

Character and . . .

Discomfort

Volume 5 / 2019

ANNALEE R. WARD

Introduction: Character and Discomfort

Articles

BETH LINDQUIST MCCAW

The Oxymoron of “My Comfort Zone”

ADAM BENJAMIN SMITH

Discomfort, Attention, and Character

SEAN BENSON

The Persecution of Jaelene Hinkle

Response

ROGER P. EBERTZ

Learning to Live Comfortably in an Uncomfortable World: A Response 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.

Contact Information

Wendt Center for Character Education
University of Dubuque
2000 University Avenue
Dubuque, IA 52001

563-589-3440 (office)
563-589-3243 (fax)
wendt@dbq.edu (email)
www.dbq.edu/wendt (website)

Copyright Notice

Copyright ©2019 by the Wendt Center for Character Education at the University of Dubuque; all rights reserved. Brief portions of material in this publication may be copied and quoted without further permission with appropriate citation of the sources of the excerpt included in the copy. Copies may be made for classroom use if 1) the material is distributed without charge or fee above duplication costs; 2) the materials are photocopies, not reprints; 3) the material includes full bibliographic citation and the following statement: "Copyright by the Wendt Center for Character Education at the University of Dubuque. Reproduced by permission of the Wendt Center." This policy extends also to electronic copies or links posted in online course management or e-reserve systems, provided access is restricted to students enrolled in the course. This statement serves as the Wendt Center for Character Education's official permission for using material under the conditions specified above.

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 8th edition of the *MLA Handbook*.

Learning to Live Comfortably in an Uncomfortable World: A Response to McCaw, Smith, and Benson


Roger P. Ebertz

In her book *iGen* Jean M. Twenge provides an insightful report on the mindset of young women and men who have grown up in the era of smartphones. In one interesting chapter, Twenge tells us that iGen'ers are extremely sensitive about matters of safety. Twenge provides both statistical and anecdotal evidence that young adults and their parents are very concerned about keeping safe. But what is especially interesting is that the concern goes beyond physical safety to emotional and cognitive safety.

Twenge relays a story from a writer who visited a high school in the United Kingdom. Speaking to the students on controversial themes, the author naturally expected students to challenge her. Rather than responding rationally, the students became upset, saying, "You can't say that!" (154). Twenge uses this story to illustrate a trend on college campuses in general. Students demand "safe spaces" where they can avoid ideas they find offensive or objectionable. Twenge surveyed 200 students at San Diego State University and found that 86% agreed that "[i]t is the responsibility of the university administration to create a safe

space for all students to thrive” (155). The key, however, is in how one interprets “safe space.” If interpreted to mean that universities should provide places where students are free from physical, verbal, and emotional abuse, it is a reasonable expectation. But more and more, “safe space” refers to a place where students will not encounter ideas with which they disagree, will not be challenged in their beliefs, values, and lifestyles.

Perhaps the reason for this concern is that this generation, iGen’ers, suffer from a high level of anxiety and depression. Maybe they are overly sensitive and need to be protected, like a person with light skin needs to be protected from the sun. But I think it goes beyond this. Twenge quotes a student: “You can always take precautions for someone hurting you physically, but you cannot really help but listen when someone is talking to you” (157). This, Twenge says, is “a distinctively iGen idea: the world is an inherently dangerous place because every social interaction carries the risk of being hurt. You never know what someone is going to say, and there’s no way to protect yourself from it” (157). In response to this concern, college campuses have created places for students to retreat, where students who disagree can escape when controversial speakers come to campus. Some universities have even cancelled speakers, judging their ideas too challenging. As Twenge writes, “Protecting students from being distressed is considered more important than having a discussion of potentially uncomfortable ideas” (156).¹



It is all too easy to strike out, condemn “the enemy,” make rules to keep them at bay, and brand them as evil or dangerous.

