

# Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

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## Resisting Civility in Higher Education

BING BINGHAM

*Dear Higher Education,*

I'm Bing. I'm a queer, gender non-conforming, white, first-generation college student from the Midwest. I was born in 1990, a year with the highest AIDS mortality rate to date, just thirty-five minutes from Ryan White's final resting place. While Ryan White was a household name, we dared not speak of the other lives lost to that very same disease. In fact, my early life was almost entirely devoid of any mentions of queer and trans people, living or deceased. Socially it was not considered "polite conversation." Educationally queer people were treated as irrelevant. And religiously they were to be pitied as best, damned at worst. To this day, I have only ever taken one course on anything even remotely LGBTQ+ focused.

I have spent the last decade of my life trying to find what was so easily kept from me. I feel a deep need to understand who and what has come before me. Through this process I've gained a profound appreciation for the nuances and complexities of our world and the perseverance of a community I am honored to call my own. Humanity, which once felt so small and rigid, has now revealed itself to be wonderfully expansive and beautifully diverse. It is with this spirit that I approach my work as the director for Virginia Tech's Pride Center.

The Pride Center is one of five Cultural and Community Centers (CCCs) that call Virginia Tech home. The APIDA + Center, Ati: Wa:oki Indigenous Community Center, Black Cultural Center, El Centro, and the Pride Center make up our little marginalized family unit. We are few in number which means on any given day we are shaking hands with donors and turning around to serve food at student-facing events. Deciding what to wear is a nightmare.

Believe it or not, the vast majority of my job is actually working with cisgender, straight people. That's who most of our administrators are and that's how most faculty members identify. We meet and talk about accommodations and changes that can be made so that queer and trans students, faculty, and staff can focus on their assigned tasks. It seems very simple but because queer and transness has been made so foreign to everyone, it's always an effort to meet folks where they are. Some want to understand the nuances of the queer and trans communities while others just want to know what they are supposed to do about it.

What follows is part of an address I gave at a Student Affairs breakfast and award ceremony in 2022. I was asked to speak on "civility," a principle championed by our administration as "aspirational." While I was thrilled to be invited to speak at such a large university gathering, it was absolutely devastating to be given this topic. Not only did I not consider myself a "champion of civility", but I was outright opposed to it being called anything other than a low bar. At the time I had been in my role for only two years and was certain I could stay for more if I played my card rights. This meant that I needed to choose my words wisely. After numerous conversations with all involved parties, I accepted the invitation. The purpose of this address was twofold: I wanted to challenge civility as an aspirational attribute without insulting or assuming intent and I needed to offer something to take its place that felt like a genuine step in the right direction.

Here's what I said:

Civility. I don't like it. I don't want to talk about civility.

I've often equated civility to something as backhanded as tolerance. The "I don't care what you do as long as you don't do it in front of me, approach to difference." I can't think of a time when I've ever wanted to be tolerated. At its best, I've seen civility used as a facade meant to hide dissenting opinions which ultimately ends the conversation. At its worst it has been used as a silencing tactic, policing the tone of the marginalized, and reinforcing the existing power imbalance. It's a low bar and the opportunity for low bar efforts has long since passed.

So, I don't want to talk about civility and I know I don't want to practice it either. This feels like a good time to tell you that others knew what I was going to say today. If you are sitting in your seat just now thinking that you are witnessing the last public appearance of Dr. Bing, take a breath, everything is going to be okay.

Given my experiences with "civility," I really struggled with how to respond to such a flattering invitation. At this point in my life and career, it's important to me that I show up as genuinely authentic as I can. I owe it to myself, I owe that to the mentors who have invested their time in me, and I owe it to my students. And I couldn't think of anything further from the goals of my work than civility and peacekeeping. Our work in the CCCs focuses on making space for bodies that this institution was not built to serve. It is creating something where there was nothing, it is beautifully and justly disruptive. And I'd say that is the goal for everything we do. If you don't walk away thinking or feeling differently about something, we haven't done our jobs.

Like any good student when faced with a problem they don't know how to solve, I returned to the basics. Even a "the Webster's Dictionary defines...." approach would be better than what I had to say about civility.

As described on Virginia Tech's website: "At the heart of this pursuit is a basic commitment to consideration, respect, and courtesy. Civility expects that we strive to listen as well as to speak to each other; we try to understand each other in our commonalities and differences; we show respect to all members of the university community; we favor courtesy over rudeness and encourage considerate treatment over dismissive behavior; and we combine free speech with reasoned expression so that liberty and peace are both served."

This, I thought, is something I can work with. This definition speaks of an enduring commitment, intentional listening, and the power of one's voice. It calls for basic human decency in the pursuit of a shared understanding. It suggests that we can collectively free ourselves from the oppressive restrictions and that we can and must do this work together.

I like this. This is worth aspiring to but I'm not sure it really describes civility today.

I talk a lot about language and the importance and power of words in my daily work. Language is an incredible tool. It can inspire, bring light into darkness, and bring even the most stubborn of us to tears. But it can also be wielded to justify inhumane treatment, continued persecution, and is readily available at a moment's notice to ever so slightly take you down a peg.

This is why our words are so incredibly important. They are loaded with meaning and potential. Potential we all know can be wonderful and dangerous. Because of this, in any given context or time period words change significantly. Words we used to throw about playfully we now understand to cause pain. Phrases like “that’s so gay” or “you speak so articulately” reveal more about the speaker today than it does the target.

The great scholar Julia Serano talks about this phenomenon from a queer lens, calling it the activist-merry-go-round. Round and round it spins, occasionally landing on a way of speaking that most can agree is more acceptable than the last. For example, what was “sexual invert” became “homosexual” then “gay” then “LGBT,” “LGBTQ,” “LGBTQAI2,” “LGBTQ+,” and now “queer.” I’m sure everyone here can think of a word or phrase they’ve stopped using for one reason or another.

