

MANITOU MESSENGER

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If you wish to contact us you may reach us at our office in Buntrock Commons, room 110. You may also call our office at 507-786-3612. All staff members are available via email at the addresses listed above.
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Hinduphobia on campus has gone unacknowledged

By Neetij Krishnan
Contributing Writer

Last spring, Celebrate South Asia! (CSA!) and the Wellness Center were two of the organizations that contributed to inviting a sex therapist, Sonalee Rashatwar, to St. Olaf to address issues of body image and dieting in a modern social context. Following their main presentation, they held an open question-and-answer session for students who wished to speak with them further. At this session, Rashatwar made brazen, toxic and deeply hurtful claims about Hinduism and Hindu culture, a religious minority on this campus and in this country. Their primary assertions were targeted at Holi, the Hindu festival of colors.

They have also argued, in person and online, that Hinduism as a culture is racist, colorist, misogynistic, casteist and that people who practice this reprehensible tradition are complicit in its supremacist customs. This Hinduphobia is one of their main talking points on social media and is an integral part of their brand.

There was no response. Not from CSA!, who invited them. Not from the Wellness Center, who signed off on their talk as double-wellness-swiped. Not from the Taylor Center

or administration about how unfounded libel against a minority faith on campus is not in line with St. Olaf's values.

In fact, following this event, CSA! hosted a Holi celebration that began with a discussion of the supposed "dark side" of Holi, with its purported roots in colorism, racism and sexism – a fervent endorsement of Rashatwar's perspective that Hinduism is a backward tradition that needs to be "saved" from its awful ideologic roots.

Not only did CSA! fail to respond constructively or factually to defamation of a faith it claims to include, but it provided a platform for willfully ignorant rhetoric – exploiting the festival for its revelry while denigrating the tradition from which it derives.

From this incident, one thing is clear: as students, we have to decide

how we deal with attacks on minority races, faiths and cultures on campus. And we have to be consistent in how we respond to such rhetoric.

If we decide that any attack

"We have to decide how we deal with attacks on minority races, faiths and cultures on campus." - Neetij Kirshnan '20

against a particular race, religion or ethnicity is reprehensible and against the values that we espouse on campus, we need to be consistent about it. We also need to distinguish between an attack on ideology and an attack on practitioners.

If an invited speaker declares (wrongfully) that Islam is an ideology of murder or if they claimed (wrongfully) that Judaism advocates child abuse (regarding the binding of Isaac), this would be an attack on ideology.

If an invited speaker declared (wrongfully) that all Muslims are terrorists because Islam is where ISIS claims its allegiance; if they (wrongfully) claimed that Jews are

all ungenerous toads because they are stereotypically wealthy; this would be an attack on individuals.

Personally, I subscribe to the idea that no speaker should be silenced because they can bring reasoned critiques to an ideology; if we think they are wrong, we can then use evidence-based arguments to refute their assertions and show them the door. That is how the marketplace of ideas works and that is frankly how the world works.

However, if a speaker slandered a minority faith and its members at a St. Olaf-sponsored event, we would justifiably exhibit our anger over their presence on this campus and we would demand that better care be taken when inviting speakers that are meant to promote social equity and welfare.

So, is it okay for a speaker to insult Hindu culture and for a student organization to provide a platform for their views? If it is not okay to bring a speaker who insults Christianity, Islam or Judaism, then the answer is no.

If we truly wish to honor the diversity of faith and culture on this campus, we need to take a long, hard look at when we choose to protest and perhaps more importantly, when we choose to remain silent.

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Free expression and the real threat to our political climate

By Amy Imdieke
Copy Editor

For social media platforms such as Facebook, getting people to read a story is more important than the story itself. Facebook claims in one of their latest policy statements that false comments by political leaders provide "valuable" topics for discussion – the company outright refuses to moderate politicians' speech or fact-check their political ads.

The willingness of Facebook to protect political ad campaigns that spread false information reveals the superficial and capitalistic nature of social media.

Rather than clearing the air around heated political issues, Facebook creates a culture that amplifies disinformation. According to the Facebook Newsroom, 1.63 billion people in October 2019 checked their Facebook feeds daily. That is over 20 percent of the world's population. For those who use Facebook to browse the news, the company's

refusal to delete posts from politicians with false information is devastating.

