

# Character and . . .

# Discomfort

Volume 5 / 2019

ANNALEE R. WARD

*Introduction: Character and  
Discomfort*

## Articles

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ROGER P. EBERTZ

*Learning to Live Comfortably in an  
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to McCaw, Smith, and Benson*



## Editors

Annalee R. Ward, Executive Editor

Mary Bryant, Managing Editor

*The faculty essays presented here emerge from a semester-long process of reading and writing together in an environment of critique and review. Nevertheless, this invited journal of essays represents the authors' views and not necessarily the views of the Wendt Center for Character Education or the University of Dubuque.*

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The *Character and . . .* Journal is published by the Wendt Center for Character Education at the University of Dubuque in Dubuque, Iowa, and uses parenthetical citations in the style of the 8<sup>th</sup> edition of the *MLA Handbook*.

# Character and Discomfort

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Annalee R. Ward

“Discomfort is the price of admission to a meaningful life.”

Susan David

The first time I heard Susan David say this (00:10:20-25), I found myself stopping to ask, “Wait, that can’t be true.” But I like being comfortable! Our culture caters to this desire. We can get extra-soft t-shirts, extra-comfortable pillows or beds, extra-luxurious cars. We regulate the temperature of our environments to a comfortable level. Daily life is cushioned. And while some take that to a luxurious end, most Westerners have similar expectations of comfort that are rarely defined as luxury.

Comfort is not a bad thing in and of itself, and can even be a healing factor during times of particular distress and upheaval. So then, what is the role of discomfort in our lives? We don’t typically seek it out unless we somehow wish to hurt ourselves. Or do we? What drives us to try something new, seek out opportunities to learn or grow? If our only motivation is comfort or self preservation, we won’t stretch, learn, or experience change. But the human experience contradicts comfort as sole motivator. We are driven to pursue meaning. Yes, we want to survive, but to what end? To a life of purpose. And purpose doesn’t always come easily.


The Wendt Research Team of 2018-19 chose the theme of “Character and Discomfort” as a way of digging into challenging ideas and experiences that might help us move toward a meaningful life, a life of purposeful living. As Beth McCaw noted in our group discussions, the

centering of comfort in our lives turns it into an idol displacing love for God and love for neighbor. When we do this, we neglect opportunities for growth and for building community by focusing our desires on comfort and thus, losing sight of what truly constitutes a meaningful life. As technology makes lives easier and commodities gentle life experiences (for some), goals of discomfort avoidance grow more problematic. The Research Team calls us to recognize the problem by getting our priorities straight in terms of loving God and neighbor first through self-giving service, leaning into the discomfort of paying attention as a way to increase our moral sensitivity, and finally recognizing the power of language to create and ease discomfort.

## Thinking about Discomfort

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At its simplest, we might understand discomfort as the absence of comfort. Jacques Pezeu-Massabuau extends our understanding: “everything that causes friction or conflict with the material and human environment essentially fits the term ‘discomfort’” (15). In his exploration of the term, Pezeu-Massabuau argues the very pursuit of “the pleasure of existence” requires “labour and pain” (sic) (111). Discomfort is built into life.



*It takes courage, patience, and compassion to be willing to experience the discomfort in order to pursue a larger goal.*


Yet it is natural to try to avoid discomfort at root cause because of fear. We fear change, risk, and, especially, pain. Discomfort serves as a signal that one of these factors is at work. The discomfort warning sign flashes “Caution,” if not “Stop.” Things could

move from slight discomfort to intense pain quickly if the signs are not heeded. But what does that have to do with character? It takes character to live into and through discomfort. It takes courage, patience, and compassion to be willing to experience the discomfort in order to pursue a larger goal. And by exercising the character required to accept the cost of discomfort, it in turn changes and forms that very character, usually for the better.

Amanda Lang in *The Beauty of Discomfort* shares stories of people who have learned to either live with discomfort or work through it in order to achieve change. She challenges us all:

As we learn to lean into our discomfort, it will gradually turn into comfort. Our zone of discomfort moves, in other words, as our comfort zone expands. . . . Whether the answer is to reframe the discomfort, or ignore it, or lean into it, or reinvent yourself, or enlist help, or simply dive in at the deep end, there *is* an answer that will take you from “Why change?” to “But how?”. (255–56)

Being willing to pursue change in order to improve oneself, one’s community, and our world means discomfort is something we have to come to terms with. But Western culture puts up many barriers for us in the form of ease and convenience.



*By exercising the character required to accept the cost of discomfort, it in turn changes and forms that very character.*

The very idea of putting effort into something grows increasingly distasteful to a culture that has long valued labor-saving devices. Jen Pollock Michel writes, “With the push of every button, my illusion grows—that exertion is the enemy of modern life.”

