

The Triggers We Need

Dr. Gloria C. Duffy, President and CEO

A **DEBATE IS SIMMERING** on American college campuses about posting “trigger warnings” before course material or presentations that contain descriptions of discrimination, hate crimes, sexual assault, violence and abuse. Some colleges warn students before presenting such material, concerned that it may precipitate discomfort, panic attacks, or flashbacks of abuse or violence the student may have personally suffered.

A recent Huffington Post article refers to such trigger warnings, and related “safe spaces” on campus free from challenges to one’s identity, as “potentially lifesaving,” for people who may suffer from panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or mental health issues.

Certain institutions, notably the University of Chicago, do not support “trigger warnings,” preferring to emphasize free expression. As the Class of 2020 was recently advised in a letter from the dean of students, “Our commitment to academic freedom means that we do not support so-called ‘trigger warnings,’ we do not cancel invited speakers because their presentations might be controversial, and we do not condone the creation of intellectual ‘safe spaces’ where individuals can retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own.”

I see this issue a little bit differently than either the proponents of trigger warnings, or opponents like the University of Chicago. I oppose trigger warnings, but not just on grounds of free speech.

I believe we need to be shocked, including by graphic descriptions, into realizing the brutality of what has happened in our world, and reminded frequently of the violence and abuse that continues. If we are not informed, how can we identify behavior or circumstances that lead to abuse? How can we recognize abuse when it is disguised, or rationalized or excused? How can we work effectively to prevent violence, and be strongly motivated to protect those who are vulnerable?

In the summer of 1967, returning from a trip to Alaska, our family took a ferry south through the Inland Waterway. I always brought a stack of books on our family adventures, and my reading selection for this voyage was *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, by William Shirer, published in 1960. This 1,250 page book exposed in graphic detail the horrors of the Nazi regime and the genocide against the Jews, drawn from captured documents of the Third Reich, eyewitness accounts, and testimony at the Nuremberg Trials.

It was raining throughout our voyage, so I spent three solid days sitting on the indoor observation deck of the ship, gliding past the fog-shrouded trees, immersed in this story of horrible brutality. At age 14, I was very disturbed by what I was reading, and I definitely had nightmares. There was, of course, no trigger warning.

That early, unprepared exposure to the story of the Holocaust shocked me into realizing that there is never any excuse for such

brutality, made me aware of the dangers of totalitarianism, and left me determined to do what I could to oppose such inhumanity.

In my early twenties, I read the Strategic Bombing Survey conducted by the United States in Europe and the Pacific after World War II. The Pacific survey documented the effects of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. No trigger warning there. Understanding the devastating effects of nuclear blast and radiation on the Japanese population helped spark my commitment to diminish the possibility that nuclear weapons would be used again.

Journalism and literature have taken me on many other excursions into darkness. I read all of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s novels about the Soviet gulag, as well as books on the bloody siege of Stalingrad. Erik Larson’s *In the Garden of Beasts* is a recent further exploration of Nazi crimes, as is the biography I’m currently reading of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian executed for trying to protect the German churches from Nazism. The Spanish Inquisition, human trafficking,



Photo courtesy of Gloria Duffy

I don't believe it is right to shelter ourselves, students or the general population, from ... details of wrongdoing.

sexual violence, elder abuse—all of these stories are important to inform us, and they strengthen our resolve to be on the right side in protecting victims and standing against violence and abuse.

It’s one thing for a soldier immediately recovering from PTSD, or a person who has just experienced sexual violence to be protected against immersion in triggering stories. But I don’t believe it is right to shelter ourselves, students or the general population, from distressing and even disgusting details of wrongdoing.

We need to be challenged and provoked to do the right thing. If we are, we are less likely to be Holocaust deniers or “good Germans,” or to countenance the banality of evil. If we have been informed and shocked by it, we are more likely to recognize abuse and stand against it, whether it is in our individual lives, or in society at large.