

Is There a Bartender in the House?

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A teacher, a medical researcher, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau walked into a bar. “You folks look like you need a drink,” said the bartender, surveying their faces. “The Common Core, the PARCC,”¹ said the teacher, dropping her heavy backpack on the floor, “and these new recruits who think I’m deadwood because I’m over forty. I’ll take whatever you’ve got on tap.” “That’s hard,” said the bartender, “here you go. That’ll be \$3.50.” “What a week,” said the medical researcher, leaning both elbows comfortably on the counter and gesturing expressively. “Months of getting NIH² funding and IRB³ approval for this work on prosthetics, and then some participant tells me it’s important for soldiers to hold their babies. Make me a martini.” “That sure is hard,” said the bartender, “Here you go. Ten dollars, or do you want me to start a tab? And you, monsieur,” asked the bartender, turning to Jean-Jacques Rousseau. “What can I get you?” “Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things,” lamented Rousseau, “everything degenerates in the hands of man.” “So,” asked the bartender, “does that mean you want a drink or not?”

Never one to settle for being the punchline of a joke, Rousseau replied, “Doubtless it is here that I will be attacked.” He glared at two regulars down the bar. “What is to be done about it? I do not see as do other men. I have long been reproached for that. But is it up to me to provide myself with other eyes or to affect other ideas? No. It is up to me not to go overboard, not to believe that I alone am wiser than everybody. It is up to me not to change sentiments but to distrust mine. That is all I can do; and that is what I do. If I sometimes adopt an assertive tone,” — and here he turned to face the teacher and medical researcher with the steely resolve he had been showing the bartender — “it is not for the sake of making an impression but for the sake of speaking as I think. Why should I propose as doubtful what, so far as I am concerned, I do not doubt at all? I say exactly what goes on in my mind.”⁴

“Hey buddy,” warned the medical researcher. “Let’s not start any fights. This is a safe space.” At the other end of the bar, the regulars nearly fell off their stools laughing.

The bartender, however, who was in equal measure tired of the fights, the boozy lamentations, and his role in bar jokes, leaned back against the mirror in thought. “Part of me really likes what you’re saying about honest sentiments and autonomy,” the bartender started. “But don’t you see,” he worried, “that there are two problems with what you’ve just said. For one, if I, as a bartender, were to express *my* feelings honestly, I would be unable to make a living.” “Man is born free,” suggested Rousseau, “and everywhere he is in chains. This is precisely why we must do away with the privileges that arise when some seek to please and others expect to be pleased. Speaking our true sentiments to one another, as equals, we would achieve *fraternité*. Tell that medical researcher to take his NIH funding and his ten dollars and stuff it.” “I’ll drink to that,” yelled a critical theorist from across the room. “You have nothing

to lose but your chains! Speak truth to power!" The medical researcher slammed down his martini and started to pull on his coat until he heard the bartender continue.

"Hear me out," said the bartender. "There's also a second problem. Suppose there were no bartenders. Suppose you couldn't walk into a space like this, speak your troubles, and expect that someone would listen. That's no good either. I agree that money complicates things, insofar as it materializes privilege along lines of social class, gender, and race. Inequality means that some people always have to do the listening while others get to speak. But sometimes we all need a bartender. I mean, I wish *I* could walk into a bar sometimes. Could bartending be a decent model for a certain kind of interaction across differences? I'm not sure how such empathetic relations would work, but I sure wish someone would help me think it through."

At this, the teacher, who had just finished her degree in Philosophy of Education with Audrey Thompson, said "I know just who you need to talk to! Shall we get out of this joke and go find her?" "You betcha," said the bartender.

Because Thompson eschews simplistic answers, we teachers, researchers, and, metaphorically speaking, bartenders and bar regulars, will not find easy resolutions to the bartender's questions in "Angry People at an Empathy Conference." What this essay provides instead is the door-opening invitation to a valuable conversation. It asks readers to stop playing habitual, monodimensional roles and assuming others will do the same in everyday interactions and to think afresh about how each of us responds to others.

Thompson recognizes that power differentials position subjects as speakers and listeners, recipients and providers of empathy, and she wonders how, given preexisting and often embodied inequalities, education can prepare young people to provide empathy across these differentials. I have focused this response on her example of the bartender both because it captures so many of the issues she raises and because it struck a personal chord with me. Her essay uses the bartender to exemplify the problem of white people offering insincere empathy to the stories of people of color, stories whose telling gives lie to the idea of a "safe space." This example puts the reader in a hall of mirrors, especially if, like Thompson, the reader denies monodimensional, static interpretations of identity. If a man of color tells a white woman his story, and she only feigns empathy, who *is* the long-suffering bartender? Should she have to hear yet another man presume that her role is to listen? Should he have to put up with yet another self-serving performance of anti-racist sympathy? What should each do in lieu of pulling out a phone to text like-minded friends, escaping the hall of mirrors only to enter an echo chamber? How, that is, can legitimately angry people join the empathy conference?