If Facebook carries so much sway over the general public, then we must hold the company responsible to present truthful information to its readers. Truth becomes a moral duty when your voice reaches billions of people.

Politicians remain unscathed after violating Facebook's policies against misinformation and violent speech, such as with recent advertisements from the Trump campaign. Everyone must be held accountable for their actions, including the people who hold positions of power within our government. Every hateful or misinformed post on social media perpetuates the problem of fake news.

We need to be able to trust our news sources. Social media platforms such as Facebook do not advertise themselves as news organizations, yet our news feeds are filled with responses to current political happenings. In April of this year, a Stanford study on the effect of social media

on mental health determined that Facebook significantly contributes to the public's awareness of current affairs.

We need to take a stance against slander. The chief executive of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, uses the broad term of "free expression" to defend politicians who use underhanded advertisements on social media to boost their campaigns.

Although Facebook claims to be a champion of free speech, the company defends politicians whose ads are based on fear mongering and deception. While free expression certainly demands inclusivity, politicians should not have the power to lash out at others on social media when Facebook's security teams would remove such postings if they were written by anyone else.

When confronted last month about his stance on intentional misinformation, Zuckerberg dodged the question by pointing his finger at creative pursuits such as satire, exaggeration, and fiction writing. While not all of the information on Facebook is strictly factual, political advertisements on Facebook spin lies to attack other political candidates. Free speech does not have room for words spoken with the intention of harming others.

We live in a world saturated with social media. The endless scroll on our phones keeps us up-to-date on current events across the world. The circulation of misinformation undermines our efforts against fake news. Trusted social media platforms should not leave their readers wondering whether or not what they read is true.

Now, Facebook serves as a politicized environment that threatens to cast credible news sources into doubt and gives special treatment to certain political parties. If social media companies want to empower their readers, maintain the integrity of their platform, then Facebook must take a stance against political leaders who spin lies across our news feeds.

The truth should not have to shout to be heard. imdiek1@stolaf.edu

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Anna Weimholt/Manitou Messenger

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez questions Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg.

OPINIONS

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Dear first generation students... you are not alone

Alexia Nizhny/Manitou Messenger

By Emerson Yang
Contributing Writer

As a first generation college student, there were a lot of difficulties I had to face and a lot more I am still learning to deal with. Figuring out how to use college resources with not a lot of guidance, getting little access to help from my parents and being first in my family to live on campus in a town away from home has posed extreme challenges. I grew up leaning on my family for help with everything but as I went into college, I had to learn that I have to do things myself and adjust with close to zero help.

College can only provide so much help towards first-generation students so I am thankful that St. Olaf has the TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) program that was able to help me and other first generation students by informing us on how to take advantage of resources and opportunities on campus. The Piper Center and CAAS has helped me with academic hurdles while Boe House and Boe Chapel helped me overcome mental obstacles – both are ways in which I found the support system I needed.

When I first arrived on campus as a first generation student, it felt very hard to make friends with other students on campus. Socially, I felt like an outcast. After all, I come from a unique upbringing as a person of color raised by immigrant parents in a farming community. In that sense, I felt as though no one could relate to my identity. Not to mention, as I went through the school year, I witnessed

instances of racism happen on campus that frequently would go under the radar. Often times, I would be shocked how the campus refused to acknowledge racism and how rarely racism was discussed. With that piled on, talking about my identity seemed even more intimidating and the task of finding people who related to my experience seemed daunting. However, my favorite thing about this school became the relationships that I ended up finding. I managed to find people who accepted my personality and my background who were also inclusive and welcoming of others.

I overcame adversity through my strong support system. My advisor was there and continues to be there to offer me good advice and I like being guided by another person of color on campus. As for other first generation students worried about their experience at St. Olaf, I will tell you honestly that it is not easy. At the end of the day, you will feel as though you do not relate to many of the other students. However, you are here for a reason. So, the only thing you can do is to try your hardest and find people who make you feel comfortable being who you are.

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The power of the pen:

My unfinished love letter to Minnesota and all Northfield has taught me

By Alexia Nizhny
Opinions Editor

Frank Sinatra believed if you could make it in New York, you could make it anywhere. Sinatra clearly never lived in Northfield, Minnesota.