Twenge’s diagnosis applies to more than just iGen’ers. It applies to most, if not all, of us in America. Technology, first in the form of relatively inexpensive and convenient transportation, then in the form of internationally broadcast television, and now in the form of the internet and social networking, brings us face to face with the rest of the world. And the

world is very diverse. We are challenged constantly with ideas, values, and lifestyles different from our own. News organizations constantly remind us of, and sometimes even create, social and political

divisiveness, conflict, and name calling. All of this makes us very uncomfortable. How do we respond? An easy response is to create a “safe space,” hiding away in our homes and ignoring the news, or creating groups on a social media platform in which everyone shares our ideas. And if we still encounter ideas and lifestyles different from our own, it is all too easy to strike out, condemn “the enemy,” make rules to keep them at bay, and brand them as evil or dangerous.

Lashing out may be our natural reaction to threats to our beliefs and values. But character doesn’t come naturally. As Aristotle taught over two thousand years ago, developing character requires practice. The goal, according to this approach to life, is to develop into a person with virtues that enable us to flourish as human beings, to be all we can be. Virtues are not rules, not lists of dos and don’ts. They are deep character traits that require effort, just like the virtue of physical fitness requires effort. The essays in *Character and . . . Discomfort* provide food for thought on the kind of effort required to become a person of character, and on just what discomfort has to do with virtue.

THE GREATEST ENEMY TO HUMAN
POTENTIAL IS YOUR COMFORT ZONE.

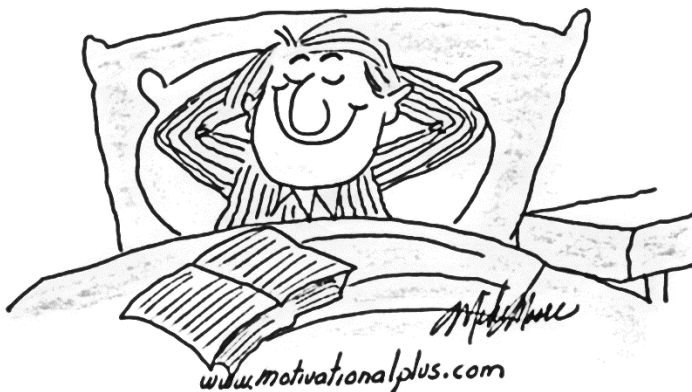


Illustration by Mike Moore, www.mikemoorespeaks.com


Beth McCaw describes the “centripetal draw of comfort” in American culture (11). Forces, both internal and external, push us to put pleasure and comfort at the center of our lives. Feeding on our fears and

anxieties, and on our sinfulness, culture pushes us toward individualism and autonomy. We put “me” and me alone at the center. What matters, in our thinking and in our decisions, is how something affects *me*. Unfortunately, in the process of seeking what is good for *me*, we leave others behind.

Even in actions that purport to aim at helping others, we are motivated by the desire to improve ourselves. McCaw sees this in common attitudes to short-term mission trips, a phenomenon that has become very common in American Christianity. While these trips allegedly aim to help others, participants can be quite self-centered in their involvement. They complain about food or accommodations, and haggle in the markets to get souvenirs at the lowest possible prices. They are housed in nice hotels, making daytrips to indigenous villages and providing “expertise” for the poor, uneducated villagers. They return feeling quite good about themselves.

But why? What have they accomplished? They have grown spiritually and explored life’s meaning. Trips are evaluated “more by the enthusiasm of those sent rather than by any benefit expressed by hosts” (McCaw 14). McCaw quotes a field facilitator in Mexico, “Today (visiting groups) are much less concerned about the impact they will have in Mexico and more concerned about the impact Mexico will have on them.” This phenomenon, the facilitator goes on, “has begun to have a negative effect on the Mexican churches” (Palmatier qtd. in McCaw 13). And an African leader is outraged by teams that come “prepared for novel vacations but not to serve” (13). Self-centeredness harms ourselves as well as others.

