OPINION  | COLUMNISTS  | DECLARATIONS

The Trigger-Happy Generation

If reading great literature traumatizes you, wait till you get a taste of adult life.

PHOTO: MARTIN KOZLOWSKI

By

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Readers know of the phenomenon at college campuses regarding charges of “microaggressions” and “triggers.” It’s been going on for a while and is part of a growing censorship movement in which professors, administrators and others are accused of racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, gender bias and ethnocentric thinking, among other things. Connected is the rejection or harassment of commencement and other campus speakers who are not politically correct. I hate that phrase, but it just won’t stop being current.

Kirsten Powers goes into much of this in her book, “The Silencing.” Anyway, quite a bunch of little Marats and Robespierres we’re bringing up.
But I was taken aback by a piece a few weeks ago in the Spectator, the student newspaper of Columbia University. I can’t shake it, though believe me I’ve tried. I won’t name the four undergraduate authors, because 30 years from now their children will be on Google, and because everyone in their 20s has the right to be an idiot.

Yet theirs is a significant and growing form of idiocy that deserves greater response.

The authors describe a student in a class discussion of Ovid’s epic poem “Metamorphoses.” The class read the myths of Persephone and Daphne, which, as parts of a narrative that stretches from the dawn of time to the Rome of Caesar, include depictions of violence, chaos, sexual assault and rape. The student, the authors reported, is herself “a survivor of sexual assault” and said she was “triggered.” She complained the professor focused “on the beauty of the language and the splendor of the imagery when lecturing on the text.” He did not apparently notice her feelings, or their urgency. As a result, “the student completely disengaged from the class discussion as a means of self-preservation. She did not feel safe in the class.”

Safe is the key word here. There’s the suggestion that a work may be a masterpiece but if it makes anyone feel bad, it’s out.

Later the student told the professor how she felt, and her concerns, she said, were ignored. The authors of the op-ed note that “Metamorphoses” is a fixture in the study of literature and humanities, “but like so many texts in the Western canon it contains triggering and offensive material that marginalizes student identities in the classroom.” The Western canon, they continue, is full of “histories and narratives of exclusion and oppression” that can be “difficult to read and discuss as a survivor, a person of color, or a student from a low-income background.”

That makes them feel unsafe: “Students need to feel safe in the classroom, and that requires a learning environment that recognizes the multiplicity of their identities.” The authors suggest changing the core curriculum but concede it may not be easy. Another student, they report, suggested in her class that maybe instead they could read “a Toni Morrison text.” A different student responded that “texts by authors of the African Diaspora are a staple in most high school English classes, and therefore they did not need to reread them.” That remark, the authors assert, was not only “insensitive” but “revealing of larger ideological divides.” The professor, they report, failed at this moment to “intervene.”
The op-ed authors call for “a space to hold a safe and open dialogue” about classroom experiences that “traumatize and silence students,” with the aim of creating environments that recognize “the multiplicity” of student “identities.”

Well, here are some questions and a few thoughts for all those who have been declaring at all the universities, and on social media, that their feelings have been hurt in the world and that the world had just better straighten up.

Why are you so fixated on the idea of personal safety, by which you apparently mean not having uncomfortable or unhappy thoughts and feelings? Is there any chance this preoccupation is unworthy of you? Please say yes.

There is no such thing as safety. That is asking too much of life. You can’t expect those around you to constantly accommodate your need for safety. That is asking too much of people.

Life gives you potentials for freedom, creativity, achievement, love, all sorts of beautiful things, but none of us are “safe.” And you are especially not safe in an atmosphere of true freedom. People will say and do things that are wrong, stupid, unkind, meant to injure. They’ll bring up subjects you find upsetting. It’s uncomfortable. But isn’t that the price we pay for freedom of speech?

You can ask for courtesy, sensitivity and dignity. You can show others those things, too, as a way of encouraging them. But if you constantly feel anxious and frightened by what you encounter in life, are we sure that means the world must reorder itself? Might it mean you need a lot of therapy?

Masterpieces, by their nature, pierce. They jar and unsettle. If something in a literary masterpiece upsets you, should the masterpiece really be banished? What will you be left with when all of them are gone?

What in your upbringing told you that safety is the highest of values? What told you it is a realistic expectation? Who taught you that you are entitled to it every day? Was your life full of . . . unchecked privilege? Discuss.

Do you think Shakespeare, Frieda Kahlo, Virginia Woolf, Langston Hughes and Steve Jobs woke up every morning thinking, “My focus today is on looking for slights and telling people they’re scaring me”? Or were their energies and commitments perhaps focused on other areas?

I notice lately that some members of your generation are being called, derisively, Snowflakes. Are you really a frail, special and delicate little thing that might melt
when the heat is on?

Do you wish to be known as the first generation that comes with its own fainting couch? Did first- and second-wave feminists march to the barricades so their daughters and granddaughters could act like Victorians with the vapors?

Everyone in America gets triggered every day. Many of us experience the news as a daily microaggression. Who can we sue, silence or censor to feel better?

Finally, social justice warriors always portray themselves—and seem to experience themselves—as actively suffering victims who need protection. Is that perhaps an invalid self-image? Are you perhaps less needy than demanding? You seem to be demanding a safety no one else in the world gets. If you were so vulnerable, intimidated and weak, you wouldn’t really be able to attack and criticize your professors, administrators and fellow students so ably and successfully, would you?

Are you a bunch of frail and sensitive little bullies? Is it possible you’re not intimidated but intimidators?

Again, discuss.

By the way, I went back to the op-ed and read the online comments it engendered from the Columbia community. They were quite wonderful. One called, satirically, to ban all satire because it has too many “verbal triggers.” Another: “These women are like a baby watching a movie and thinking the monster is going to come out of the screen and get them.” Another: “These girls’ parents need a refund.”

The biggest slayer of pomposity and sanctimony in our time continues to be American wit.