

# Two sides of the same coin: politics in the classroom

## Steven L. Berg

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## Interview with David Horowitz

**Berg:** *Although our feature is called “Two Sides of the Same Coin,” it’s not a pro and con piece. We want to stimulate discussion and education. Thank you for talking with us today. Is it desirable to try to make the classroom politics-free? Is that what you’re trying to do?*

**Horowitz:** I would rephrase that. I’m trying to make the classroom free from political advocacy by teachers. It’s very different. That doesn’t mean that politics shouldn’t be discussed in the classroom, it means that professors should not be political partisans in the classroom. They should not use their authority of the classroom backed by the authority of grades—the professor has huge power advantages if I can put it that way. One is the grading power, the other is that the professor presumably has read more in the subject, knows more. The professor also has professional obligations which have been recognized for nearly 100 years in the profession itself. The obligation is to *teach* students, not to indoctrinate them. The difference is that even on a political issue—let’s take abortion—you can be on either side of the left-right divide and be pro- or anti-abortion. It’s a professor’s task, if this is a relevant issue, and it could be in certain classes, to teach the students how to reason, how to think, how to express their thoughts.

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The students should be made aware of the arguments on both sides of the issue, and of course within the two sides there is a spectrum of argument. The students should be taught how to marshal evidence in defense of their positions and how to argue logically. That's the task of the professors, to make students aware of the universe of ideas around a particular issue, perhaps some of the history of an issue, an informative aspect of the teaching process, and to enhance the students' abilities to marshal evidence and to reason. It is not the professor's place to tell the student what to think, in other words to try to enforce a conclusion. The professor should not be using his or her authority to get students to be pro-choice or pro-abortion. We have a case of a liberal student who was pro-choice and who had to sit in a class with a pro-life professor who compared women who have abortions to Andrea Yates, the deranged mother who drowned her five children, and who gave the student a D in the class for disagreeing even though he was an A student.

That's reprehensible and it would be the same if it were on the other side of the issue. It obstructs the teaching process. The professor puts him or herself down on the level of the student, and it gets into a fierce partisan debate over an issue. The student isn't learning from that, the student is defending whatever point of view he or she brought into the class and whatever prejudice they brought in. They're not learning anything. Political advocacy in the classroom—for example, we have a case at the University of Cincinnati of a professor—and this doesn't even qualify as political advocacy; it's just venting political prejudice—referring to the President of the United States as a “douche bag” regularly. That's wrong.

Now let me say that these ideas are not peculiar to me or to my academic freedom movement or my Academic Bill of Rights. They were first articulated in 1915 in the general report of the American Association of University Professors regarding the principals of tenure and academic freedom, which said that there is a difference between education and indoctrination, and teachers should be there as educators. It was reiterated in a principle adopted in 1940, and I think I can quote this pretty much to the letter. “Teachers are entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject, but they should be careful not to introduce into their teaching controversial matter which has no relation to their subject” (<http://www.studentsforacademicfreedom.org/>). I was just in the state of Ohio, and Ohio State University has this identical regulation

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that says professors should not introduce matter irrelevant to the subject. It's very difficult to articulate this as a law, but I think it's easy to understand. The professor should not be a partisan of any political or controversial viewpoint in the classroom.

Berg: *One of the things we're interested in is where the line is drawn. Something in the last presidential campaign that made news was when Davis March was suspended for showing Michael Moore's Fahrenheit 9/11 in his English class. I don't want to get into the specifics of that case ...*

Horowitz: I'll answer that. The issue is very simple. Let's say, good judgment aside—I reserve my judgment of the film and of a professor who thinks this is a worthy film—if you are going to introduce a controversial film and one that is certainly very partisan in its political advocacy, then you minimally need to require the students to read critical articles on the film and on the person who produced it. The Web is just full of articles written both by liberals and conservatives about the, shall we say, unscrupulous methods of Michael Moore. You can find at spincanity.com—which is a liberal site, for example—59 distortions in the film *Fahrenheit 9/11*. It is totally irresponsible and unprofessional for a professor to bring a film like that into the classroom without having a critical commentary for the students, just as it would be to present a Holocaust denier without presenting counter-evidence. If possible, it would be appropriate to show *Fahrenhype 9/11*. That would be a teaching experience. We're talking about education. Professors are citizens. They have the right to be fanatically political, but outside of the classroom.

Berg: *How do we do that responsibly? Last semester I showed Fahrenheit 9/11 in my journalism class, and we discussed some of the distortions...*

Horowitz: But I think you need to provide them with materials...