The original intent of the word stays intact, what changes however is its impact. I’ve started talking about this in terms of the heart and the hand, what was meant and what it looks like in action. Actually, my favorite way to phrase this is “from womb to world.” We have some control over the creation process, we can set it up for success, but what happens after it leaves us is beyond our control.

Serano says that as long as power imbalances exist between communities, the merry-go-round will continue to spin. And while you could dig your heels in and refuse to jump aboard, it will keep on spinning and your voice will go unaccounted for.

On the flip side of language, however, is perhaps one of my favorite quotes. Carl Yung once said “loneliness doesn’t come from having no people about, but from being unable to communicate the things that seem important to oneself or from holding certain views which others find inadmissible.” (356) Horribly simplified, he’s saying that attempting and failing to be heard or understood is one of the loneliest things we’ll ever do. In the queer community, we are constantly coming up with new ways that describe our experiences with gender, sexual, and romantic attraction. It is our attempt to describe and share in a way that previous versions didn’t quite capture. It doesn’t mean that the old words are vile or inherently bad, they’re just not the best ones for the job.

This is where I think we find “civility.” Maybe, just maybe there’s something else out there that can help us better communicate our intentions. Something that better fits the ideas of enduring commitment, intentional listening, and empowering voices in the aims of collective liberation.

At the beginning of every VirTual Safe Zone training we offer through the Pride Center, there is a list of community guidelines that every participant must agree to. They are our aspirations. They help us engage with each other, hear each other, and respect each other as we clumsily work through the nuances and beauty of humanity.

Full transparency, our VirTual Safe Zone program is not ideal for everyone. We have intentionally made our trainings longer and more burdensome. We’re trying to move away from surface level, transactional learning and into something more productive, something that stays with you. What

used to be conveyed in a one-to-four-hour window, we now explore together over a five-week period. It is purposefully slow and demanding.

What a lot of people don't stop to realize is that sexism, cissexism, heterosexism, racism, and ableism have negatively affected us all just not to the same degree. Everyone here has walked into a room only to find that parts of them are welcome there, just not the whole. We are utterly alone in that until someone puts it to words.

In VirTual Safe Zone, we work through that pain, anger, and vulnerability together. We have hard conversations rich with meaningful silences. We process the anxiety and freedom that comes when we decenter our own experiences and understanding of the world. And somewhere in the process we stop talking about "them" and start talking about "us." We start taking ownership of our thoughts and actions both past and present and see them as deeply intertwined with others. It is a messy process that requires an unprecedented amount of empathy and humility. It is honestly one of the most rewarding parts of my job.

Maybe those would be my words: humility and empathy.

But I don't know what words hit the right chords for you. That's the beauty of living with and alongside others. We get to talk through it together. Our shared languages are ripe with opportunity.

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Two years after giving this speech, and numerous attacks on trans lives later, I find myself wrestling again with the difference between civility-like practices and genuine empathy and humility. Gender is a feeling, an understanding that we express in words and actions. It is almost always an imperfect translation. Many are born with their words already in existence, others have to find ours. Policies like those approved by Governor Glenn Youngkin in the state of Virginia make that work nearly impossible for young adults. These policies claim to "ensure privacy, dignity, and respect for all students and parents" and at the same time they depict transness as an inherent danger to others. This legislation ensures the safety of some by restricting that of others. This is the guise of civility. This is what has been embedded in our society since its creation.

As freedom of speech now becomes one of our biggest topics for discussion in higher education, I urge you to resist civility-like practices. Don't just do the bare minimum. Respect others' pronouns and think about your relationship with your own. Is it important that you are addressed using specific pronouns? How about adjectives or compliments? Use a person's chosen name and reflect on your own or the ones you've given others. Do you like your name? Is there one you'd like more? Would you keep a sweater as long if it no longer fits? Who says you have to keep what is given? Learn the difference between saying "everyone should be who they want to be" and "everyone should have the freedom to be who they are" because there is a difference. Don't ensure your comfort by taking from someone else's, we all deserve to be here. We all deserve genuine respect.

If you'd like to take it a step further, and I hope you do, don't just memorize a person's chosen name and/or pronouns, work to see them as they know themselves to be. Unlearn your habitual gendering practices and start seeing people for who they tell you they are. Make room in your mind for queer and trans existence. Being seen as who you know yourself to be is one of those most beautiful gifts we can give to one another. Every day you are presented with the opportunity to welcome the beautiful complexity of humanity into your life.

*I hope you accept that invitation.*  
*Bing Bingham*  
*Director of the Virginia Tech Pride Center*

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## References

Jung, C. G. *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, translated by Richard Winston and Clara Winston. Fontana Press, 1995.

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## About the author

Dr. Ashleigh “Bing” Bingham (she/they) joined Virginia Tech and Cultural and Community Centers team in October 2019 as the Director of the Pride Center (formerly LGBTQ+ Resource Center.) Dr. Bing’s work focuses on supporting the mental, emotional, social, and physical well being of queer and trans Hokies through creating space, providing resources, advocating for student needs, and facilitating learning opportunities for students, faculty, and staff. This work includes but is not limited to: serving on the steering committee for the Lavender House Living-Learning Community, advising student organizations, creating a 15-week VirTual Safe Zone training program, expanding the use of pronouns and chosen names in the university system as well as ID cards, and working to expand the availability of All Gender Restrooms across the Blacksburg campus. Dr. Bing holds a bachelor’s degree in psychology, Master’s degree in Social Psychology, and a Doctorate degree in Higher Education from Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana.