I'm not standing up for my issues if I'm friends with these folks. And so I really pinballed around a lot in that stage of my life. And so, you know, I'm giving you an answer.

I'm giving you a small answer, right? I'm giving you an answer about my time as a college student. But I think it's maybe a more interesting answer for those of you who are in college right now because at that time, the truth that shaped my social and cultural interactions was alienation. And I had a lot of ideas, I had a lot of information, and I just didn't have a lot of wisdom.

And so other people's realities had an enormously shaping influence on my self-awareness and my self-concept. And there was a lot of growing to do. Thank you.

I believe. Okay, we're on. I was going to say that a lot of students in the audience can relate being a hot mess as a freshman.

So it was great to start there. And also trying to find your identity as a college student.

So maybe we'll start with the same question.

How does truth relate to your social and cultural interactions? And within that question, how do you define truth? Yeah, I mean the definition of truth would take us a long time. It would take a long time. Five minutes is a little bit too short for that.

But truth and interactions that we have with one another, I think, which is kind of a count of almost like a rootedness of one's own authenticity in contact and interaction with others. That seems really important and kind of underscore the need to be rooted. And I think that's one way to talk about truth.

I know that very often, especially on campuses, but among professors as well in certain disciplines, truth is kind of looked down upon in certain ways, right? In a sense, nobody, if you take something like a count by Foucault or folks of this sort, truth ends up being a simply mode of exerting power. With other people, truth is a tool. It's not really a commitment that we should have.

We achieve certain goals when we are speaking truth. So all news is fake news. It depends whose fake news is stronger and more powerful than the others if you go in that direction.

And I have realized, especially during the war in former Yugoslavia, when I was thinking about the question of how does one remember rightly what happened to one? And truth there became so significant. Obviously, we have struggles of memories over the past memories in terms of how we reacted with one another. But I've realized how important it is to be committed to seeking truth together.

I think we are truth seeking creatures. For instance, when I was a little bit younger, I loved ski. So California, Mammoth Mountains, fantastic for skiing.

You go chair 23 and you come to the top of the chair 23. On one side is pretty steep double diamond. Two runs.

Wipe out and drop out. Right? Imagine I go to a pub afterwards and I was skiing with a friend and I said to my friend, listen, we came up to the chair 23 and we turned right and went down to drop out. He said, no, no, don't you remember? We turned left and we went down wipe out.

Why does he say that? It matters somehow a sheer piece of information that has no consequence, but still matters that we get it right. But now, what about if I said something like this? I turned down and went down the sheer black eyes run, but my friend, I was saying to third person, but my friend, he chickened out and went all the way around to chair 14, you know? He's a mirror slum. That's not right.

We both didn't ski that. It matters how I told the story because every lack of truthfulness

is a form of injustice in those kinds of situations. We sometimes put justice and truth and opposite side of one another, but actually commitment to truth is a commitment to just relationships and reading relationship in the just kind of way between people.

And that's why truth in relationship matters to us in such a -- so profoundly. It creates a foundation of trust on which we can build a life together and it creates a sense in which my identity is not always warped by another person perception of me or the way they render me to be, which is basically injurious to me. And in that sense, I think truth is important, but I think it's also important and hopefully we'll get to talk about that as well, is what in the pistol of evasions in New Testament we read.

It's important to speak the truth in love, kind of sense that the other person with whom I am searching for truth, if they differ for me, if I find that I have to contrast the truth, to contrast my version of things to his or her version of things that I don't denigrate the person, but actually that I support the person as person, even if they see things very differently than I do. So that when the truth cannot bind us when the truth divide us, that there is some other bridge that holds us as human beings together so that we can be together involved in the search for truth. So I think that kind of common binding is fundamental in the family relations, in friendship relationships, in college, educational experience, in political experience, within nations, between the nations, throughout all the domains of life, I think truth is important, and seeking that truth with respect and even seeking to enhance the other person as a person.

Both of your answers actually link really well with the next set of questions because you both highlighted how your experience of truth or truth convictions also have a relationship with social justice, as well as your relationships with other people. And we were glad I'll start with you for the next set of questions. And this is all connected.