Berg: *I also showed excerpts from Fahrenhype 9/11, so there were...*

Horowitz: That's good. It should be parallel kind of stuff. That's my thought. Your job as a teacher is to teach students how to think. If they see an argument presented—and the Michael Moore film was a big event. A lot of people saw it, it was discussed, and it's something students would know about. Particularly for journalism students, this is something they'll have to deal with. The role of the teacher is to introduce students to materials that will help them to reason, not to

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get them to draw conclusions about George Bush. In a course on the presidency, they would be approaching and trying to figure out what to conclude about George Bush. Again, the professor should present materials so they can make up their own minds. I will bet you anything that 90% of professors, if asked about teaching, will say exactly what I'm saying. You're going to teach students *how* to think, not *what* to think. I'm sure they encourage students to make up their own minds and not just follow leaders. The problem is that our faculties are almost universally, 90- to 95% politically left, and there are a lot of ideologues among the faculties, unfortunately, people who are really political activists and shouldn't probably be in a classroom. The culture of the university and the community college has changed. What you need is a policy to remind people what their responsibility is. If everybody is doing it, it's much more difficult to change.

I'm going to read from the rules of the University Faculty Governance from the faculty handbook of Ohio State University. It says—this is completely ignored and I'll explain in a second what I'm going to do about it—but here's what they say:

Academic freedom carries with it correlative academic responsibilities. The principle elements include the responsibility of teachers to ... 5) refrain from persistently introducing matters that have no bearing on the subject matter of the course ... 7) differentiate carefully between official activities as teachers and personal activities as citizens and to act accordingly.

The analogy would be doctors. You don't go into your doctor's office and expect to get a lecture on who to vote for in the next election. If you did—and if the doctor was advocating for the candidate opposing yours—you might have second thoughts about putting yourself in his hands. Everyone knows that political passions are high, and that interferes with the trust relationship which is crucial to the profession of medicine and also to the profession of teaching. Teachers are professionals. They get special privileges for being professionals; they have special responsibilities. My problem with the Ohio State guidelines is that they are buried in the faculty handbook as responsibilities of professors. They are also student rights and they should be codified as an Academic Bill of Rights for students, which is what my Academic Bill of Rights is about....

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- Berg: *If I want to facilitate an open and honest classroom discussion, do you think I should not be open and honest about my own beliefs?*
- Horowitz: I thought you were going to ask me whether you can play Devil's Advocate which, of course, you can.
- Berg: *Devil's Advocate is a teaching tool that I think a lot of faculty use and I've used in my classes, but there are times...*
- Horowitz: My answer is this: if it's at all possible, unless you feel that you can't be fair-minded and therefore you want to warn students, it's best not to let them know what you think. Is this possible? I had 19 years of education up through the M.A. level, mainly during the McCarthy Era. I went to school from 1944 to 1962. I don't remember one teacher or one professor in one class on a single occasion *ever* expressing a political viewpoint and I would have been sensitive to it because my parents were Communists and I was, shall we say, not in sympathy with the politics of the time. I don't remember it happening once. What's happened here is really a cultural change where it has become acceptable and where it shouldn't be. Can you do it? Yes. For instance, let's go back to abortion. You could say to the students, "This is a very controversial issue, and I think it would be better if you knew what I think so you can correct for any bias that I may be introducing into the discussion." I would restrict what I say. I wouldn't make the case. I would just say, "I happen to be pro-choice. However, the first thing I want to assure you is that your grade and my attitude to you will not be affected one iota if you disagree with me. I am here to teach you how to make an argument, how to reason, how to look at these things, not to tell you what to think." If a professor does that, I have no problem.
- Berg: *If we talk about our professional background or share our writing with our students, some of that could come out.*
- Horowitz: If I taught, it would be impossible for me to conceal what I believed, so I would make an *extra* effort. I would be very self-conscious about the left-wing, liberal kids in my class. The point is to make them feel a certain comfort. I can't tell you of the hundreds of students who bite their tongues in the classroom and say things they don't believe in order to protect themselves.
- Berg: *What kinds of things would you do to make your liberal students comfortable?*
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Horowitz: I would find ways to support their positions. It's easier for me because I was on the left, so I'm familiar with the arguments. I could, for example, point students—depending on what we're talking about. If we were talking about the war in Iraq, I would address the students who are anti-war and talk to them about anti-war leftists, anti-war liberals, show them I'm familiar with the arguments and the literature. I would just try to increase their comfort level and convince them that I think this is a position that is worthy of being answered and deserves respect.

The main problem that I encounter on college campuses today is that professors are completely disrespectful of Republicans; in particular, they make derisory remarks about the President all the time. We had a case at the University of Georgia. During the election campaign, the professor—who was supposed to be teaching about the First and Second World Wars—used obscenities calling both Bush and Cheney “chicken shit” and “cowards,” and it was all about Bush's alleged National Guard service and evasion of the war. This had nothing to do with the First or Second World War; Bush wasn't even born then. It was just some professor venting his politics. The reason it came to my attention is because a young Republican student felt—this was the first day of class, and I know the professor said this because he defended himself on the History News network and quoted what he said and was obviously pleased with himself—but the effect was that the student dropped the course.

The student felt he wasn't going to get a fair shake in the class, and whether that's true or not I think it's reasonable caution for the student to have taken. What happened is not education anymore. It's the way a professor expresses his views. I would not make derisory remarks about Leftists in a class I'm teaching because I have a different responsibility as a teacher than I do as a political polemicist. This is very basic stuff that unfortunately has been ignored too much in our universities today, and they would be much better institutions if we could change the learning environment. That's my whole agenda, to change that environment.

