Standing Our Ground in Kern County: A Perspective on Intellectual Freedom and Censorship

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Recently, a young professor without tenure at Bakersfield College was advised not to participate in a college-wide presentation on a controversial topic. The reason: apparently, the advice giver felt that the professor’s chances for tenure would be diminished if she broached such a subject. My initial response was outrage: who would give such terrible advice? Then, I recognized the advice was well meaning, albeit terrifying. What does intellectual freedom mean at Bakersfield College if speaking about one’s scholarly interest puts tenure in jeopardy? If BC faculty can’t express controversial ideas without putting our careers at risk, do we dare assign readings that challenge conventional wisdom or the mores of Kern County?

Choosing readings is fraught with risk in Kern County. Recently, The Bakersfield Californian reported that parents of a local high school student are seeking to remove the classic American novel The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn from the curriculum. Challenges to Twain’s novel are not unusual, for although Huck’s slave companion Jim is heroic, those who skim instead of read only see the word “nigger.” Without considering the historic context of the novel, they label it racist when the novel presents the antithesis of racism.

This kind of narrow perspective exemplifies those who seek to censor, and Huck Finn is just a recent example. A few years ago, parents whose daughter attended East Bakersfield High School sought to remove Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye from the curriculum. Myriad rationales for censoring the novel were given, but the recurrent theme was that the book was dirty, pornographic. Clearly, anyone who calls The Bluest Eye pornographic doesn’t understand what pornography is. Pornography seeks to titillate, “to cause sexual arousal.” Nothing about the rape
in *The Bluest Eye* is titillating; it is tragic and horrifying. In this novel and others, Morrison confronts the terrible consequences of racism and self-hate.

Although the student whose parents who initiated the protest against the novel was offered an alternative assignment, that solution was unacceptable to these parents. They believed they should be the judges for every Kern County student. As they saw it, their view was superior to the statewide panel that placed *The Bluest Eye* on the approved reading list; their view was superior to the panel that awarded Morrison the Nobel Prize in Literature. After much consideration and several board meetings, letter-writing campaigns, and media coverage, the board of the Kern High School District did not capitulate to censorship, but neither did it repudiate censorship. The board upheld the right for teachers within the district to assign the novel, but only in English honors classes. While the board was to be commended for not censoring the novel outright, the decision was largely symbolic. Today no high school in the KHSD has a class set of *The Bluest Eye*. To the knowledge of local high school librarians, no teacher has assigned the novel since the campaign to have it censored. So while the novel wasn’t officially censored, in essence, it is.

An earlier incident reveals that high school boards aren’t always so adverse to censorship. At times, unfortunately, administrators and trustees take sides with the would-be censors or become the censors themselves. One such case occurred in Wasco, when English teacher Lee McCarthy added John Gardner’s *Grendel* and Nobel winner Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* to her senior English class’s reading list in 1983. *Grendel* is based on the classic epic poem *Beowulf*, and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is regarded as one of Garcia Marquez’s masterpieces. Suddenly, in 1985, the superintendent and board required that McCarthy send permission slips requiring parental signatures for both books. The next year, the
books were simply removed from the district’s approved list of readings—with no reason given. In 1987 with the support of the ACLU and People for the American Way, she challenged the removal in court in McCarthy v. Fletcher. A Kern County judge dismissed the case without trying it; but McCarthy persisted and in 1989, an appellate court ruled in her favor, asserting that books couldn’t be banned for religious reasons and that “legitimate educational concerns” must be presented and proven. McCarthy’s victory is court is a tribute to the rightness of her cause—and to the strength of her character and her legal support.

However, the impulse to censor in Kern County doesn’t occur only on the high school level. Here at Bakersfield College, in the early 1990s several students challenged the Rita Mae Brown’s bildungsroman entitled Rubyfruit Jungle. According to Gloria Dumler, one of the English professors who assigned the novel, a few students “refused to read it since it was a positive novel about a lesbian.” In spite of media coverage of the students’ challenge to the book, the English department and the college, according to Dumler, “stood squarely behind us.” Two decades earlier, in 1973, a few community members sought to censor The Death of Artemio Cruz by Mexican author Carlos Fuentes, which was optional reading in a Mexican literature class. Before taking action, President John Collins read the book and did some research. He discovered that the novel was assigned at Harvard and Notre Dame, among other universities. To a standing room only crowd at a board of trustees meeting, Collins recommended that the book not be banned from a college-level course. He argued, “Authors simply chronicle the acts of their characters. We do not have to approve of those characters, what they say, what they think, or what they feel.” The board agreed—unanimously. Collins stood up for the book—and it remained on the course’s reading list.
Whether controversial books and ideas are read and discussed is incumbent upon the strength of intellectual freedom and the will to stand up against those who seek to censor. Without institutional support, standing up against the forces that seek to censor can be daunting. The censorship of John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* in Kern County certainly bears that out. Librarian Gretchen Knief was the newly appointed county librarian when she received word that the Board of Supervisors had summarily banned the novel from county libraries. The year was 1937, and the Depression was in full force. Although the board had just hired Knief, the supervisors apparently didn’t care to hear her opinion about censoring Steinbeck’s novel.