We are social beings, McCaw argues. We are made, according to the Judeo-Christian tradition, to love God and love our neighbors. Even outside of the Christian framework, there is abundant evidence that humans need relationships. We need community to thrive; we need to care for and be cared for by others. Our self-focused lives grate against our very nature. As McCaw writes early on in her essay, “[a]s we focus increasingly on superficial personal



We need community to thrive; we need to care for and be cared for by others.

comfort, others are moved to the periphery of our care in life and the moral and vocational fabric of life starts to unravel” (12). McCaw calls us to “push back” against the forces of selfishness. The first step, she suggests, is to become “conscious of the desire(s) holding center stage in our lives” (19). Once we do this, we can begin to push selfishness out of the center, making room for God, for others, and for community. While there is a place for self-care and enjoyment of comfort, these should not be our central focus. “Re-centering will send us out to others—true outreach,” she writes. “This will lead us to the margins in our community and our world” (20). Having recognized our tendency to put ourselves in the center, we can begin to practice being people of character. “Intentionally devoting ourselves to relationships and embodying community will start to order our choices and make our commitments to others routine—compassion, justice, even love can become more and more our habit” (McCaw 22).

We flourish ourselves when we take ourselves out of the center.

McCaw is calling us to practice character. This is risky. It will bring joy, but it will also bring discomfort and even pain. When we take ourselves out of the center and realize we are united


with others, the suffering of others will become our suffering. This is part and parcel of a full human life. Paradoxically, we flourish ourselves when we take ourselves out of the center. We find our lives by giving them up. And this means being willing to be uncomfortable, and even to suffer, for others. “It may sound odd to describe the acceptance of discomfort as freeing,” McCaw writes, “but how small our perspective, our experience, our agency in the world become when confined within the bounds of the comfortable. It becomes isolating, suffocating, even anxiety-producing when every discomfort is framed as a threat to be avoided or eliminated. . .” (21).

The first step, McCaw tells us, is to become conscious of our desires. In other words, we must pay attention. Adam Smith helps us understand what this might mean. Smith argues that while we experience many uncomfortable things, our reactions to discomfort are in part up to us. Unlike the student quoted earlier, Smith suggests that we are not passive in the face of words (and other events). Appealing to the

insights of the ancient Stoics, he argues that discomfort involves not just painful or difficult things, but our “judgments concerning them” (Epictetus qtd. in Smith 28). Smith does not mean we create our discomfort out of nothing and can eliminate it with a trick of the mind. The causes of discomfort are not wholly under our control. Rather, “[i]t’s about getting more comfortable with what makes us uncomfortable.” “Paying attention,” he writes, “is about *getting comfortable with discomfort*” (28).

Sometimes, Smith suggests, we have to pay attention to learn something new and valuable. Drawing an analogy from physical training, he points out that while most of us think doing pull-ups is just pulling oneself up with one’s arms, doing pull-ups properly involves using muscles in one’s back. To do pull-ups well, then, we must pay attention to these muscles. Unfortunately, when we begin, we don’t even know these muscles exist. To help us to do the exercise properly, a physical trainer must use metaphors and comparisons. We must open ourselves to experience something new. We must pay attention. We pay attention, and practice, and finally, it clicks. When one learns to do pull-ups well, Smith says, one becomes comfortable with them. Yes, one may experience soreness from the exercise, a sort of discomfort. But one is comfortable with this discomfort.

Like learning a physical routine, studying requires paying attention. To study well requires that one learn to pay attention to what one is studying. But this is not instinctive. Telling a student to “study well” does not help. He must learn to study well. If a student is told to “study hard,” the chances are she or he will focus on trying not to be distracted. But this in itself is a distraction. Paying attention is a positive thing. To study well, one must get caught up in what one is studying. When one experiences this, it becomes enjoyable. This is not to say that the work of intellectual activity will never bring discomfort. But a good student becomes comfortable with this discomfort.



