“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”

Martin Luther King Jr

Hi Everyone

The astute reader will already note from the absence of a Sir William Osler quote that there is something different about this week’s Acknowledgment. The individuals selected this week are symbols, simply chosen for who they are though they abundantly merit an Acknowledgement for their substantial contributions.

First I must make it clear that I am writing not in my position as Chair of the Department or Physician-in-Chief of our beloved hospital. I have not sought my employers' endorsement for this. I am writing as an individual and colleague who simply cannot remain silent this week about the outrage that is the proposed provincial Charter of Values. Leadership comes with responsibility. It also comes with opportunity and in this case a readily available email distribution list. If you object to my using this as a means of delivering a "political" message, simply read no further. If I get flack from the powers to be in the University or the MUHC, its flack I am more than willing to take for the sake of a clear conscience and being able to look my children in their eyes if they ever ask; "Dad, what did you do?"

The proposed Charter is so fundamentally flawed, it astounds me that in 2013 in the democratic civil society that we purport to be that it even merits consideration or debate. It shows a fundamental failure of logic, reason and historical precedent.

The state is indeed separate from religion. The state should be neutral in matters of religion and faith. The state should not use it resources to favour one religion over another.

How these fundamental truths of our society can be construed to mean that an individual's rights of religious expression must be constrained in some way is incomprehensible.

Personalizing an issue allows us to move from the abstract to the particular. When this Charter was introduced I immediately thought of two members of our community that I interact with a regular basis. I thought of Bruce Mazer, a classmate, colleague and friend, who as an observant Jew regularly wears the now forbidden kippah. For over 20 years Bruce has provided care for Quebec’s children with frequently challenging immunologic and allergic disorders. He is a world-leading researcher in his field. Bruce is a full Professor and Associate Chair (Research) for the Department. Any clinical Department is robust and successful with Faculty members such as Bruce. I thought of my pediatric neurology resident Ruba Benini. Ruba immigrated to Quebec as a teenager from her native Ghana. Fluent in French, in addition to English and Arabic, Ruba completed a MD-PhD at McGill and is now in her final year of her residency. She is everything you would want a resident to be; intelligent, hard working, conscientious, and a determined advocate for her patients. She has a long bright future ahead of her. Ruba wears a hijab. After 5 years of knowing her, I have no clue what her hair color is.

For both Bruce and Ruba, their faith and spirituality is as much a part of their individual identity as anyone's skin color, mother tongue, ethnic origin, gender identity or sexual orientation. It is an essential integral part of who they are. It makes them the individuals we value. It has absolutely no impact on others. It does not influence the care they provide. No child or family has complained. Yet these outward expressions of their deeply held faith now somehow violates a Charter of Values (an example of naming irony if there ever was one) that somehow must be banned from the public service sphere in which they serve so valuable a role. That these expressions of faith are banned, but not others, affirms the inherently racist and discriminatory nature of a Charter that springs from the darkest reaches of ignorance.
Any student of history will tell you that the erosion of human rights for some is always predicated on the notion that the "other" is somehow less of a person, less of a human. The last 100 years is all too replete with such examples, unfortunately not restricted by geography, ideology or ethnic distinctions. Take a moment to personally think of a few. Don’t forget to think of the victims who under different circumstances of time and location might have been you or someone you know and care about.

Our Department's Mission/Vision/Values statement eloquently describes our commitments to cultural sensitivity, tolerance and collegiality. Our staff and most importantly the children and families we care for reflect the diversity of humanity. You don’t need to travel to tour the world. It is here amongst us. There is no going back as much as some would like.

We cannot remain silent on this. To hide behind an institutional "opt-out" cause is to accept for others what we would not accept for ourselves. It is quite frankly cowardly.

There is a wonderful story of Christian X, King of Denmark during the Nazi occupation, wearing a yellow Star of David identifying with his Jewish subjects when they were compelled to do so by the Nazi occupiers. Unfortunately historically it is not true, but it gives me an idea for an action we can take collectively.

What I am suggesting is that one pre-selected work day in the very near future that we all choose to wear one of the banned symbols, be it a kippah or turban for men, a hijab for women, or large crosses for both genders. In this way we can affirm our identification with those whose rights are directly infringed by this Charter. By the way while some are directly infringed, denying rights to some is ultimately a denial of rights to all.

Please contact myself if you are interested in helping to organize the above protest. I already have my kippah picked out and would love to have some company.

Regards

Michael Shevell, MD CM, FRCPC, FAAN, FANA

P.S.

Hi Everyone

Just a post-script to last week’s Departmental Acknowledgement that focused on the recently introduced Quebec Charter of Values.

I clearly touched a nerve. There was an unprecedented tsunami of responses from all sectors. Indeed the communication went viral and was widely disseminated beyond our Department. All responses were strongly supportive of the sentiments I expressed. There is obvious solidarity amongst us on this issue and indeed there was much willingness to engage in the symbolic protest that I suggested.

I received no flak from any sector for the email. Obviously there is support at the highest levels of leadership who must operate with a level of discretion far beyond what I have to work within. Furthermore, as many of you are aware, McGill's Principal Fortier, the Faculty of Medicine (Dean Eidelman) and the DGs of the McGill teaching hospitals (MUHC, JGH, SMH, Douglas) all publicly communicated their strong disagreement with the minority government's proposals. They should be congratulated for so doing. Hopefully our sister institutions throughout the province will also come forward.
We live in a functioning democracy and, if we are permitted, we can thank whatever higher power we wish for being so fortunate. Through the exercise of democratic values and the ballot box, I have confidence in the citizens of this province that they will see the proposal for what it is (narrow-minded, racist, reactionary and regressive) and force its ultimate withdrawal, repudiation and defeat before it has the effect of law.

Regards

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