While Knief worked behind the scenes, writing the supervisors individually and conferring with the California State Librarian, Mabel Gillis, she never spoke publically about the ban in spite of the furor the ban caused. In her private letters to the board members, she clearly enunciated her position against censorship: “If that book is banned, what book will be banned tomorrow? . . . It is such a vicious and dangerous thing to begin . . . . Ideas don’t die because a book is forbidden reading.” Although Knief attended several board meetings devoted to the controversy, she was never asked to speak, nor did she volunteer to speak. In her letters to Gillis, she recounts the political machinations of those who orchestrated the ban, yet she remained, officially, silent. Gillis encouraged her to keep quiet, writing that Knief could do no good if she was fired.

In spite of public protest, the Board of Supervisors upheld the ban of *The Grapes of Wrath*. However powerless she felt to challenge the board and the political powers backing the ban, Knief did enact her own form of protest. Without conferring with the board, she initiated her own way around the ban. She couldn’t circulate Kern County’s copies of the novel in Kern County, but she offered the books to other California libraries. So Kern County’s books were sent around
the state and checked out to readers outside of Kern County. This continued until Supervisor Stanley Abel heard about it. And when the board ordered that the books be returned to Kern County, Knief complied. The novels sat on a shelf in her office until the ban was rescinded. This episode of Kern County history haunts Kern County and is the subject of a 2008 book by Rick Wartzman entitled *Obscene in the Extreme*.

The Kern County Library has not always capitulated in the face of censorship. When I was a young children’s librarian, a school district within my library’s service area demanded that I remove a book from the shelves of the Oildale Branch Library. The book was far being great literature, but it was popular and its theme—a child dealing with a single parent dating—was relevant to many children. When I wouldn’t remove the book from the collection, my branch librarian and the children’s coordinator at library headquarters were fully supportive of my stand. More importantly, I knew that my job was not at risk. With institutional support, I was empowered to stand firm to my belief that children had a right to read that book.

Institutional support made the difference. Knief’s powerlessness in spite of her strongly held belief against censorship prevented her from anything but behind-the-scenes protest. That same vulnerability haunts teachers and librarians who must confront boards, parents, and community forces that have power over them. The American Library Association, which takes a strong stand against censorship, publishes an annual account of attempts, successful or not, to censor books. The majority of the challenges occur in schools, school libraries, or libraries controlled by community boards. In many cases, the librarian or teacher or library clerk who might “defend” the book is also beholden to the community or board for her employment. Like Knief, these individuals become pawns to those who have more political power than they do. Many times, they surrender instead of mounting a counter attack, which might jeopardize their
jobs. Most do not have the courage or tenacity of Wasco teacher Lee McCarthy.

Without McCarthy’s tenacity or the security of intellectual freedom, taking the safe course can be tempting. But I learned that even “safe” choices are questioned in communities as conservative as ours. One semester in English 1A, a particularly religious student was in my class; I knew of her deep faith because she had been enrolled in the prerequisite composition class with me. I didn’t really think much about her religious views until she came to me to tell me she was dropping the class. Since she was doing very well, I was puzzled and asked her why. She said she couldn’t tolerate the reading I had assigned. I was truly puzzled, so I asked her what she found objectionable in Arthur Miller’s *The Death of a Salesman*. She replied that the characters used God’s name in vain. As I tried to convince her to stay, I asserted that Miller was realistically capturing the language of Willy Loman and his sons. I also asked her how she could stand to sit outside the classroom, where the air was thick with the profanity of her fellow students. Somehow, to her, real life was different. Ultimately, I convinced her to stay, saying that she would be happier when we read the next assigned work, Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*. In the meantime, she “coped” with reading the Miller play by having someone line through all of the blasphemy with a thick black felt pen. But she wasn’t any happier reading *A Raisin in the Sun*, I suppose because in the play, the daughter challenges Mama’s faith in God. To the student’s credit, she didn’t seek to have the books banned from the curriculum; she was willing to drop a class in which she was earning an A to avoid reading books like these.

Clearly, I hadn’t chosen these works because they were safe; I’d chosen them because they exemplified our struggle with the American Dream, the class’s theme. Never would I have anticipated that college students (or their parents, for that matter) would or could object to reading these two classic American plays. But, for this student, these great plays offended her
faith. Although I knew her distress was heartfelt, it didn’t shake my faith; I assigned the plays in following semesters and assigned far more controversial works over the course of my career.

What this student’s objections taught me is how perilous it is for faculty to try to make “safe” choices. I don’t know what would have satisfied her sensibilities, short of a religious tract. Accommodating such narrow views is not the role of a college.

Would any of us compromise our intellectual freedom by assigning only “safe” books, by discussing only politically correct subjects, by avoiding the controversial? When I consider the possibility of such pragmatism, I am reminded of Orwell’s 1984 and Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451. But they too are books that are often challenged, often censored, perhaps because they show the dangers of succumbing to the forces that seek to impose narrow limits on individual inquiry and expression today.

Just as individual freedoms in other areas of American life must be constantly defended, it falls to us to protect academic freedom in our classrooms and to demand that our academic institutions remain committed to the freedom to think.