This essay weaves together personal and political reflections in considering how one takes a stance for and against censorship, particularly when it comes to the needs of children.

At the tea store this morning, I heard an interview on National Public Radio concerning an attempt to broker peace between the government and the Taliban in the Swat Valley of Pakistan. The chief negotiator for the government is an elder Islamic cleric who hopes to eliminate the violence that has disrupted life in the valley for approximately ten years. The cleric is negotiating with his son-in-law, whom he characterizes as intolerant of Western ways. Chief among the issues of contention is the education of women and girls. According to the report, the son-in-law's group has destroyed scores of schools for females because schools are spreading obscenities by teaching women to read. Although this story might appear to be a long distance from the recent censorship controversies about "gay penguins" from And Tango Makes Three and the word "scrotum" in The Higher Power of Lucky in the United States, I think they are directly connected by continuums of fear and control. The report triggered an
Upon arrival at my office, I had convinced myself of the superiority of my social theories to the theories of those who oppose the equality of the sexes. Immediate, negative response from me. Clearly the closing of schools for females is wrong because it attempts to control their lives while not similarly constraining males. The Taliban’s official sanction of inequities between the sexes cuts deeply into my understanding of justice, positioning the son-in-law and his group as “stewards” who fear a world in which females are able to acquire ideas beyond their immediate circumstances. Their violent reaction to their fear made it easier for me to assume a higher ethical ground. I fused about the reports on Swat Valley all the way to work, connecting to it to the Jyllands-Posten Muhammad cartoon controversy that escalated into more than 100 deaths, bans of burqas in schools across parts of the European Union (EU), and even my mother’s association with the Susan B. Anthony House in my hometown of Rochester, New York. Upon arrival at my office, I had convinced myself of the superiority of my social theories to the theories of those who oppose the equality of the sexes.

Complications
My certainty began to wane almost instantly, however, because my associations with the Pakistani negotiations would neither stop nor confirm my convictions uniformly. Thoughts of the Muhammad cartoon in Denmark raised a memory trace to Sean Delonas’ recent cartoon of a policeman shooting a monkey and exclaiming to his partner that they’ll have to find someone else to write the next economic stimulus bill for the United States. One reading of the cartoon could be that the bill is so poorly written that a monkey must have used the typewriter, but even that reading leads to the association of President Obama, a black man, with a monkey. The cartoon was published in the New York Post and caused an immediate outcry of racism—no destruction of buildings or deaths, but direct calls for censorship. The ban on burkas—even mothers wearing burkas when meeting their children at the school door in the Netherlands—evoked thoughts of dress codes in our local high schools. Boys cannot let their pants hang exposing their colorful boxer underwear and girls must refrain from wearing halter tops. Students claim that their rights of expression are violated by this censorship of sexual representation. In our house, Susan B. was nearly a saint, but few heeded her warnings about intermarriage.

Do I oppose or favor censorship? And my answer was, “Yes!”

This second wave of associations to the negotiation of peace in Swat Valley complicated the issue of censorship for me. Although the Taliban seemed clearly wrong, a negative evaluation of those who called for censorship of racism in the newspapers, sexualized dress in schools, and giving free rein to alcohol consumption are not so clear to me. I guess I do fear racism and seek to control racists. I believe that our society in the United States has made sex a commodity and is selling it to children. I understand this is wrong because it seems to lead men to commit violence against women. I live in a college town in which students and local bar owners just invented “Stark” Patrick’s Day as an excuse to begin drinking at dawn on a weekend when the Saint Patrick’s Day holiday falls on a weekday. This year, fifty students were admitted to the emergency room at the hospital for alcohol poisoning. The NPR story and its personal aftermaths began to take over my entire day. Do I oppose or favor censorship? And my answer was, “Yes!”
to adulthood by encoding adult secrets within print texts that required considerable teaching for children to gain access. As evidence of this trend, Postman offers the development and growing popularity of public schooling across time. Yet even my family's experience challenges Postman's timetable for universality of his notion of childhood. My father and his 17 brothers and sisters all started full time work at age 11 or 12, and he was filled with stories about his induction into the adult world at the lumber camp where he began his career. U.S. child labor laws (which were not federal until 1938) still exclude farm work from their restrictions. Across cultures, classes, and genders (consider the recent controversy over childhood on the Years for Zion Ranch in Texas in 2008), there are children to be sure, but childhood does not seem to have a single meaning.