*Our reactions to
discomfort are
in part up to us.*


Smith draws from Simone Weil. In Weil’s view, the ability to pay attention is one of the most important moral virtues. There is

something in us, she suggests, that is more “evil than flesh” (qtd. in Smith 29). There is something within our soul that pushes us not to pay attention. Could this be akin to the inner forces pushing us to self-centeredness that McCaw writes about? I think it is. Smith asks the reader to imagine stepping outside his or her mind and looking back in. “That’s what paying attention is like: stepping outside yourself, looking back into yourself, and noticing whatever there is to notice” (34). The goal is not to judge what is going on in one’s mind, but to simply observe. Paying attention in this way requires practice. It is a virtue we must learn. But as we do, we begin to observe things we were not conscious of before. We observe our own discomfort, physical, emotional, and even spiritual. We observe thoughts, judgments, and reactions to things that we are uncomfortable with.

Truly paying attention does not give us the comfort we get from pleasurable activities like watching a film or playing a video game. But there is a comfort involved. “It’s a more complicated kind of comfort,” Smith writes, and “‘something in our soul’ doesn’t want to be comfortable in this more complicated way. We resist it.” Weil says this resistance is close to evil. It prevents us from exercising our abilities in the best way. As Smith writes, “it’s an obstacle to developing good character” (36). But if we learn to pay attention, we enable ourselves to “push back” and “pull-up” well. Living fully is not pain free. In fact, if we

identify with others on the periphery, as McCaw challenges us to do, life can be very painful.

There is discomfort as we use our physical, intellectual, and spiritual muscles. But in the end, we become comfortable with the discomfort.




Caring for others requires paying attention, truly opening ourselves to the other.

McCaw and Smith provide similar and complimentary insights on discomfort and character. Both challenge us to become aware, to pay attention, to what is going on inside of us, so that we can become truly aware of others. And both recognize that this is not easy, it can be uncomfortable, and it takes work. Drawing from Weil, Smith explains that truly paying attention to another person is very difficult. “We have to ‘know how to look at [another person] in a certain way. This way of

looking is first of all attentive. The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth” (qtd. in Smith 36). Caring for others requires paying attention, truly opening ourselves to the other.

Smith helps us understand how becoming attentive to our minds and reactions helps us become better people. Our goal, when peering into our minds, is not to judge, but to see what’s there. We see who we are at the present moment. But this doesn’t imply that we must approve of all we see inside ourselves. We can also realize that not all of the judgments we observe in our minds are appropriate. Some are inappropriate, even morally wrong. Smith uses a very striking illustration. People who enjoy watching snuff films, films in which people are actually tortured and killed, do not respond appropriately. They laugh. They get aroused. These feelings are inappropriate responses toward something that is horrendously immoral. Similarly, people laugh when they see others mistreated or bullied. They experience pleasure on viewing moral wrong. Again, this is wrong. It is morally inappropriate. When we observe inappropriate judgments and feelings within ourselves, as Smith advises us to do, the goal is not to get angry at ourselves. But it is to gain a knowledge of ourselves that enables us to “move forward” (Smith 38).



*Paying attention
paves the way
for growth.*

Paying attention paves the way for growth. When we find ourselves experiencing uncomfortable situations, we turn away. We don’t really pay attention. It is easier to laugh than to face discomfort. The more we do that, the more habitual our inappropriate reactions become. Paying attention pushes back. It means truly observing our feelings and reactions, not turning away. And this can be very uncomfortable. It is not an easy thing to confess one’s sins, even to oneself. As Smith says, “We might want to run back inside the house, where things are comfortable and entertaining. . . . we go back to our old habits of feeling.” To continue paying attention is to resist flight from discomfort. But “we’re doing this so we can adjust those feelings, until we are paying attention to the right things, knowing that what we pay attention to has the power to shape us” (40). Truly paying attention to one’s

feelings opens up a key possibility. “When you ‘observe’ without judgment, you loosen the hold of the feeling.” It “*changes* the feeling from one that has a grip on you, to one that you have a grip on.” And all of a sudden one has room to change, “room to maneuver” (40). You can begin to focus your attention somewhere else, and in return begin to feel differently.

And as you get better at putting your attention more precisely where it’s supposed to go, you’ll get better at feeling: feeling the right feeling, at the right time, toward the right person or thing, in the right amount, for the right reason. You’ll get better, in other words, at developing your moral character. (Smith 41)

This sounds to me a lot like pushing back at the forces that drive us to self-centeredness and making room for the care for others that enables us to flourish as human beings.