Recognizing that we are steeped in a culture that values ease, she reflects on how it has turned to vice and must be battled as an enemy of God.

In theory, I want to love [others]. In reality, I want it to tax me less. . . . Who do we become when we’re no longer willing to bother? . . . I don’t know that I can fully recover from my entitlement to ease. But perhaps I can remember that love, patterned after God’s own self-giving, is bent on inconvenience and cost. (Michel)

Love of ease, avoidance of discomfort, or in Tim Wu’s words, “the tyranny of convenience,” all detract from character growth. Wu urges us to remember:

[B]eing a person is only partly about having and exercising choices. It is also about how we face up to situations that are thrust upon us, about overcoming worthy challenges and finishing difficult tasks—the struggles that help make us who we are. What happens to human experience when so many obstacles and impediments and requirements and preparations have been removed? . . . Today's cult of convenience fails to acknowledge that difficulty is a constitutive feature of human experience. Convenience is all destination and no journey.

Removing the discomfort, many times even pain, robs us of the character-forming challenges that living with and into discomfort creates.



Illustration by Jimbob, [www.etsy.com/market/made\\_by\\_jimbob](http://www.etsy.com/market/made_by_jimbob)

## Character and . . . Discomfort

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This journal issue raises questions that will make us squirm. The articles shine a spotlight on places we'd rather not see or think about. But that's not the goal. Instead, our hope is that we will be reminded of what it means to be fully human, caring about and helping our communities as together we flourish in the kind of moral character that builds up, that exemplifies hope. The topic of discomfort could go in many directions. After reading together and discussing ideas, our authors chose to write

in areas where we might not first think about the role of discomfort in shaping character: service or mission projects, paying attention, and the slanderous use of language.

*Removing the discomfort, many times even pain, robs us of the character-forming challenges that living with and into discomfort creates.*

Beth McCaw, an experienced leader of group service and short-term mission projects, considers the bondage to self that so many participants inhabit. She writes of people wanting to do good but

often doing it in order to feel good about themselves. Experiences that pull them out of their comfort zone might be viewed with a tourist gaze, tolerated as long as they can return to comfort. Even the well-intentioned service can quickly degenerate into self-congratulation. She argues: “Intentionally re-centering others or ‘the other’ as a primary object of our care is essential for a life that has integrity. . .” (10). Of course, recognizing motivations for service and even being able to objectively evaluate how one is serving requires a great deal of focused reflection.

Reflection, or in Adam Smith’s words, “paying attention” not only requires concerted effort, but can be linked to moral character. “[A]ttention is how we practice virtue” (39). It’s what McCaw calls us to do when we choose to give community service or mission service. Are we paying attention to our motivations, to the needs of others, to the call to community? Attention moves us toward excellent practices whether we are studying, choosing our entertainment, or listening to a joke. Attention develops discernment, a key part of growing in character.

And paying attention matters in the language we use and the word choices made, especially when it comes to sensitive topics, topics of deeply held convictions. The last article, by Sean Benson, examines the case of the U.S. women’s soccer player Jaelene Hinkle and her refusal to wear a rainbow jersey. Concerned that the label “homophobia” has mischaracterized people who see a distinction between the person and the expressed sexual action, Benson calls for “the civility to talk with

one another so that we can cultivate intellectual tolerance of those with whom we disagree on the question of same-sex expression” (53). Whether or not one agrees with his essay, the willingness to be in discomfort by listening to one another and seeking ways to talk civility are important first steps in the pursuit of a just society.

Finally, in an insightful response, Roger Ebertz brings perspective on the topic and on these three essays. Weaving together their work, he highlights the self-centeredness that drives us away from practicing the kind of discomfort that will help us grow. Don't miss his conclusion, which highlights four action steps for all of us.

## Conclusion

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Author Darnell Moore, in an interview on Krista Tippett's "On Being" reminds us:

[N]o one ever really takes the time to think about what it might mean to point the finger back at self and examine the monstrosities within us. So self-reflexivity, self-reflection, honest reckoning, is something that we do not like. But we resist the uncomfortable conversations. I mean, to love is to not lie. . . . I do understand how we resist discomfort, but what I do know is that we can only get to "light" if we are willing to work so hard to travel through the darkness.

In pursuit of light, I conclude with the challenge to love, a strange ending perhaps, but that's where this journal has taken us. Self-giving love, love that is willing to be honest with oneself and sacrificial with others, love that listens first to understand, is a character virtue that will drive us to heights of discomfort and depths of meaning, to lives that have purpose.

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Thank you to Jimbob for permission to use the illustration on p. 5.

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