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Why You Won't Grow Up At College

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Greg and Jonathan Haidt Lukianoff, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting up a Generation for Failure* (New York: Penguin, 2018).

The university is a key institution in our society, helping the young navigate their transition to adulthood. From its inception, the university has striven to devote itself to the “cause of truth” to “enable people to come to the full measure of their humanity” (*Ex Corde Ecclesia*, 4, 5). Because of this unique mission, college campuses have often found themselves at the heart of fiery debates regarding speech and academic freedom as individuals and groups have argued over how universities must live out their commitments to the pursuit of truth and education of the person.

Thus, while the existence of turmoil at universities is nothing new, Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt argue that the *nature* of these controversies has changed over the last few years in a way that reflects unique and serious challenges facing today’s university students. Lukianoff, a constitutional lawyer serving as president and CEO of the Foundation of Individual Rights in Education and Haidt, a psychologist on faculty at New York University’s Stern School of Business, identified some of these trends in a popular 2015 article in *The Atlantic*. In light of new developments on university campuses that followed the publishing of the article, Lukianoff and Haidt expanded their arguments in *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting up a Generation for Failure*. Their book intends to be a warning to parents, universities and society in general to stop promoting the three “Great Untruths” if we wish to help form our children into competent adults capable of thinking, dialoguing, and sustaining a democracy.

The book opens with an allegory narrating the authors’ supposed voyage to Greece to visit “Misoponos,” the modern-day oracle of an ancient god of stupidity referenced by Aristophanes. Misoponos personifies the common assumptions prevalent in parenting and education today which contradict ancient wisdom. He delivers the aforementioned “Great Untruths” of our time: (1) The Untruth of Fragility, (2) The Untruth of Emotional Reasoning, and (3) The Untruth of Us Versus Them. The authors go on to explain the genesis of each of these “untruths” and the negative effects they have had on the development of young adults, particularly “iGen” (short for “internet Generation”—those born after 1995 who grew up with the internet) whose arrival on college campuses has coincided with the emergence of new and alarming trends.

The Untruth of Fragility encapsulates the idea that stress damages a person and, as such, parents and educators should seek to protect children under their care as much as possible. The problem with this idea, the authors contend, is that people are actually “antifragile.” In essence, like our immune systems, children “*require* stressors and challenges in order to learn, adapt, and grow. Systems that are antifragile become rigid, weak, and inefficient when nothing challenges them or pushes them to

respond vigorously” (23). Overprotection sets up a vicious cycle: parents and educators see stress as damaging and thus protect their charges from adversity. If we never face adversity, we never get the chance to *overcome* adversity. And without the experience of overcoming adversity, we begin to question our *ability* to overcome adversity. Thus we seek *more protection* from authority figures. And the cycle repeats.

The authors argue that this idea is the heart of the growth of a culture of “safetyism” on college campuses which manifests itself in the trends of speaker disinvitation, requests for “safe spaces,” “trigger warnings,” and the expansion of the definition of “violence” to include speech. Rather than seeking to confront and dispute ideas through rational debate, students seek to avoid “dangerous” ideas through the help of university bureaucracy. Lukianoff and Haidt argue that, as a result, students are developing a “moral dependency” on third-parties to mediate their problems and are consequently less equipped to deal with the inevitable challenges that life will bring. I have seen first-hand this lack of self-efficacy and grit as a parent and a professor.

The Untruth of Emotional Reasoning captures the prevalent idea that we should always trust our feelings. While this approach is seemingly innocuous, further reflection reveals that our emotions are often inconsistent with reality. I might fear that I am in danger when I am not. I can feel like someone does not like me, when she does. The most prevalent form of modern psychological therapy—cognitive behavioral therapy—is based on the premise that many of us engage in distorted patterns of thinking, like catastrophizing or overgeneralizing, and that correcting these will lead to decreased anxiety.

Lukianoff and Haidt argue that certain practices on campuses *encourage* cognitive distortions (which lead to greater anxiety) rather than correcting them. One such practice is training students to recognize “microaggressions,” these being “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative...slights or insults” toward marginalized groups (40, quoting Derald Wing Sue at Columbia University). The issue with this training, the authors suggest, is not in encouraging people to recognize and avoid insensitive comments that they might be making—this would be a good thing. The problem is the inclusion of the word “unintentional”: what constitutes aggression is now defined “*entirely in terms of the listener’s interpretation*” (40, authors’ emphasis). This encourages students to interpret what may be a misunderstanding or an insensitive comment (that could be corrected charitably) as acts of violence worthy of retaliation.