Berg: *Regarding the student who feels she is being treated unfairly—and I'm not suggesting any of the examples you've cited so far are red herrings, but I did read on the SFA website, there was one example where the student said that she or he got a D- just because the professor hates families and thinks it's okay to be gay.*

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Horowitz: Look, these are students. And that's one of the reasons I'm so concerned about them: they're just students. They can make mistakes.

Berg: *If a student said, "Dr. Berg gave me a D- because he hates families and thinks it's okay to be gay," and that's not true at all, how would I go about reaching that student so she knows that the problem is the terrible paper.*

Horowitz: I think the way to do it is directly. First of all, what I would guess from the situation that you're mentioning is that the professor had made remarks in class which were inappropriate, that is, given the student the idea in the first place. What you're showing is precisely the problem. A student could even misunderstand as an anti-family comment a statement by a professor whose intent is to get students to be more tolerant of gay people. It's such a politicized atmosphere, but let's assume that didn't happen. If that did happen, the professor, again, would have to say, "You need to be assured, we disagree on this issue, but I am your teacher, and I am here to help you. I will not grade you on areas on which we disagree." Perhaps the professor could give an example of a conservative student who got higher grades.

I suspect the red flags went up for this student because the professor was too politicized in presenting these issues. You just have to adapt, I think. The classroom is not a political arena. This is not the Hannity & Colmes show. It's a different process and different things are going on here. You just have to take some care. I don't think this is rocket science. Even my Bill of Rights has been politicized. In my view, it should be supported by liberals, by Leftists, as well as by Conservatives. It's completely viewpoint-neutral. It will be helpful to everybody, particularly in the present atmosphere where radical professors like Ward Churchill are creating a bit of a problem for universities. It would be very helpful to endorse this kind of tolerance and a return to academic pursuits. I think the American public is more than willing to support true academic work.

Berg: *In the Academic Bill of Rights you seem to single out Liberal Arts areas and not areas such as business school.*

Horowitz: I don't mention any professional schools. First of all, I would make the same caveats for business schools. A lot of this, as you can tell from our conversation, is about respect. It's just about respecting difference. Everybody at the university has

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been taught to respect difference if it's about skin color or gender or sexual orientation. I'm asking to extend that to political viewpoints which are even more volatile in some ways than race issues in our society at this time. I'm not sure what you might be thinking of here. A business school is a profession school. Its job is to train people, which is very different from Liberal Arts which is to examine the philosophical basis of issues. To have a Marxist anti-business person as a professor in a business school—and I'm sure there are some—to me is in itself wrong. It deprives students who have paid a lot of money to learn about business, to have somebody in there who's against the business system as such—there's a place for that, but it certainly isn't in the business school any more than if you have a school of medicine where students have signed up to learn traditional Western medicine but have homeopathy advocates who think the medical system is a sham. There's a place for that. There might be a course in the medical school on the philosophy of medicine, and that would be fine—almost a kind of truth-in-labeling issue.

*Berg: I could see in an economics department having a class on Marx and presenting that as a point of view.*

*Horowitz: Sure. I've never campaigned against having left-wing viewpoints in the classroom.*

*Berg: One of the things in the Academic Bill of Rights is that curricula and reading lists in the humanities and social sciences should reflect the uncertainty and unsettled character of all human knowledge. I could see concern because humanities and social sciences are mentioned, but not other areas.*

*Horowitz: I think it's true in all areas; there's a certain uncertainty. But it's very true in the humanities and this is the area where we've encountered these issues. Not exclusively, I have to say. I had a student tell me that in his organic materials class—he's a metallurgy major at Stanford University—the professor put on the screen a picture of Governor Schwarzenegger with the question, "Is it right that the governor is going to Ohio to campaign for George Bush?" I don't think it says anything relevant to metallurgy and is way out of place there, but generally it's not as significant a problem. Human knowledge is unsettled. Look, if it weren't, we'd be running our universities like the University of Havana. We'd have a one-party political system because there are right answers; all we need is one party because it's got the right answers. In our universities, we'd only need one side represented, the side with the right*



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answers. There are some Americans who believe that, but it's not what we believe as a nation; and we shouldn't run an educational system based on any other assumption except that human beings are fallible, we may be wrong, and therefore we don't teach an ideology here. We teach people how to reason and how to weigh evidence.

Berg: *I'd like to go back to some ways in which we can handle ourselves in the classroom when things come up in discussion. I've had the experience of conducting a class discussion and a student makes a comment or a joke about the President or uses the phrase, "that's so gay," which many students use now. As a professor, how should I handle that to make sure the other students are comfortable?*

Horowitz: You can say to the student, "I'm sure that joke is funny to some people in the class. It's not so funny to others. The problem is that it introduces into our discussion a mode of discourse which is not conducive to thought. Humor is a way of deriding and dismissing things, not thinking about them. The purpose of this class and our discussion in this class is to *think*. I would appreciate it if you reserved that kind of humor for other places. It's not appropriate to the classroom." That would do it. That's the way I would deal with it. It's going to affect the whole level of the discussion.