And the first one is, is there a point at which truth commitment is incompatible with inclusivity? And within that same set of question, what do you do when your truth claims seems to directly oppose someone else's view? Yeah, that's one of the toughest questions I think that we are facing this evening. And in fact, we are facing it's tough for us this evening because it is a tough in our mutual relationships precisely that question. How does my commitment to truth, what does it do when it collides, not just with perspective that the person has, but with perspective that is deeply tied to their own identity, deeply held beliefs.

And I think we can see that in many areas of life, but certainly religious domain is one domain where we see that. After all, unless you are just nominally belong to a particular religion, if you are deeply committed, religious commitments are commitments about the most fundamental values that you have. They define the very character of you as a human being.

They provide you with a criteria which you use to assess what is valuable and what is

not. They're the kind of the ultimate thing. That's not just religious truths.

For instance, if you take philosophy of Nietzsche, by the way, I'm a Christian, but Nietzsche is my favorite philosopher. I used to read Nietzsche for devotions. I had him on the bedstand and I would always read a little bit of Nietzsche because I thought he is absolutely spectacular, and all wrong and absolutely spectacular.

And I still continue to read him and teach him. I find him, he has become really good pals and disagree most profoundly on things. But for him too, for his philosophy too, he was about new tables of values that he wanted to establish.

Those new tables of values, everything in life is evaluated on the basis of these new tables of values. That's why he said, crucified against the honest, the honest against the crucified, the two tables of values. Now, is it possible to pursue the question of truth while respecting the identity of that person? Well, I can tell you, my Paul Nietzsche and I are doing really well.

I think I can, right? It's possible to do that because both of us, and I think that's true of Nietzsche, both of us are deeply invested, not simply in our position, but in truth. Truth is something that transcend us. Truth is not something that we claim and desperately hold onto, but truth is something that takes us into freedom, that moves us into itself rather than being possessors somehow of the truth.

And once you perceive things in those terms, I think it's possible then that you will wrestle and wrestle deeply while at the same time keeping friendships, affirming the other person, providing space for other person. If you ask me, is it a good thing that there was Nietzsche in the world? I'd say, yeah, it's a good thing. Even though they disagree with Nietzsche's position, even though it's contrary to a Christian position, I think so.

Right? So, kind of a formation of the goodness of the existence of the validity of a person, while at the same time engaging in very rigorous discussion about whether that's on issues that, on which we disagree. I mean, difficulties, of course, become when it becomes a political issue, when we make decisions about how do we map the social space, because every claim to truth is also a claim for territory within the social space, right? And so, I think then the question becomes, well, is it possible for us to be truth seekers while at the same time being social pluralists? And I would say for myself that absolutely I am a pluralist, social pluralist, because my commitments to the Christian faith. I'm not social pluralism as a compromise to these beliefs.

And maybe we don't have time here for me to develop the position, but actually pluralism as a political philosophy was developed by Christians. And it was developed in the 16th century, early 17th century, by sectarian Christians, who believed most strongly in their positions, but just for that reason, believed that the other person has to have

space to live, has to have right to articulate those positions. First person who articulated this as a public political philosophy and enshrined it in a constitution was Roger Williams in Rhode Island.

Again, a highly particularist Christian who believed in the truth of his convictions, but just for that reason was a pluralist. I think we need to be in the position of this sort where each of us will be pluralists for the particular reasons that each of us as religious or our religious people have. I think Mio Slav just gave us the next very test form topic.

The intersection between social pluralism and truth seeking, DJ, the same question as well, is there a point at which truth commitment and compatible with its inclusivity? And what do you do when your truth claims seems to directly oppose someone's very identity? So let me build off of that fantastic pro seminar we just got from Mio Slav. Rather than speaking about this in the abstract, which will immediately take me out of my depth, let me share a few remarks about what I see happening on college campuses in our country today, which really dovetails with the end of what Mio Slav was talking about, which is in individual interactions, if I'm pursuing the truth and you're pursuing the truth, we can have this rigorous exchange. When you take things to the level of the superstructural, the political, and you weaponize truth in order to claim sectors of social space, to render people, movements, ideas visible and invisible, this is where things get really messy and painful and ugly.