This has stifled dialogue on campuses where students (as well as faculty and staff) fear being “called out” and deemed offensive bigots by their peers on social media. As later chapters describe, this does actually happen and, in some cases, has led to investigation, suspension, and termination. Rational argument for a position can now be construed as a personal attack on a listener. I have witnessed this conversation-cooling effect in my own classrooms, for example, during discussions about “hot button issues” in my theology courses.

The authors also link this trend to the uptick in “disinvitation events” during which students protest to prevent a speaking event from happening because the content of the speech is considered “violent” (provoking subjective feelings of harm, therefore objectively harmful). In the extreme, protestors have resorted to significant physical violence, as was the case in the “**Milo Riot**” at UC Berkeley on February 1, 2017.

This trend has been compounded by the Untruth of Us vs. Them which describes the idea that people engage in increasingly dichotomous thinking about others. Rather than focusing on our common humanity, the authors contend, we tend to form identities around common enemies that need to be

defeated. The authors trace the roots of this thinking to increased political polarization and a loss of viewpoint diversity in universities (left-leaning professors outnumber right-leaning scholars by as many as seventeen to one in certain disciplines) which leaves institutions prone to “groupthink” and “witch hunts” targeting heterodox voices.

While they point out that this trend is present on both ends of the political spectrum, dichotomous thinking and action on the left is in part fueled by the continued embrace of Marxist ideology. Thinkers like Herbert Marcuse apply the Marxist power paradigm to “privileged” and “oppressed” groups along the lines of race, class, and gender with the end goal being a “reversal of power” rather than “equality.” In the words of Marcuse: “liberation of the Damned of the Earth presupposes suppression not only of their old but also their new masters” (66, quoting Marcuse). Such thinking skews the view of “justice” which many young people so badly long for.

Lukianoff and Haidt assert that the Great Untruths have created an environment antithetical to realizing the aims of a university. The freedom to experience the “joy of searching for, discovering and communicating truth in every field of knowledge” (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, 1) is increasingly diminished for students and faculty alike, as they walk on eggshells seeking to avoid career-ending controversy. And the disastrous result is a generation of young people ill-equipped to face adulthood. The authors end on a positive note, however, offering advice on how to remedy the presented issues through a variety of ways: for example, encouraging free play in young children—giving them opportunities to assess risk and mediate disputes without the aid of adults, limiting screen time (particularly social media) in the early years, and improving free speech protections on campuses at the university level.

The limitation of *Coddling* is that it paints an incomplete picture of the problems facing university students today. While paranoid, helicopter parenting, social media excesses, and university bureaucracy may cause or contribute to anxiety and the need for greater protection, so can broken families, a rampant hookup culture, binge drinking, prescription drug abuse, debt concerns, real struggles to develop a strong sense of identity and purpose, and the loss of faith. The advice section does not address any of these issues. Parts of the book seem to imply that a deeper commitment to academic freedom at an institutional level and cognitive behavioral therapy on a personal level would eradicate many of the problems facing universities; this strikes me as a bit naïve. Further, the book offers limited concepts of truth, freedom, justice, and happiness. Truth is conceived of primarily in terms of data and facts, freedom is indifferent to the Good, justice is merely fairness, and happiness is primarily good mental health.

That critique aside, when taken not as a macroanalysis of all things that ail universities, but as the insight of two men within their respective fields of constitutional law and psychology, *Coddling* offers some fascinating insights into the troubling events transpiring on university campuses and some thoughtful suggestions regarding where to go from here. It provides powerful food for thought for university faculty, staff, students, and any parent who desires to prepare their child for the road ahead.

Perhaps Lukianoff and Haidt’s work can help cease the current uncivil discourse and redirect universities toward their true task, so aptly described by St. John Henry Newman in *The Idea of a University*:

It is the education which gives a man a clear, conscious view of [his] own opinions and judgments, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them, and a force in urging them. It teaches him to see things as they are...

Equipped with the capacity to know, love and argue for the truth, young people will be ready for

adulthood.

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