

Searching for civility after a campus's *annus horribilis*

By [Mary Beth Mathews](#)

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*In our "Reflections From the Classroom" series, seasoned teachers talk about their experiences walking with students and guiding their learning.*

Anti-feminist sentiment, misbehaving athletes, racist images, and student safety concerns all manifested themselves in one way or another during the 2014–2015 academic year at the University of Mary Washington. Now that the *annus horribilis* is over, new challenges present themselves. President Rick Hurley recently [announced recommendations](#), including a series of discussions on civility.

That's a good start, but we need to do even more to address the [polarization and \*ad hominem\* attacks we saw last year](#). In a climate that rewards vitriol and character assassination, we need to teach our students how to temper their rhetoric even as they work to change the campus and the world.

My first goal this semester will be to speak up inside the classroom. It's tempting as an instructor to think that your students are as immersed in your subject as you are. And it's easy to forget that most of students in your classroom do not compartmentalize their feelings, either about a campus debate or a tragedy. Rather than blundering ahead with the prepared topic of the day, I need to be sensitive to the emotional well-being of my students. A brief discussion at the start of class about current events, however local, can help identify the elephant in the room and make the transition to a possible teachable moment. For example, racial insensitivities on campus are the descendants of racial injustices that have pervaded our shared history.

Directly related to speaking up inside the classroom is my second goal: to [build empathy](#) among my students, one class session at a time. That can take the form of free-flowing discussions about current events, but it can also be accomplished by asking students to list and expand on the motivating factors at work in American history and religion. Students will almost always condemn anti-Semitism, for example. But they are better able to see how hatred is constructed and used for

oppression after they critically examine the confluence of events that led to Henry Ford's [interest](#) in the fabricated *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

Once they understand the background of such hate speech, it becomes easier for them to identify with the victims of hatred, oppression, and ridicule. Then they can more easily recognize similar biases in society today. This exercise should not lead to a quick judgment; indeed, I have noticed that my students tend to repudiate various forms of discrimination so rapidly that they simply cannot comprehend how they could have ever existed. While this is admirable, a more nuanced understanding helps them see how injustice and hate do in fact persist. It also prevents facile dismissal of such hate as “crazy”—as if such a label would make it disappear—and it forces them to examine the structural forces at work in American culture. This makes it harder for people to pretend that they are immune to the biases that hurt others.

My third goal this year will be to add a dose of Reinhold Niebuhr to these discussions. He has enjoyed a revival since 2007, when then-candidate Barack Obama [cited Niebuhr's](#) influence on his thinking. Niebuhr's views on the morality of individuals and the immorality of groups influenced Martin Luther King Jr. and helped add a healthy sense of realism and strategy to the civil rights movement.

The 18-22-year-old demographic will probably resist hearing that the group they have membership in can and will put that group's self-interest above that of the individual. This is, after all, the age in which youthful exuberance prevails over all else. But when students see that individual rugby players, for example, would never stand on campus alone and [sing a misogynist song](#), they can begin to see how groups behave in ways that push the boundaries of ethics and decency.

Finally, I'm going to follow Congressman John Lewis's admonition to the UMW Class of 2011 (and to graduates at other schools) and get into “[good trouble](#).” I've already suggested to our president (through a listening circle with our Title IX administrator) that he schedule a series of town-hall style meetings all over campus—in dorms and academic buildings alike—to listen to the concerns of the students in small groups. I'll speak up in departmental and other meetings and try to model the very behavior I'd like my community to embody.

*Our weekly feature Then and Now harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's published in partnership with [the Kripke Center](#) of Creighton University and edited by [Edward](#)*

Carson, Beth Shalom Hessel, and John D. Wilsey.