Postman dated the reinvention of childhood to the end of the 15th century with the invention of the printing press. Prior to that time, he claimed that by the age of seven or so children were treated as adults.

A second set of criticisms of Postman's argument called into question his singular definition of childhood, even in the Western world. Postman dated the reinvention of childhood to the end of the 15th century with the invention of the printing press. Prior to that time, he claimed that by the age of seven or so children were treated as adults. Even children, he noted, were involved in the economy and participated in conversations and engaged in adult entertainments. Postman argued that starting in the 17th century, a growing percentage of families began to postpone children's transition to adulthood by encoding adult secrets within print texts that required considerable teaching for children to gain access. As evidence of this trend, Postman offers the development and growing popularity of public schooling across time. Yet even my family's experience challenges Postman's timetable for universality of his notion of childhood. My father and his 17 brothers and sisters all started full time work at age 11 or 12, and he was filled with stories about his induction into the adult world at the lumber camp where he began his career. U.S. child labor laws (which were not federal until 1938) still exclude farm work from their restrictions. Across cultures, classes, and genders (consider the recent controversy over childhood on the Years for Zion Ranch in Texas in 2008), there are children to be sure, but childhood does not seem to have a single meaning.

Is protection from information or participation in adult or modern worlds necessary in order to keep children from harm?

These criticisms of Postman's work push hard against the terms I used to justify censorship — "protection," "harm," and "we." If people, even children, were involved in or constitute the world, does censorship make sense at all? Is protection from information or participation in adult or modern worlds necessary in order to keep children from harm? Won't children make what they will of any type of "text" regardless of the symbols involved? The feminist stories of young girls' Barbie attention parties come to mind. Isn't the idea of censorship as protection from harm paternalistic, even patriarchal? After all in The Higher Power of Lucky, the word "scrotum" is understood by one character as "something green that comes up when you have the flu or cough.

And if some group could identify criteria in order to justify censorship as legitimate protection from harm, then what would make their claims for censorship universally appropriate for all groups?

My original plans for my weekday in tatters, I headed home with some temporary resolution to the puzzle that began with the NPR report on the Swat Valley in Pakistan. The world is too complex to be either for or against censorship. Perhaps more useful questions at least for me, are why does censorship exist and how does it work? It's too simplistic to believe that censorship protects some group from assumed harm caused by exposure to some idea, value, or action. Censorship can't stop girls and women from thinking and working to better their lives (however they define better). It can't stop racism, blasphemy, sexualized commoditites, or even dangerous drinking. (College students drank during prohibition in the United States — I know this from my mother's stories about how she met my father.)

These differences among thoughts, beliefs, and actions exist, and apparently they find an infinite number of ways to manifest themselves — some even too subtle too raise my consciousness. Rather, censorship, then, appears to be a tactic for challenging other people's views of what should come into being and for demanding respect for one's own views from other people. At its best, calls for censorship are invitations to discuss differences; and at its worst, censorship is a club for beating others into acquiescence.

Another day

I hoped that NPR would air another story that would help me sort my way through my new thoughts about censorship. And maybe in an odd way, it did. With an apparent smile on his tone, the radio host offered a brief report that the semi-official Vatican newspaper had just published a longish article entitled "The Washing Machine and Women's Liberation: Put in the Detergent, Close the Lid, and Relax." It explained how labor-saving technology had freed women from household drudgery in the West and would do the same eventually for women in developing countries. The subtext, of course, was that the other labor-saving technology, the birth control pill, which offers women greater control over their bodies, did not, and cannot, liberate women anywhere. Although not identical to the sun-in-law's position from the day before, the Vatican newspaper offered a social theory about normal life intended to control women in some ways that it does not seek to constrain men. The Vatican's version of normal life seems to offer women and girls more options than the Taliban. Ultimately however, it still rests on the fear of a world with knowledgeable females and...
Narratives to legitimize censorship as a normal act invite counter narratives intended to disrupt the censors' projections of harm to argue for different visions of what could be and should be considered normal.