If we're going to treat the President without respect—and I'd say this if it were Bill Clinton or if John Kerry had become president—when you're discussing these issues in the classroom, it's like telling an off-color joke about Clinton in a newspaper. Since you're a journalism teacher, you know generally there's a tone. What makes the *New York Times* a paper of record or what makes the *Washington Post* listened to? Part of it is the tone they adopt in dealing with these issues. The *Times*—I have less respect for the *New York Times* than I ever did—has this weird thing of calling everybody "Mr." They used to call Mick Jagger "Mr. Jagger," but that obviously is an occasion to show people there are arenas where this is appropriate. If you watch HBO or Comedy Central ...

Berg: *So rather than talking about President Bush, talking about "the president" or "what the president would do" might be a better way of not personalizing it?*

Horowitz: It's respect. It's comparable to what happens in the UN, for example. You have all these countries that hate each other, but when they're talking in the UN, there's a certain diplomatic form of address. Or in the Senate, you know Senators

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get called out. They're not supposed to call their colleagues derogatory names. I get a lot of complaints from conservative kids that it's a complete obstacle to them, expressing themselves in the classroom because it quickly becomes derisory. Students will start making fun of them and the professors will enjoy the fun because they're Leftists and they've forgotten what their responsibility is as professors. I think I say a certain tone to a classroom—and dare I say to a campus—is appropriate. There should be zero tolerance for student groups that obstruct speakers. They should be put on probation immediately and expelled if they continue to do it. Unfortunately, I haven't found many takers among university administrations. But I think this would enhance the academic environment at a university. There is such a thing as a discourse that's appropriate to a teaching environment.

Berg: *It always troubles me when people try to shut down views.*

Horowitz: That's precisely the point. I appreciate that you do and I don't want to take anything away from you, and I think that if pressed, most academics would concur. The problem is that a disrespectful culture has been allowed to develop. I think the truly liberal professors are often intimidated by radicals in just this way because radicals will call you a racist at the drop of a hat, and they shut people up. There's an atmosphere of intimidation on campuses which hasn't been addressed and which really needs to be. Again, that's the reason for my campaign for Academic Freedom. Even though I'm a conservative—and there's probably a lot of people reading the interview who wouldn't agree with me on political matters—others should see that what I'm trying to do will be helpful to them and will improve the atmosphere on campuses. It will insulate universities from attacks by the public in the Ward Churchill sequence. The real problem is that he represents whole faculties at Boulder. The public is saying, "Where are my tax dollars going?" If you have a diversity of views on campus, the public will say, "Well, that is what an education should be about."

Berg: *You referred to the "truly liberal" professor. Could you expand on that?*

Horowitz: In today's political lexicon, the word *liberal* is mightily abused. There are a lot of people who are not liberal who are called Liberals. People ask why Liberalism has a bad name. Well if you call life-long Communists like Angela Davis liberal, or anti-American totalitarians like Ward Churchill liberal, that's going to give liberalism a bad name. Liberal is tolerant.

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Liberal is inclusive. Let's use it in its generic sense. It means respecting different opinions. It's kind of interesting. The university has practically made a religion out of respect for difference, but it draws the line where Republicans, Conservatives, and religious pro-life students are concerned. They can be demonized on college-campuses. Nobody stands up for them.

Berg: *I consider myself one of the true liberals. When I read the criticisms of liberals on campus I want to scream, "Not me! You're not talking about me!"*

Horowitz: I understand, but the problem begins with the failure of people on the left, very broadly defined—anybody say who voted for John Kerry, so that's half the country—to differentiate themselves, draw a line between themselves and Leftists. Peter Beinart in *The New Republic* points out just that: in the Cold War—he likens the war on terror to the Cold War—in the early cold war, Eleanor Roosevelt and Hubert Humphrey threw the Communists out of their organizations. They drew a line between true liberalism and Communism. There is what I would call a neo-Communist left, which is very, very strong among college campus faculties, and one of the ways true liberals could draw a line of distinction would be to support my Academic Bill of Rights. I am the wrong messenger because I have such a strong profile as a conservative. I wish that somebody else had.

It's a very ecumenical bill and an ecumenical proposition or policy. It should be supported. I think that if we could get a policy of respect for all parts of the political spectrum that was enforced on college campuses and by professors, we would begin to change the situation. I do an awful lot of writing about universities, and I publish a lot of articles. Yet publishing about universities is pretty unrelieved; 90% of speakers will be Leftists. There's no effort whatsoever made—I realize, to make the university more inclusive. I realize hiring is a problem, and I have not advocated affirmative action hiring for conservatives. But there are other ways to foster inclusion by inviting speakers in, by featuring conservative texts more.