Thompson's essay spoke to me in light of some troubling exchanges I have had with colleagues over the past year. In each, the topic was social justice, and in each I was called out for a comment that was interpreted as a mark of my privilege and insensitivity to the issue at hand. In a faculty meeting led by the diversity committee, we were provided a data-based account of the school's recruitment and retention of students of color. During the subsequent discussion, I asked whether in the future

we would also find out how the school was doing in regard to socioeconomic status, sexual diversity and gender, and perhaps language background. A Black male professor explained to me that because race was *the* defining narrative of American history, questions like mine were a distraction and inappropriate. More recently, a colleague speaking about undocumented immigrants asked what all of us were now going to do to address this injustice with our students. My suggestion was that perhaps, given all the issues of social justice clamoring for attention, the best course was to take action on behalf of one issue, or a small handful, to model to our students what a life of political commitment can look like. My colleague called out my privilege in being able to pick my issues that way. In part, these interactions made me feel deeply uneasy. I wondered if my comments, which expressed commitment to the broader goal of social justice but in a manner not completely uncritical of the speaker's claims, were microaggressions that had the effect of discrediting speakers whose authority was already limited. In part, these interactions made me angry. Their responses to me felt like — and indeed were perceived by others in the room as — public dressings-down. In her research on women in the workplace, Joan Williams has found that white, heterosexual women are expected to express empathy for others' problems and penalized for reluctance to perform this service, or, heaven forbid, for getting angry. (Curiously, she found, Black and Lesbian women are relieved of some of this expectation, though they face other hazards.)⁵ Figuratively speaking, white women are expected to be the bartender. And yet, I imagine my colleagues felt the same way. As Thompson says, "Now there were two of us who were angry."

It is tempting to argue here that U.S. society, as rife with inequality as pre-Revolutionary France, needs to provide the conditions such that *no one* has to be the bartender and, towards this end, to call for authentic communication about the issues that matter. As Thompson and Rousseau recognize, however, insofar as subjects are fully independent, pity rather than empathy is the sentiment that would move them to listen and act on another's behalf. Empathy, like sympathy, seems to call for a recognition of the other as needing something from me, as dependent on me at this moment for kindness. Pity assumes no dependency, but it is expressed down some perceived hierarchy of human flourishing. If the bartender and the regulars are truly independent, either their relations based on pity will reinstate the inequality that Rousseau seeks to overcome or there will be no bars, no social spaces in which to share a story that no one else feels like listening to.

Nor does the social critic's call to "speak truth to power" help here, useful though that invocation can sometimes be. Speaking truth to power works when the emperor is told he has no clothes and this suddenly becomes obvious to everyone. Bearing witness to racist, sexist, ableist, and other slights often does not function this way, as differences in epistemic position make one person's "truth" invisible and inaudible to others. My colleagues' frustration at my questions about social justice may have arisen from resentment about my having slipped the emperor a dressing gown just when they had the crowd's attention. Or perhaps they saw a truth I couldn't see. Thompson's hard question is how a listener who cannot accurately perceive the wrong and therefore cannot feel the pain *with* the speaker can still respond with genuine kindness.

Perhaps one answer is to teach young people that we are all sometimes the bartender and sometimes the regulars, and that our position as one or the other changes over time. As Eva Feder Kittay has argued, the needs of dependents cannot be responded to appropriately if dependency is considered a deficiency to be overcome as efficiently as possible.⁶ Furthermore, relationships that involve dependency, such as that of a child on a parent or one friend on another, are much of what makes human life worth living. In such relationships, however, we find ourselves shifting between dependence and independence, and, ultimately, to interdependence. In the insight that we are only ever temporarily abled bodies, temporarily free to speak our minds or walk out, temporarily the bartender or the one with the story, the hapless characters of my joke might find some answers. Genuine empathy, perhaps, requires an awareness of human interdependency. I will be the bartender now, if you, or someone in your stead, will be the bartender later.

1. Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers

2. National Institutes of Health

3. Institutional Review Board

4. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile: or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979, 34, with some ellipses and punctuation changes.

5. Joan Williams and Rachel Dempsey, *What Works for Women at Work*. (New York: NYU Press, 2014.)

6. Eva Feder Kittay, *Love's Labor* (New York: Routledge, 1999). Feminist philosophers of education have expressed versions of this idea. For my characterization of Rousseau, I am indebted to Jane Roland Martin, "Rousseau's Sophie," in *Reclaiming a Conversation: The Ideal of the Educated Woman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).