Yet in working to deny and silence, censorship must invent discourses of control and justification that bring the topic to life. In turn, those discourses provoke more talk from so-called 'abnormal groups,' proposing opposition and resistance to censorship - however loudly and publicly they are able to speak. Attempts to control through censorship bring resistance, and resistance must be planned and coordinated through talk about action and the censored topic. Narratives to legitimize censorship as a normal act invite counter narratives intended to disrupt the censors' projections of harm to argue for different visions of what could be and should be considered normal.

These flows of discourses and counter-discourses about the censorship of children's books is perhaps most apparent during banned book months. Then, censors' apparatchiks for removing books from libraries and classrooms - according to their articulated, normalized narratives of single messages that disrupt their vision of life - are directly and publicly challenged by groups with different views of normal life and different stories of the past and future. This talk of books and values has been so loud that commercial entrepreneurs have identified it as a market - Amazon.com advertises banned books on its website. Rather than silence, censorship of children's books creaks chatter of all types.

Because the talk surrounds censorship on many sides, we face the utopian goal that we might find ways to work out the differences in every instance.

Talk could lead to negotiation, in which group members participate actively and meaningfully in social life, which in turn, could bring understanding. Censors expect eventual consensus - a collapse to a single position - through the transfer of social to personal systems of control. To me, however, such expectations are more a working-over than a working-out, and the 'we' is much too small a group to stand as a solution for long. Rather, if talk might lead to understanding, we should expect "disensus" - a process of identifying differences and locating those differences in relation to each other. The talk surrounding censorship could achieve collective explanations of how people differ, where their differences come from, and whether we can live and work together with these differences. In this talk, we can dream of difference without fear or domination.

...if talk might lead to understanding, we should expect "disensus" - a process of identifying differences and locating those differences in relation to each other.

Censorship of children's texts

Calls for censorship and the act of censorship around children and youth illuminate all of us in complicated struggles over different social theories of life and how it should be lived. We feel responsible for their experiences and for the ways in which children and youth come to understand those experiences. We believe they are not ready to handle the complexities of life. Even as we acknowledge that they will construct their understandings according to their intentions and that they live in different childhoods, we recognize that they will do so according to the language and ideas available to them. Because those words and ideas are always embedded in differing social...
Censorship, even of children’s texts, can serve a not-always-rational public space in which the complex and dynamic play of ideas and forces can make differences real to us, revealing our social theories and corresponding sense of normalcy and challenging us to acknowledge, if not accept, those of others.

Consider the placement of representations of specific commercial products within school textbooks. Advocates, publishers, and businessmen provide narratives concerning this placement as a normal practice, rendering textbook information more relevant to students’ lives. According to their social theories, other groups construct narratives of potential harm in order to justify censorship of those representations. Along this fear continuum, some worry about the promotion of commercialism in schools educating the young to buy others might speak of branding children’s desires, leading to lifelong loyalties conceived in the classroom and perhaps, a few raise the point that textbooks treat knowledge as a commodity that students will sell later in order to make their way in the world. At each point along this continuum of concern, adults can jump off in order to act according to their theories. At the same time, these potential censors seek mechanisms to secure the end of placements in textbooks, and their opposition seeks to block this action. In the din of all this talk and struggle, different ways of thinking, believing, and living are named, explained, and defended, enabling negotiations concerning how we wish to live together.

Censorship, even of children’s texts, can serve a not-always-rational public space in which the complex and dynamic play of ideas and forces can make differences real to us, revealing our social theories and corresponding sense of normalcy and challenging us to acknowledge, if not accept, those of others. When adults voice concern about two male penguins raising an orphan chick or Lucky Trimbble’s Ramona-esque consideration of the word “scroung,” it’s probably time to bring children into this public space in order to begin to prepare them for the complexities of the lives before them.

**Children’s Books Cited**


**References**