I just came across a professor named Mark Edmundson, a University of Virginia English professor, but he writes a lot about politics. He's in his 50s and was on C-SPANs "Book Notes." Brian Lamb asked him if he had read Friedrich Hayek's 1945 free market classic, *The Road to Serfdom*. And he'd never heard of Friedrich Hayek, a man who won the Nobel Prize and one of the handful of the most important social

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thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He happens to be a libertarian conservative, which is why this guy never heard of him, but it reveals the problem. I have supported Beinart even though I disagree with him on a lot of things, and I will support any campus movement that is for true liberalism.

*Berg: On the first day of class, as faculty we set the tone for the classroom, what is and is not going to be okay. What should we do on the first day of class to set the appropriate tone that everyone is going to be welcomed?*

*Horowitz: If you want to say you're a liberal, it's very difficult because of what liberal means these days. I would almost avoid that and say, "This is my view of what you're here to learn and what I'm here to teach you. That means we're going to have a civil and civilized discussion. It means that we are going to respect all viewpoints and learn how to respond to them in a disciplined, that is, a rational way. Even if someone says something that you find to be extreme, you're not to express your horror and be emotional in your response. If I'm going to do anything, I'm going to teach you how to make a reasoned response, how to argue a case. Anybody can hurl an epithet at somebody. Anybody can make a joke about somebody. Anybody can say, 'That's totally stupid.' The hard thing is to learn how to make a case that reasonable people who are not convinced of your viewpoint will understand." I don't think it's any harder than that. Then you show it by enforcing respect on both sides. Some Leftist might say he approves of 9/11, that we deserved it. The other students might get very upset and you'd say, "Look I understand your feelings, but this is a classroom and what we're trying to learn here is how to make a reasoned case as to why we feel the way we do." If you feel very strongly that this was an inappropriate point of view, you need to be able to express that in a civilized, non-emotional manner. I think they'll understand, and you'll be well on your way.*

*Berg: I am a true liberal....*

*Horowitz: I knew that from the first three or four sentences. First of all, you weren't hostile, you were truly interested in what I have to say. That's it. If you were a Leftist, I would have detected it right at the start.*

*Berg: Even though we might disagree in some areas, we can come together and be very concerned about what goes on in the classroom and both say, "How do we do it right?"*

*Horowitz: In terms of the legislature, my desire is that it not be the*

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legislature, but I have been utterly blown off by university faculties. The AAUP is a good example. I approached them before anything happened and asked them what they objected to. I'm very willing to compromise. I actually vetted this with three Leftist professors before I launched it, and took out anything that irritated them. I'm only going to legislatures and I tell the legislators this, to get the universities attention, to make them pay attention to the problem. I wrote the Academic Bill of Rights to be as broadly appealing as possible, but if I missed something I will sit down with any college including yours—and I don't even have to sit down with them. Let them just adopt a policy of good manners. That's what this is about. It's already incorporated in the AAUP's guidelines. I quoted the OSU handbook. I don't care what the language is, just get the results. What I want is the administration and the organized faculty to say to its members, "You are teachers here. The political agendas are fine for citizens outside the classroom. You have a responsibility to all your students, including the ones who disagree with you."

*Berg: I am in agreement with you. You have given good advice, not just to people like me who are liberals, but to conservatives. Because I share your concern—because of my background it's very easy to figure out my politics—and I'm also an openly gay faculty member and I try to be respectful of my students so they're not put off and they realize that I would never want to let a student down.*

*Horowitz: I understand and applaud that. I do open my website to professors' responses. I'm not attached to any particular complaint. I would prefer that everyone was accurate, but I know students. Sometimes students will write me, and the more they write the more they show me that it's their problem, not their professor's.*

My job is to trigger a conversation and hope there's a response. It's very difficult for all of us. I get associated with intolerance of the right, yet I'm a very tolerant person and I've challenged the right on issues like the gay issue.



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## Interview with Karol King

*Berg: Thank you for taking the time to talk to us. Regarding the whole idea of politics in the classroom, some would argue that a classroom should be “politics-free.” Do you think that is desirable?*

*King: I must speak simply from my classroom. I don’t want to make a general statement. In my classroom, I teach Theology 111, a basic theology and ethics class. I don’t think it can be “politics-free” and accomplish what I want to accomplish which is to demonstrate true dialogue. I simply use theology and ethics as a way of demonstrating, hopefully, and teaching—showing the importance of—honest, real, true dialogue. If you take politics off the table, that in itself is a way of denying the honesty of the class. I feel politics have to be on the table; but again, that’s not the main thrust of my class. It does include that, though.*

*Berg: With a class in theology, somebody might say, “Shouldn’t there be a separation between church and state? Theological issues are their own thing and political issues are something else.”*

*King: Xavier University—of course run by the Jesuits—and the theology department at Xavier are very big into social justice. Now that’s the school I happen to be associated with, but I don’t think all theology departments are like that. However, I was trained there, and we do take social justice extremely seriously. Having said that, if you emphasize social justice, you can hardly take politics out of it.*

