THE RIGHT TO INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM

A STATEMENT BY THE PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION SOCIETY

A vigorous democracy continuously builds upon the faith that in matters of public policy the people can decide what is best for them as a result of open discussion. A democratic people puts its trust in procedures that provide a hearing for contending beliefs and the weighing of differing ideas. Anything which prevents or restricts the process of public inquiry and the free communication of ideas interferes with the process by which the people decide what is good in every aspect of their common life. In this manner, they seek to improve the institutions which serve them.

We have a distinguished tradition which affirms the right to engage in free and open inquiry into problems of public concern. Our Founding Fathers, knowing the free exchange of ideas to be indispensable to the progress of a free people, provided that “Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of Speech.” Throughout our history we have attained, even in perilous times, a vital and abiding faith in the free expression and examination of ideas. Jefferson affirmed clearly this deeply held value. “If there be any among us who would wish to dissolve this Union or to change its republican form, let them stand undisturbed as monuments of the safety with which error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it.” This tradition has been the keystone of this country’s greatness.

When ideas are not freely exchanged and judged on their merits, decisions and judgments are controlled by the arbitrary authorities of the moment. Then, to hold a belief at variance with the views of those who hold arbitrary power is to risk suppression, perhaps by an official police power. Tyranny, rooted in the effort to control the thoughts of men, may gradually come upon us if in timidity or thoughtlessness we fail to practice our tradition of speaking, hearing, thinking and choosing.

Mature minds cannot be developed where ideas deemed dangerous are kept out of our common life. We must provide, therefore, those conditions which make the full range of alternatives freely available for public inspection. To the degree that the conditions of open inquiry and communication are established we need have no fear but that our citizens will choose policies that advance the common good. Failure to accept this responsibility is to deny the very basis of self-government and thereby to surrender to tyranny.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION SOCIETY is devoted to the belief that ideas are important in the affairs of men. Its members work at the tasks of clarifying the meaning and determining the worth of beliefs by which we live and regulate our community affairs. It seeks to promote the conditions by which the operation of today’s institutions, particularly the school, may be improved.

Although the members of the Society hold different philosophical points of view, they are united in their commitment to a free society. The Society, valuing with one voice the basic principle of free intelligence, seeks, through making clear to others the grounds of its position, the fostering and extending of this fundamental democratic principle.
Consequently, the freedom to inquire is a public necessity. Our society will be renewed not by those who know no other way to live but only by those who, knowing others, prefer the democratic way. Thus, the rights to inquire, to hear, to speak, are not rights we hold privately, but rights we share in common through our citizenship.

It thus becomes the duty of thoughtful citizens to protest the suppression of freedom of thought, inquiry, and communication wherever it may occur. In each instance, where the rights to hear and study and explore ideas are infringed, there is a present danger to our way of life and to the freedom of each of us. These rights should be exercised, to be sure, in a thoughtful manner, with full regard for the obligations of personal sincerity and integrity and a commitment to the ways of a free society. Yet responsible inquiry and expression are best safeguarded and nourished when intellectual freedom is held so dear that we protect the right of individuals to express even the most unwelcome ideas.

In the light of these considerations we affirm that the indispensable condition for the preservation and enrichment of our democratic heritage is the full and free examination of ideas. A living danger to a free society exists whenever a particular interested group appropriates for itself the right to censure ideas, to determine what others may hear. This course, though pursued in the name of democracy, can lead only to the subversion of our way of life. It is the obligation of a democratic community to provide the maximum opportunity for the full, free and responsible exchange of ideas on matters of public concern.

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