And this is real life, right? And we're living in a time of both populism and extremism right now in our country and around the world. And one of the challenges higher ed faces right now, and as the Dean of Students, I actually play a central role in managing Cornell's approach to free speech, so I think about this all the time. And part of what a university is supposed to do in the American academic tradition is create a space for exactly what Mio Slav was describing, which is the pursuit of multiple truths as frictional as that may be, because that's part of how you form as an intellectual person, an emotional person, a spiritual person, is in the constant churning of this test of ideas, and in the probing of one another's ideas.

And sometimes in the heated and passionate arguments of these ideas. And when you think about the kind of image you get when you think of the American Academy, that's the image, right? But students right now are doing that, and they're linking that agitation to broader social and political structures that make it so that this isn't just about ideas. What I hear from our students who are passionately engaged in a variety of forms of activism, progressive, conservative, all of the isms, is that this isn't just about ideas for them.

So for members of our documented and undocumented community, if they're arguing with students who firmly believe that there shouldn't be undocumented peoples in this country, right? Folks who are part of the Stephen Miller doctrine that advises our current

president on how we should be managing questions of migration and immigration. That's not a contest of ideas for them. That's an existential question.

Do you see me as having the ability to exist? And it's difficult to keep things at the level of civility that we aspire for in the kind of, you know, the emblem of the academy that we hold in our minds and hearts when really things get down to your holding a position that might eradicate my ability to be me. And, you know, at the heart of some of the deepest struggles for social justice and human dignity are these kinds of sometimes life and death issues. If you're a trans person in our society right now, or a genderqueer person in our society right now, you are engaging in conversations that can quickly turn into extremely high risk conversations.

If you realize that you're dealing with someone that thinks that you are aberrational or broken or malformed or a scientific anomaly, and it's difficult to maintain the stance, the intellectual stance of, well, these are competing truth claims because it inherently becomes an ontological question, right, a question of fundamental being. Do I, you know, do I have in your worldview, do I even exist? And so I think that the academy is being tested heavily right now. All of us who work in the university administration are dealing with an aspirational value and a political reality that oftentimes, you know, the people who are dealing with a political reality, that oftentimes struggle to coexist, we aspire to create intellectual pluralism.

Many institutions also have aspirations of dignity, equity, and justice. And our students are doing the best job at raising some of the internal contradictions in intellectual pluralism and questions of dignity and justice. If all viewpoints have the right to exist, what about viewpoints that obliterate other people's humanity? And I don't think that there's easy answers to this.

And as we sort of continue to soul search and find a way forward, I hear from a lot of students here at Cornell who feel like the current tolerance for all viewpoints puts them because of identities they carry at risk for feeling unsafe the entire time they're here learning. And what we know about safety and learning is that if you truly feel unsafe, it's very difficult to flourish. And that keeps me up at night.

Just to register a very important issue, I completely agree that is fundamental. What I've heard at the very tail end of what you, Vijay, have said is that actually the nature of our humanity, what does it mean to be human? That may be one of the central issues that's being debated. Is there something like a universal generic humanity, are all forms of such generic notions of humanity inherently oppressive? Can we think of humanity in a very particular, is it in Teterian kinds of ways? This is an issue on our campuses, this is an issue in the European right.

This is an issue all over the place which I think we're not sufficiently debating and you're right to put your finger right on that question. And the truth takes us right to that

question of nature of our humanity. Along with the nature of our humanity, I think you're highlighting Vijay, the fact that the university is supposed to be a safe place.

Not only a safe place, but a place also for someone to feel that they have a safe space to exist. So that leads to our next to last question, which is what world should the university play in the tension between safe spaces and freedom of speech? And I'm adding to this freedom of behavior. What's that we hear? [laughter] Oh boy.

Oh, here's a question. Yeah, right. So I think that, you know, we were, Miraslav and I were lucky enough to have dinner at the Chesterton house before coming over here.

Some delicious Thai food and this question of safe spaces came up over dinner. So the dinner conversation was heavy. But the, so I'll share a couple of thoughts and these might be somewhat discontinuous, but hopefully I can find a way to link them all up by the end of my thoughts.

So I'll call them all up by the end of my five minutes of rambling. Oh, two and a half minutes. Oh, okay.