*Berg: When you have discussions, are you open with your own political views?*

*King: Yes and no. My situation comes more from my religious history rather than politics. I’m very open with my story. On pre-assignment Sunday, I start out after the syllabus with my own story which is very personal and very lopsided as far as organized religion because I was so involved with and hurt by organized religion. By the time I finish my story, I don’t think there’s any question where I stand when it comes to organized religion. I have a problem with it. That is where students find out more about me than actual politics. Last fall, because of the election issues, etc., there was more political sense than there had been in my classes before that. For good or evil, I’m not sure. I don’t think politics was nearly as prominent in my other classes as it was last fall. I think it is okay to state one’s position if it’s done in an open, even friendly, way.*

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The thing that differentiates my class from other classes in this sense is that I do demand—I have one inflexible rule in my class—respect, respect, respect. The students pick up on that the very first Sunday and it sets the tone of the class. Again, I don't think I'm having illusions of grandeur, but I don't believe everybody can do that well. I do think somehow I'm gifted to do that well. Two things, my personality—which is kind of puppy-dog friendly—but also because of my past. I was taught so strictly, so strongly on organized religion questions, that there is black and white, right and wrong. My dad was a dyed-in-the-wool Republican. I've heard him say so many times, "FDR put the country on the skids. We've never been the same since." So when I left the religion and came out into the world, I found the things I had been taught in almost every realm simply were matters of opinion. I'm not saying they were all wrong, but they were matters of opinion. I would not go to Hell if I cut my hair or wore a ring or wore pants. I would not go to Hell if I espoused some Democratic ideas instead of these strict Republican views. For me, it is a part of my story, it is a part of all of us to have some political leanings, so I think it's okay for me to tell my story, mainly about religion, but politics do enter into it. That's a long answer to your question.

*Berg: When you talk about political issues in your class, are you concerned about the student who doesn't agree with you, the student who sees politics in black and white, or one who thinks your father was correct about FDR? Do you worry that a student who disagrees might be afraid to speak up in your class?*

*King: Absolutely. That is a huge concern with me. I feel that I address that in the best way that I know how, which is to bring an openness in my own spirit, my own mind, to the situation realizing that I could be very wrong in some of my preferences. Certainly I want to allow for the fact that I could be influenced to go another way. Just the fact of my own openness—a student would have to be really bent on proving that I was not open to have a problem with the way I deal with religion and politics in my class. For the most part, I don't think I've had to deal with that because the students seem to love and respect who I am through my story. They seem to understand—and I make it very plain—that all perspectives are respected, all perspectives are welcome and nobody is right or wrong. I want to believe that comes through loud and clear.*

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Berg: *For those who might want to deal with political issues in the classroom, some of what you have said about emphasizing respect, sharing, and being open about yourself are good ways of doing it. Are there other things that a faculty member may want to follow from what you model?*

King: It's important not to have an agenda. I can't help that I have some leanings, and I don't think it hurts to share that with the students. How to maintain that balance is a gift; to say, "This is how I feel, but having said that I also *want* to hear how you feel, simply because I'm curious." I have that given to me from my past because everything was so closed to us as children, and we were never allowed to think our own thoughts so we were more or less treated as children even as adults. To come out and be able to express an opinion without being ridiculed is such a wonderful thing to me that I in turn just want to give that to them, and I think they feel that. I can't have an agenda as far as a political position because I had almost no respect for Kerry, but I was obviously not a fan of Bush's either. It was pretty obvious how I felt, but the students picked up that I was also eager to hear how they felt. I'm not sure how to convey how to do that. I could model it until you could feel it if I were in a classroom with your peers, I think they would feel that. How to exactly explain it, I don't know. Again, I don't think everybody can do that or do it well.

Berg: *From what you're saying, you have a sincere wish to be open. It sounds like students pick up on the sincerity, and that's not something we can fake as instructors.*

King: I don't think so. Students are like children: they're pretty hard to fool. They know.

Berg: *There are always cases where people are getting in trouble for mixing. Just a few days before the election, Davis March showed Michael Moore's film, Fahrenheit 9/11 in his English class at Rowan-Cabarrus Community College. I don't want to discuss the specifics of that particular case, but do you think it's appropriate to show controversial movies?*

King: Were you aware that I showed *Jesus of Montreal*? Are you familiar with the film?

Berg: *I'm not familiar with the film.*

King: I would suggest that your question could be answered by your simply watching that. It is very *anti*-organized-religion.



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I show that—of course, by then my students were very aware of my problems with organized religion. It's very one-sided, very hard on organized religion and the church and asserts that the church is not *the* Anti-Christ, but that the church is anti-Christ and against what Jesus really meant when he was talking. I show that simply because I think it's a wonderful film and I want them to get that perspective, but I always open it up for discussion. Being subtitled, it's a little hard to follow. But I do think it's appropriate to show those films if, indeed, there is true openness and the professor can open him or herself and say, "This is a film, but let's discuss. Perhaps it was too heavy-handed, and I want to discuss that." I think it's extremely important to show those films for dialogue. Again, my class in my own vision is about dialogue. It's not even about organized religion or not organized religion. It is about bringing these views and really talking about them on a gut level. That's what I feel like I'm about.