Sean Benson’s “The Persecution of Jaelene Hinkle” provides an interesting case study on responses to discomfort. Benson describes a series of events involving American soccer player, Jaelene Hinkle, and the United States Women’s National Team (USWNT). When the USWNT leadership chose to include rainbow colored numerals on team jerseys, showing support for LGBT rights, Hinkle chose not to accept her invitation to the team, explaining her views to the audience of the evangelical television show, the 700 Club. A year later, when she was again invited to the team, critics responded vehemently. One critic wrote that Hinkle’s earlier decision had been based on “religiously motivated homophobia,” calling Hinkle’s actions “embarrassing for the team.” She should never, according to the critic, have been given another chance (Best qtd. in Benson 48-49). Benson’s primary point seems to be that Hinkle’s critics have not been fair to Hinkle, labeling her a *homophobe*, and describing her actions as motivated by *homophobia* simply to vilify her.

Benson argues that Hinkle’s actions were based on carefully considered, and traditionally held, religious views, and should have no impact on whether she is asked to play. In spite of this, Hinkle is being discriminated against because of her religious views, simply because she does accept what Benson calls “LGBT orthodoxy” (49).

The case Benson highlights is fraught with discomfort. He mentions the discomfort felt by Hinkle and others holding her view as a result of the words and actions of critics. This is one discomfort. But I believe there are other discomforts that should be highlighted as well. Although attitudes are changing, there is a high degree of discomfort surrounding homosexuality in the United States. In subcultures and even whole towns across America, people are uncomfortable talking about



We cannot avoid discomfort in today's world. The question is how we will respond.

homosexuality, and more importantly, with the presence of homosexual persons. If a gay man is hired as a secondary school teacher in a small midwestern or southern town, there is likely to be a reaction. People are uncomfortable with gay and lesbian teachers. We might even say they are afraid of them.

On the other hand, there are places of discomfort for LGBT individuals in America as well. Many of these places are the same places in which others are uncomfortable with them. In fact, there is often good reason for LGBT individuals to be fearful. The level of violence against, abuse of, and discrimination against these individuals far outweighs the abuse perpetrated by LGBT individuals themselves. I am not talking about the members of Westboro Baptist Church. I am talking about words and actions by thousands of individuals across America. Sometimes these words and actions are the result of ignorance. Sometimes they result from fear or hatred. Whatever their cause, they make those who identify as homosexual very uncomfortable. Although polls suggest growing acceptance of homosexuals in our country or at least the recognition of their civil rights, there are still plenty of people who simply wish homosexuals would go away and who do what they can to make that happen! These are the realities of America.

In short, we live in a nation in which people hold radically different views on LGBT issues. And some people act on those views. The result is discomfort. As the world becomes smaller, as cultures are brought together through technology, social media, and emigration, life will be uncomfortable. How does a person of character respond? Benson rightly points to one response that is unhelpful: describing others with emotionally loaded labels. Sounding like a psychological term,

homophobia has become a catch-all label by which to condemn anyone with views on homosexuality more conservative than one's own. There are many such labels. *Fundamentalist* and *socialist* are two such labels frequently used to vilify others. While both these terms were coined by people to describe their own views, they have become labels used by others to condemn them. I would suggest that *politically correct* and even Benson's phrase *LGBT orthodoxy* are phrases that are actually used to cast a blanket over and reject what is being referred to. If we are going to learn to live with discomfort, one thing we need to do is learn to avoid the use of vague and emotionally loaded language.

This case also illustrates our need to learn to listen to ourselves and others, as we have been encouraged to by McCaw and Smith. Benson demonstrates, I think, the failure of Hinkle's critics to understand the reasons behind her more conservative views. Without listening, they simply attack. But I believe it is true on the other side as well. Benson goes to some length to draw a distinction between the views of someone like Hinkle and those of Westboro Baptist Church. "The Christian community has had to become more open-minded as to the naturalness of homosexual desire, and sympathetic to persons with such deep-seated attraction" (53). This more moderate view, it seems, accepts that the civil rights of individuals should not be violated, no matter what their sexual orientation. It simply argues, according to Benson, that living out one's homosexual inclinations is not the best way for men and women to flourish as human beings.