I'll share one and a half thoughts. So one, I think that the, we haven't done a good job of sort of delineating different forms of safety, right? But the truth of it is that universities prioritize physical safety over emotional safety. And we should be more transparent about that.

If you look at codes of conduct, if you look at a variety of different documents, there is a hierarchy of safety, right? Your physical safety is more important than your emotional safety. And so we can debate whether that's appropriate or not, but that is the current status quo. The, another thing that comes to mind in, when thinking about safety, that, another really important set of ideas to pick apart is the difference between safety and safety.

Am I putting it in and out? Okay. I don't know if that's something that can be dealt with at the top. Or do you want me to put the hand on the mic? So I'll try.

Do you mind if I use? So I'm going to be coming in twice as loud now. But the other thing is, I think we have to be careful and really spend time on packing as a community, the difference between safety and comfort. And this, when we don't do a good enough job of unpacking the difference between safety and comfort, we end up with a lot of competing truth claims that have not been thoroughly interrogated.

Around when students start to say, well, I didn't feel safe when somebody made that point that I found offensive. And when being offended is somehow being conflated with being unsafe, it becomes very difficult to carry out the intellectual project of the American University. So I think it's also important that we continue as a community, as a community of truth seekers, to really interrogate the difference between safety and

comfort.

And the reasonable amounts of discomfort are a critical part of learning. But being safe is also a critical part of learning. So how do we create greater tolerance for discomfort as we pursue truth? And a third thought is that safe spaces, when I think about safe spaces in a very functional way, I think it's really important in a very tangible brick and mortar sense that human beings have found that they are not safe.

And being have physical places where they can go, where in that space they feel normal. And one of the things that elite institutions are grappling with heavily right now is that the vast majority of elite institutions in America, IVs or non-IVs, were extraordinarily homogenous for several centuries. And about the last 10 or 15 years have become extremely diverse, right? So whether you look at racial demographics, socioeconomic, country of origin, gender and sexuality, all of these things are diversity now compared to 10 years ago at Cornell.

It's stunning if you look at all these numbers. And that's really exciting. And part of that compositional diversity gives us a challenge in belonging.

Because just because we're extremely diverse campus doesn't mean that it's easy for everybody to come to a genuine sense of belonging. And part of what it takes to brave the heterogeneity are home bases where you feel normal. And so safe part of the way I try and reposition safe spaces in a landscape where our media is really making a mockery of what these ideas are actually about.

The popular media always loves to throw around safe spaces in inaccurate ways. When you think about the purpose of an LGBT resource center, a women's center, an Asian American center, a black living cultural center, places like this. These are spaces where community members that oftentimes were not part of American higher education for its first multiple centuries and are suddenly here and are constantly reminded of their newness and otherness in a myriad of ways can go to these places and in those places be normal.

And that's really important for being a human being and being able to breathe. And you don't spend your whole life in the safe space. You spend a couple hours in the safe space so you can go back out and be brave the rest of the time.

And those places are critical if we're going to be a university that goes beyond simply admitting diversity but empowering diversity to flourish. Thank you so much Vijay. I think it was interesting how you started by talking about emotional safety and physical safety.

I think giving your status within the academic that you have a different understanding of these different types of safety. I think as a student, as an undergraduate student at Cornell being the mostly white institution and being a black female undergrad, I think I

worry much more about physical safety. And as a faculty now I advise a lot of students to have a different understanding of emotional safety and physical safety.

I think that was interesting. Okay, the same question. What role should the university play in the tension between safe spaces and freedom of speech as well as freedom of behavior? Yeah, I agree with so much of what Vijay has said, especially the kind of sense of space that is to say physical environment which feel as a home and which are function as a home to students or to any of us actually in all the interaction that we are talking about, especially in university settings, I think that's a personal thing that's really very important.

I also think that safety isn't just feature of space, it is a feature actually of interactions. And a lot of attention needs to be paid then on the character of one-on-one interaction to create a sense of safety. Let me give you an example of how I practice it, not that it's necessarily always exemplary, but maybe this one particular case is a successful form of practicing something that I think may be applicable more widely.