I've had some times in my class when I was aware of students who were very grounded in their church and very much devotees of their religion. I've been as careful as I know how to be to be as respectful to them as I was to any atheist or freethinker that would say, you know, "The hell with it all." It has been so rewarding to find these people who, in spite of me and my biases, will stand firm in my class and say, "This is what the church has meant and done for me. This is what Christ has done for me." I always make an effort to tell them how much they bring to the class and how much I appreciate it because I want somebody strong to come up against me to reason, to see a whole different aspect and perspective of somebody that hasn't been hurt by religion as I have and also to foster dialogue. It is important to me to respect, respect, respect. The atheists come in thinking they won't get respect and by the first couple of classes they realize, "Oh, I am going to get respect." So they're kind of taken care of. But I feel like I have to cultivate the devout Christians and people who do love the Lord and are faithful to the Bible, etc., because it makes the class even richer.

Berg: *Have you ever had to give a low grade to a devout Christian?*

King: Yes.

Berg: *How do you communicate to the student that they didn't get the low grade because they had a different view of religion than you?*

King: Besides just making that statement very plainly from day one

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in the class, I talk to them, email, or write notes and let them know that it was poor writing or unclear thought and reasoning. I don't think there was ever a case when the student didn't understand why. I think back on my evaluations and there's never been a case when a student wrote, "I just think she disagreed with me."

Berg: *Do you think instructors sometimes have a difficult time communicating that to students?*

King: Oh, absolutely. There are egos involved and most students feel hurt, naturally, if they don't get a good grade. Consequently, they're somewhat combative or defensive, at least. It is hard to explain that. But again, do they really want to learn? Many of them are out for a grade. Some of them, their companies are paying and they have to maintain a certain level—there's always that complication.

Berg: *There are some students who will reject us outright. How can we reach a student like that?*

King: Again, for me, it's a matter of communicating one-on-one with them. If the professor is really sincere in that, if it doesn't come across there is a tremendous communication problem. On the other hand, if the student can't accept that, I think there's more going on than just, "My professor doesn't like me." Perhaps there is baggage from the past or a simple refusal to deal with the reality of what's going on here.

Berg: *What are some things that you do to communicate one-on-one with your students?*

King: I do a lot of emailing. I write notes on their papers. I'm big about communicating—we're having a conversation as I'm reading their paper, if possible. It depends on how many are in the class how thorough I can be. The other is, if they call me or want to stay after class, that's what we do.

Berg: *There's been more and more talk about political bias in the classroom and websites like Students for Academic Freedom or some of the work that Mr. Horowitz has done promoting his Academic Bill of Rights. Do you think that's necessary?*

King: I really hate to see any more legislation about anything. Maybe it's necessary to let it be known what is expected of academia and university professors, but it should just be with the territory; it shouldn't have to be necessary. I can't say with authority—I guess I have to ask you back, is this becoming an issue?

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Berg: *I have seen in the last year or so more and more of the charges that academia is the last bastion of liberalism and that conservative professors and conservative students are discriminated against on college campuses. It's part of what prompted me to choose the topic for this interview. Where do we draw those lines?*

King: I feel ambivalent myself. I think it's a shame that professors would have to be given a Bill of Rights or have to have it to protect them. At the same time, I decry any professor who would use his or her freedom to foist personal ideas onto others. That's a fine line. I am very lucky in what I teach. I welcome strong views on either side, whether mine or the other. I welcome that because I want to demonstrate how difficult real, honest dialogue is. It's virtually impossible for more than two people to have real dialogue. I welcome strong perspectives, strong views on either side. When students have that sense of trust and openness, they respond so well that a lot of our bases are covered when it comes to different perspectives. I feel that they are at ease and comfortable saying what they want to say because they know at least that I won't be disrespectful to them and I won't allow disrespect in my classroom.

The one thing more threatening than politics is religion, because you touch not only a very primal need—I think somehow we all need religion—but you also touch the ultimate authority. It can be very intimidating on my part to look at some of my students, particularly those whom I know to be devout, and say, "All I'm asking you to do is question," because in their minds to question is to blaspheme. That's where I feel there's a fine line between saying, "I respect you and I respect your beliefs, but at the same time I'm asking you to question those and really look deeply into why you believe these things." Again, I don't think I'd have any success if I first didn't open myself and allow them to see my past, my openness, my vulnerability. I've had to look at myself and everything I believe.

Berg: *You're saying again that you model the behavior for the students; you take the risk first. With the one-on-one personal approach, they come to trust you.*

King: I had a Viet Nam veteran in my class who started opening up and said, "I have said things, I've told the strangers in this class things I haven't talked about for 30 years." He had to miss one class and when I called his home, his wife answered. She said, "I just want you to know, you probably know more

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about my husband than I do because he's told me things he's shared in that class that he'd never even told me." I felt that was such a compliment—such an honor—he felt that from my own openness and the way the students all responded, he felt safe to respond in that fashion. I feel it is a gift that has been given to me.