But just what did the rainbow numerals represent? Did they say, "We support same-sex marriage," or "we believe transsexuals should be free to use the restrooms of the sexual identity they are most comfortable with"? That seems like a stretch. Or did they say something like, "We welcome gays and lesbians to our team; we commit ourselves to treating them fairly and refusing to discriminate against them"? Why did Hinkle respond the way she did? Did she ask what the rainbow jerseys were meant to represent? Perhaps she didn't take the time to think through, or to clarify, what was being said by the jerseys. Perhaps she could have explained to the 700 Club audience why she was willing to wear the jersey, even though she was a Christian. That would have been truly courageous!

The fact of the matter is that we cannot avoid discomfort in today's world. The question is how we will respond. How should we respond? These essays have given us a place to start. First, we must reflect upon the desires, the feelings, the judgments within our minds and hearts as we find ourselves

in uncomfortable situations. Are these reactions appropriate? Are there better ways to respond? Second, we should take the time to think carefully about the situations, the words, and the actions, of others. Rather than assuming we understand, rather than lashing out because they make us uncomfortable, we must learn to listen. Third, paying attention, both to ourselves and to others, is not easy. It will make us uncomfortable. It will sometimes be very painful. But it is only when we give up our selfishness, only when we share both joy and suffering with others that we will flourish as human beings. Fourth, I think these essays teach us that growing in character in the face of discomfort requires practice. It requires conscious effort.

The best response to the world around us is not always the natural response. Being self-aware, caring for others, becoming comfortable in a discomfoting world are habits that can only become "second nature" by practice. Finally, in a world in which many are seeking safety and comfort, we must find another way. Unlike the universities that create safe places where students can avoid disagreement and discomfort, we must somehow learn to create places where we can safely engage in dialogue, think opening and critically in search of the truth, respect one another when we differ, and treat all people justly. These are the elements of true character, as individuals, as communities, and as a nation.

Becoming self-aware, caring for others, becoming comfortable in a discomfoting world are habits that can only become "second nature" by practice.

Roger P. Ebertz is professor of philosophy at the University of Dubuque. He is a graduate of Carleton College (BA), Fuller Theological Seminary (MDiv), and the University of Nebraska (PhD). His research interests include applied ethics, environmental ethics, philosophy of religion. He has lived in many parts of the

Character and . . . Discomfort

United States: North Dakota, Oregon, Iowa, Kansas, Wyoming, Minnesota, California, Nebraska, West Virginia. He and his family then settled down in Dubuque, IA, where he has lived for the last 27 years, although he will probably never feel quite at home in any one place. As he has moved around both geographically and intellectually, he has frequently felt uncomfortable. But he is thankful for the life of growth and change that has resulted. He has particularly learned to enjoy the rich and diverse cuisines of other cultures, discovering that “comfort food” comes in many delicious forms.

Thank you to Mike Moore for permission to use the illustration on p. 66.

Notes

¹ Notice the assumption that the words automatically cause harm, as if the hearer is entirely passive in the effect words will have. I am not sure this is true. Critical thinking skills can help protect one from ad hominem and false ideas. And we cannot always protect ourselves from physical threats.

Works Cited

- Benson, Sean. “The Persecution of Jaelene Hinkle.” *Character and . . . Discomfort*, vol. 5, 2019, pp. 46-63.
- McCaw, Beth Lindquist. “The Oxymoron of ‘My Comfort Zone.’” *Character and . . . Discomfort*, vol. 5, 2019, pp. 9-26.
- Smith, Adam Benjamin. “Discomfort, Attention, and Character.” *Character and . . . Discomfort*, vol. 5, 2019, pp. 27-45.
- Twenge, Jean M. *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood*. Atria Books, 2017.