So I'm writing right now an introduction to the revised edition of *Exclusion in Embrace*, which is about identity, negotiating identities, truth claims, pursuit of justice. All of these things are connected with that, are addressed in that book. And I'm taking up that question in the context in which politics of identity, both at the universities and the world at large, has exploded in its importance.

And one of the significant actors in the identity politics worldwide is New European Right, which is from my perspective, the exact opposite of where I personally as a Christian find myself. So I was at a conference where one of the main philosophers, of the German philosophers of the new European right was present. And I was just then contemplating or writing new introduction to *Exclusion in Embrace*.

I thought, okay, so let's do it this way. I'm going to talk to Caroline Sommerfeld, and we've been in correspondence, we've been reading each other's work. I'm going to ask her what she thinks about *Exclusion in Embrace*, how would she respond to this? I'll try to engage her on all the central kinds of issues, and over the past three months, we have had exchange of ideas.

We couldn't be further apart. My text is an anti-identitarian text, right? She is an identitarian philosopher, right? But it was possible for us to engage, because it mattered to me when, in this introduction, that I articulate her position, in the way that she would recognize herself and say, "Mero, so yes, that's what I hold to." I'm not distorting her position. My way of respecting her is showing that even her position, I'm going to take seriously enough that I'm going to articulate it in such a way that she can smile and say, "Mero, so even though you disagree with me, you've stated what I believe and stated it correctly." So now, this is a safe space for her, right? I have not distorted her.

She has not distorted me as well in the process of our interaction, translate it to our everyday interaction about identity questions, about all sorts of questions that we engage. When you do something of that sort, you say, "I respect you. I honor not just you as a person, but I honor your position in such a way that I need to be careful that I articulated the way you want it articulated so that we can have a conversation that's productive rather than we are sitting in each of our little echo chambers and throwing stones in each other without truly coming to any deeper understanding of each other." We are now at the time for the news coming on stage at the time of wrapping up the prepared questions, and we are going to entertain some of your questions.

And I get to have the truth power to choose. What's that exclusion and embrace? [laughter] So I'll start with this one. "To what degree do you believe that truth may ask someone to change? Where's the line between challenging someone's humanity and challenging this person to alter a way of living and thinking?" "May we slide or start with you?" Yeah.

[laughter] No, no, no. I'm with this question. I think it's a very important and fundamental question.

I mean, we encounter that in this course, life worth living all the time. As a matter of fact, what I do in this class, so we read original texts from these philosophies and religions, we spend time discussing them, trying to understand through us a great of asking the question, "What is the vision of the good light?" Then, this is all under presupposition that they're making truth claims. Now, if a philosophy of religion is making truth claims, that means that they're not talking just about adherence of that religion.

They're talking about everyone. They're making truth claims about everyone, which is to say, I say to my students, my class, they're talking about you, which is to say, if you disagree, they want you to change your opinion. So now, toward the end of a class, I want you, us all, to imaginatively enter into that world and imagine yourself that you're embracing that position and ask yourself, "How would I need to change? What would that philosophy demand of me?" Let's talk about that.

I think that is really all fundamental philosophies. Call that from us. But I see that as the challenge to our perceptions of humanity as a way of kind of purifying, if you want, my own position about it.

In interfaith dialogues, I've never shied away from saying what I exactly believe, but I've always wanted to hear what they think of me and what they think that I should do. And often, that has come to my good, that perspective from the other person and how they see me acting and what they would demand of me to do. I think where we get into trouble is if we do not have not only freedom of speech, but if we don't guarantee the right of another person to not just disagree in act, but to have a space in which they can

protect it by law, disagree with us.

Otherwise, you end up having either open or hidden forms of persecution. I've lived through persecution quite a bit. I've been jailed because of Christian faith.

I know what it means to some of these truths to call your existence into question. But on the other hand, I've written a dissertation on Karl Marx, the same Marxists that have put me to jail. I've written about their philosophy.

And that's a good thing. So I would distinguish between political and philosophical, religious side of that question. Question for you.

Do you remember the question? Are we peed? Are we peed? To what degree do you believe that truth may ask someone to change? And along with that question, ways aligned between challenging someone's humanity and challenging this person to alter a way of leaving and thinking or end or thinking? I really like Mira Slob's answer to that question. So... I don't have great answers to this question. I'll start with that.