*Berg: May I, if you don't mind, bring up your son for a moment? I know he's in the Army in Iraq and I believe doesn't share some of your political views.*

*King: That's right.*

*Berg: Do you think that helps build your credibility, the fact that you can talk about someone whom you obviously care about having different beliefs and still being supportive of him?*

*King: Absolutely! That is a great help. I speak of him with great pride, of course. I'm the proud mama; I've got a Black Hawk pilot out there doing all these great macho things. And he's also doing it for home and country, wonderful, wonderful. But then I try to develop the fact that there's a whole other side, that he and I sort of have to look at each other and say, "I respect you as a human being, but we feel very differently about the President of the United States." The thing that has saved us is total respect for the essence of who we are as human beings and then, a sense of humor. We love each other and refuse to let a political stance hurt our relationship. Do we have in-depth conversations? I was afraid we couldn't, but then I went to Savannah in October and we did. We had one or two very gratifying and very fulfilling conversations and one I started out with, "Art, you know at Xavier what I teach is dialogue and of all people on the face of the earth that I feel I cannot dialogue with, it's you." I'll never forget this. He just looked at me with such surprise in his eyes. He came over and sat down beside me. He said, "Mom, give me a little credit. I know the truth. I know that this is a political war. But I am a soldier, I'm a pilot, and I'm going to do my duty as I see it." That was reassuring to me in the sense that he knew there was more at stake than just beating up the bad guys, we're right and they're wrong.*

Right after 9/11 was one of our first in-depth conversations when he said, "How can you really blame these people who are so oppressed and downtrodden for attacking us when they haven't been able to get our attention in other ways?" He was talking more about Palestine and Israel. He said, "We've

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always defended Israel, we've always taken their side. Why should we be shocked when we get attacked for some of that if it's all interconnected?" So, yes, to answer your question, it has been helpful. I'm sure he and I don't see eye-to-eye, but fortunately we have a relationship that sustains us through that.

Berg: *Part of my interest in your view on that relates particularly to my Research Methods class where we talk about doing argument, putting together evidence, those kind of issues. Especially last fall with the election, I indicated that my partner and I were probably voting for different candidates. Later a student told me that part of the reason I could get away with having politics in the classroom was because I would mention that. It made the students who disagreed with me feel safe.*

King: I couldn't emphasize that enough, Steve. I think that is so important. Using Art has been a tremendous tool to make them understand that I really do care about both sides of it and as much as possible think I *do* see both sides because of Art's involvement.

Berg: *Are there any other things you'd like to cover?*

King: Even though I feel I have been successful at it, I would like more input about how to be truly unbiased and fair in presentation. I want to believe that I am and I believe I have a good heart. On the subject of racism, I assume you notice the problems that Cincinnati has starting with the riots. I find it a subject that I would like to go much farther with if I ever develop a second class in dialogue. That would be about racism. I wonder how successful I would be. I think I would have to have special training dealing with how honest can you really get in dialogue on something as important as racism, or as I would assume you well know, sexual orientation. For some reason, those are such hot buttons and people seemingly cannot keep emotions out of it. I'm not sure they should unless the emotional carry-on breaks down the dialogue. We get into it to a point, but time constraints and text and so forth keep us from going in depth the way I would really like to in a Level II dialogue class.

My other concern is that I never want my class to deteriorate into an AA meeting. I'm not knocking AA meetings, but that's not what class is, kind of a group therapy session. I feel it's a real danger in my class because oftentimes I find such a collective sigh of relief that I'm not going to cram religion

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down their throats, that we are going to talk about some important, relevant, even emotional issues. In telling their stories, which I welcome, I don't want it to become just a time when we get all warm and fuzzy with each other and cry a little bit. What's the best way to keep this on an academic track? I would like an opportunity to explore further how to personally and professionally disagree and yet not have the disagreement break down the relationship.



*Managing Editor's note:*

Wikipedia.org describes **David Horowitz** as “an American social activist and writer. He was prominent in the American New Left movement but today holds staunchly right-wing views. He is currently a writer for the conservative magazine NewsMax.... Horowitz, along with some Republican leaders, has been promoting his ‘Academic Bill of Rights,’ an eight-point manifesto that seeks to eliminate what they consider to be political bias in university hiring and grading.”

**Karol King**, an adjunct theology professor at Xavier University, is manager of the Cinergy Foundation where she oversees the investment of more than a thousand grants a year.

The Cinergy Foundation Encourages initiative, creativity and collaboration by contributing to the total well-being of the community in three areas: (1) Art and Culture, (2) Lifelong Learning, (3) Healthy Communities.

In 2004, she was honored as the “Against All Odds” Woman of the Year by the Leading Women of Cincinnati. King was born into a confining cult environment in which she lived for 37 years, finally escaping with her husband and two children 20 years ago. She serves as a board member for the Edward B. Brueggeman Center for Dialogue at Xavier University (Xu.edu).

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