My experience living in the rural mid-west as a bonafide city girl has hit plenty of bumps and hurdles. However, no matter what, the one constant I keep coming back to is pen and paper. When the world feels scary and lonely and I cannot quite sort out why it feels so hard to get up in the morning, I write. When I start new relationships and am met with an overload of insecurities, I write. When I feel soul-crushingly homesick, I write. Sorting out my unintelligible emotions on paper has helped me grow and better understand myself. Needless to say, I am a strong advocate for giving writing therapy a shot and I am not the only one.

The chair of the psychology department at University of Texas, Austin, Dr. James W. Pennebaker, believes expressive writing can impact people in many positive ways. According to Pennebaker, organizing thoughts and giving meaning to trauma can potentially encourage people reach out for necessary help as well as assist in breaking negative cycles of rumination. Health psychology researcher Susan Lutgendorf, stresses the importance of using writing as a tool to grow from and overcome trauma. Journaling is not just about writing, it is about deriving meaning from your experiences. In her words, “An indi-

vidual needs to find meaning in a traumatic memory as well as to feel the related emotions to reap positive benefits [of writing exercises].” Although I was no stranger to journaling, I never realized how much her words would ring true as I used writing for self-discovery in college.

On August 31, 2018, I exited Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport by myself with three suitcases and \$60 cash. Although I had arrived a day before first-year move-in, had no place to stay the night and knew absolutely no one in Minnesota, I was excited to explore Middle America for the first time. Having spent my whole life in a bustling neighborhood a couple blocks south of Midtown Manhattan, all I could think about was how thrilled I was to leave my metropolitan childhood behind for the quaint college town of Northfield. It was going to take some getting used to – that much I was sure of – but nothing could have prepared me for the ebb and flow of rural campus life.

My first semester was rough. There were some obvious local differences I was prepared to adapt to – scarce public transportation, limited food options and harsh winters. I very quickly realized, however, that the differences between New York City and Northfield ran deeper than just those minor adjustments. Certain accepted cultural behaviors were so foreign to me that my lack of familiarity to them made me stick out like a sore thumb.

So, I wrote about it. In my entries I described Minnesotans as masters of small talk and active listening. Ultimate frisbee was considered a sport and choir was taken extremely seriously. I could tell they were generally non-confrontational and overall

surface-level friendly (not to mention the funny way they say “bag”). After drafting these caricatures of Minnesotans on paper, I was prepared to figure out where my place was in all of this. How was I going to mirror their behaviors enough to fit in, while also finding room for a little bit of home?

At the time, I had only allowed myself to marinate in my writing comfort zone. I described my cultural confusion without reaching the reflective, emotional side of writing therapy. Which is to say, I had not dug deep enough to benefit. So, every time I thought I had begun to figure out Minnesota enough to feel comfortable letting loose my obnoxiously sarcastic and direct east coast mannerisms, I would feel the rug be pulled from underneath me. My humor would not land or my word choice came off as too harsh. The reputation I was creating for myself was not kind and – unlike back home – I could not hide behind a crowd in anonymity. In my small college town, my new reputation would stick. So, in that moment, I realized I had lost control of my narrative.

Having been exhausted of any urge to write, I sifted through old entries and felt myself sink into a deep pit of loneliness. I had completely lost the urge to journal. However, as much as my hands protested, I forced myself to pick up a pen, this time embracing my melancholy. Through it, I was able to discover my subconscious wants and needs in a way that helped me better understand myself. After letting my emotions pour onto the page, for the

first time in Minnesota, I felt liberated.

Although the success of expressive writing will vary from person-to-person, there is no evidence supporting any negative long term effects. Simply, a willingness to explore emotions through journaling could be incredibly advantageous for self-reflection and improvement. The British Journal of General Practice released data supporting a reduction in certain people’s anxiety, behavioral issues, blood pressure and depressive symptoms simply through writing exercises. Reasons not to try are few and far between.

Having written extensively on my experience in Minnesota, my journal bleeds with entries of me navigating around toxic friendships, suburban boys and “Minnesota nice.” I take each word I write as an opportunity to learn something new about myself. Admittedly, I often feel as though this state intentionally puts me in unpleasant situations – almost as though it is out to get me. All I can say to that is bring it on Minnesota; my pen has got a lot more ink left in it.

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