I think that when I hear the first part of the question, which is, you know, when can truth ask someone to change? I think that there's truths about life that require us to change all the time. And so to step back, you know, I know a lot of my answers have been rooted in sort of like new social movements thinking, right? The context of power and identity and voice. But to step back from that and think more about the human experience, the sense that we always get to dictate who we want to be, I don't think is very accurate to my experience of life.

There have been truths that have asked me to change repeatedly. The truth of finding a spouse and getting married required tremendous change in how I thought about my time, my autonomy, my energy, what it meant to compromise, what it meant to grow with a person and not just think about myself in my own trajectory. I think about the truth of becoming a father.

I have a three-year-old daughter and a one-year-old daughter. And their truth dictates that I change all the time. And so part of what I think is important, you know, the second part of that question was, you know, said something about, is it okay for, you know, one person's truth to rub up against another person's way of thinking or living? And something I think about is, you know, do I have a humanity that transcends the way I'm living right now? Am I the sum of my lifestyle? And I think about this a lot because I've gone through sort of many identity crises at different moments in my adult life.

So after all of that dramatic and angsty teenage stuff, I still have the journey, right? I mean, I think about how difficult it's been, you know, love my daughters. Let me start with this. For any parents in the room, you know, I think you'll get me on this.

I love my children. But there's been a huge identity crisis after having them because I

never get to do, I mean, I rarely get to do the stuff that defined me before I had them. My time is completely upside down now.

And so what I've had to reorganize in my understanding of myself is that I am not the sum of my hobbies, the way I spend my time, my activities. I'm not the sum of my Instagram feed. I'm not the sum of my trophies, my accomplishments.

I was saying to Marislav, as we were chatting, we both have young children. And we were reflecting on just how difficult it is to write and publish at any reasonable rate when you have small children at home. And I have times where I feel bad about that.

I look at my CV and I'm like, "Whoa." There's like some sort of apocalypse in 2016 in your publication. "Oh, my older daughter." But my humanity is more than those things. And so part of what I've been doing in my own life is de-pathologizing life experiences that require me to change.

Because what I experienced between 25 to 40, I'm 40 now, is having really serious identity crises every time I was required to change. And so I'm hoping that in the next 40 years I'm going to be required to change just as frequently. I know that's going to be true, but I'm hoping that it can be less painful.

And one of the ways that I hope to get there is by decoupling my humanity from the sum of how I'm spending my time or thinking so that when those get radically reorganized by external events, that I won't come into a crisis of who am I. That's tremendously helpful. The distinction between the ways of living and underlying humanity that is in the kind of substratum of what is in the flux all the time. Sometimes I think that the word humanity misleads us, because humanity can be used as humanness, the sheer fact of me being human.

And it can mean the ways of living, even humaneness, what it means for me to be humane, right? And humanity kind of covers both of these, and it will be helpful sometimes to disentangle this and speak of nobody at any time. Neither I myself nor anybody else ought to call into question my humaneness or the fact of me being human. But the ways in which I live out my humanity, I challenge all the time, and others my challenge as well.

So this question, I think you've addressed this in one of your earlier answers, but the way that the question is posed is to expound upon what you said before. Is it helpful or hurtful for universities to create temporary emotional safe spaces? If we all agree, this is not the real world. Does this not belong to families, communities or friends? I can say a lot about this, but I'm not the speaker.

I'll give you my fortune on that. You can say. So, be sure.

Whenever I'm moderating to, I'm always like, "Oh, I wish I was on the panel." So, you

are. Give me that mic, and I'll ask you that question. You know, there's a learning development theorist, Vygotski, right? And there's something called the Vygotski in moratorium, right? Which is this idea that we actually have to create spaces that are free from certain kinds of consequences in order for people to learn.

In the sense that this plays out, it's easier to illustrate with small children than it is with college students, but the theory holds true. If my toddler is reaching up to grab a burning hot skillet on the stove, and I'm like, "Yo, real world toddler, you're going to learn by burning your hand." You know, then this is not a good plan for the long-term development of this child, right? So, there are so many ways in which we have to actually create alternatives to reality in order to usher learning. Knowing that reality is around the corner.

And we do it all the time with very young people. And then there's something, and I'm sure historians and philosophers have this really well mapped out, but there's something in our society that just says, "Well, you're an adult now. That can't happen anymore.

This is a real world." And also, there's this very sort of popular discourse about, "Oh, college, it's such an alternative to the real world." You know, we're too soft on college students today, right? And in the real world, you never get away with that. And there are times when that's probably accurate, right? There are times when probably there should be greater consequences for certain behaviors. But the whole point of having this be a learning laboratory is that we have to create ways in which you can experiment and fail, not just intellectually, but interpersonally, emotionally, and spiritually, so that you emerge transformed.

If every mistake you made in college came with the ultimate consequences, then this wouldn't be as great a learning laboratory. And so I think that for this to be preparatory for the real world, we should make college as transformational spaces possible, and those spaces tend to give people grace to fall down and get back up again. There was a second part to the question.

Does this map belong? The question was regarding universities being helpful or hurtful in creating these emotional spaces which you addressed. And the second part is, "Doesn't this wall belong to families, communities or friends?" Yeah, yeah, you know, I mean, look, ideally, sure, it would be amazing if every one of us had families, communities, whatever we mean by that, and friends that gave us the Vygotsky and moratorium so that maybe the university didn't have to be it. But what I know about our students and the human experience is that that's not necessarily true.

Many people come to the university and they're actually trying to get away from their family. If they're coming from a permit which was toxic or abusive or unhealthy or unsafe, they're coming to the university and they don't have good friends in their life. Or they're coming to the university from a community that they thought was a healthy

community and they quickly learned, "Wow, that community that was really deeply entrenched in wasn't a very great community for me." And so I think, you know, part of what we have the opportunity to create in a university is a community.

And to be really intentional about the community we create, just in case the people learning in our midst aren't fortunate enough to have other communities that can be nurturing to them. And I know many students here and other institutions I've worked at that don't have that, that don't have those support systems. And so the university has can fill an important void in many people's lives.

May you slap, you will not get away from this question. Are you getting away from it? You are on the hot seat, no? So is it helpful or hurtful for universities to create temporary emotional safe spaces if we all agree that this is not the real world? Does this not belong to families, communities or friends? Well, I think it belongs to families and communities and friends, but I think that university, the way it functions now is not that people are with their families and then go to school at university. They leave their home and go to university, that becomes their wider community.

So I think in the outside world we all have spaces of this sort, right? But those kinds of spaces need to be created. I mean I know many for instance Christian groups at the university, they have their own safe space, they have their own safe space a little bit outside of the university. Chesterton House is one of such spaces and I think that's a very good thing for them and I think it satisfies a certain kind of profound need that people have in order to stabilize the kinds of visions and the way they perceive themselves be in a community that gives them a kind of positive feedback in the crisis in which they might find themselves.

I don't think that means that they're not there for challenge to rethink their who they are, how they are living their lives and so forth. It just means that they can retreat and then as Vijay has said, go back into that wider world and be challenging, sometimes in profound ways. I don't think that I think universities should have, a question is only how much, what ought to be done, but whether I don't think should be a question.

I think that intellectual exchange and I think we agree on this and during our lunch dinner actually we had the same conversation. That doesn't mean that intellectually there wouldn't be a challenge and there wouldn't be a sharp arguments that are happening. Once intellectually you cannot articulate your position, then it becomes I think from my perspective difficult.

While at the same time, keeping my, what I said earlier, I think the person articulating a position to someone has a responsibility to respect the humanity and dignity of the person to whom they're articulating that. Forget about rights, I think they have rights to that, but think about responsibility. Certainly I as a Christian would say, I have to speak truth in love which is to say taking the individuality, the personhood of the person with

whom I speak seriously and honor them as persons, honor their positions that they have, not agree with them, but honor them.

That seems to me, Apostle Peter writes in his first epistle, it says it has actually command. It's surprising to a number of people, especially those who don't know the Bible, many of those who know the Bible. It says honor everyone.

Honor everyone. That's a command. And I think that creates an intellectual safe space to disagree and sometimes disagree in strenuous ways because you're being honored by in that disagreement.

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