AFTERWORD

WHY I RESIGNED FROM NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

As I progressed through the research and writing of *Galileo's Middle Finger*, at times it felt as if the book were writing me. The project seemed to require me to be bolder, braver, more attentive, and more persistent than I otherwise might have been—to live up to being a good example for the people I was trying to rally to action with this story. It was, to be honest, rather exhausting, and as I was wrapping up the writing, I thought for sure that I would soon get a personal break from having to be so publicly upstanding. But as it happened, just as my editor and I were deep in final revisions, I had to cope with one last personal test of my principles and resolve regarding academic freedom. Although I was dealing with this test during the final proofing of this book's manuscript, because of the timing the story of it never made it into the pages of the hardback edition. Penguin Press has kindly allowed me to add it here.

For ten years, starting in 2005, my department at Northwestern University, the Medical Humanities and Bioethics Program, put out a journal called *Atrium* roughly annually. Our faculty provided the editorial work required, and the medical school provided for the costs of professional layout, printing, and mailing. Each issue focused on a

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stated theme: *haunting*; *heroes and villains*; *graphic*. An open call for proposals invited everyone to tell us what they would like to write for that themed issue. Whichever of the faculty were editing that particular issue selected from the proposals received and then did the usual back-and-forth review and editing work that makes up much of the days of the average humanist academic. Most of the preliminarily accepted contributions made it to the final printed issue, although occasionally we had to reject a piece if its author just couldn't rise to our standards even after editing assistance.

The essays and articles we published in *Atrium* were short (a couple thousand words at most), contemplative, compelling, and sometimes pretty intense. The front covers—which our program faculty would spend days discussing—constituted visually artful takes on the issue's theme. These covers, like the inside content, frequently startled and provoked. For example, the cover of the 2008 "Unmentionables" issue featured a black-and-white photo of a mother and father gazing upon their deceased newborn, who looked in the image to be sleeping peacefully. (An article inside explained that the photo was taken by a photographer who serves grieving families by visually recording such events for them, if they wish.) The 2006 "Power" cover featured an Andy Warhol–style four-photograph image of the actor Matt Fraser in a ski mask holding a gun. Fraser was exposed to thalidomide in utero, and so he has very short arms and fewer than typical fingers. His angry visage in the mask, his short arms, and his stubby fingers holding a big gun made for quite a lead to the volume.

The field of medical humanities exists to examine medical practice and medical research as if they are fascinating and problematic cultural presentations, and in *Atrium* we took our work very seriously. Over the years, *Atrium* built up a very strong reputation internationally in medical humanities, bioethics, and medicine. Sometimes when I traveled, colleagues would ask me when they would be able to get their hands on the next issue. About three thousand paper copies went out to subscribers, and many other people read the free reproductions online.

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Readers included not only scholars in our own field, but also physicians, nurses, social workers, patient advocates, scientists, and journalists. With high production values and truly extraordinary content, people told us the journal was a joy to hold and to devour. Each issue brought a greater and greater number of people wanting to contribute. The medical school kept funding it because it recognized the value of this work.

In 2013, the editor in chief of *Atrium*, program faculty member Katie Watson, invited me to edit the 2014 issue. She suggested the theme of "Bad Girls," a theme I told her everyone would assume was my idea. (I loved it.) Our program sent out a call for proposals, and in response, I received about thirty proposals, out of which I could only choose about thirteen. I selected a range of articles—on women who do not wish to be caregivers, on abortion, on women who seek to birth with few medical interventions, and so on.

Among the essays I chose for the issue was an essay by Bill Peace, a cultural anthropologist teaching in the honors program of Syracuse University. Peace's essay described what had happened to him in 1978 when, at the age of eighteen, he became paralyzed from the waist down due to the progression of a neurological disease with which he'd been born. In his essay, Peace related how he was kept in a rehabilitation hospital for many months and how that led to development of close relationships with some of the other paralyzed men and nurses. In his article, he recalled trying to ask his physicians about sex. Would he still be able to have sex? Could he be a father? The physicians could not or would not answer his questions. (At the time, it was not uncommon for physicians to feel uncomfortable talking to young disabled men about sexuality.)

Peace described in his essay how his confusion and distress around his sexuality were ultimately addressed by a nurse with whom he had grown close. He explained that in some circumstances in this rehabilitation facility, some nurses would provide oral sex to some patients. He told the story of the night this happened to him:

9780143108115_MiddleFinger_i-xiv_1-354_1P.indd 279 12/18/15 1:23 PM

> It started out badly. It was late at night and I had pissed all over myself and the bed. I hit the call button, upset. I thought I had had a handle on bladder management at that point. The nurse that came to help was one with whom I was very close. She changed my sheets and came back as I was washing myself. I was playing with myself without much luck. She explained I had to be a bit more vigorous and try non-traditional approaches. Then she rubbed my leg and pulled the skin on my inner groin, and sure enough I grew hard. I started to cry in relief. She wiped away my tears and then went down on me. She brought me to orgasm, and I was taken aback when I realized no ejaculate had emerged. She explained to me that this is common for paralyzed men and that it involves a retrograde ejaculation. She assured me it would not affect my fertility or my sex life in a major way. My son is living proof she was correct.

In the essay, Peace explicitly described this occurrence as part of the unusual cultural milieu of paralysis rehabilitation at that hospital at that time. This was the 1970s—people everywhere were more openly doing drugs and having casual sex, and the wards on which Peace was housed was not, he remembered, a complete exception to cultural experimentation. The 1970s was also a time when rehabilitation medicine itself was relatively experimental. As Peace put it, "A Wild West mentality prevailed: no idea was too crazy, nothing dismissed. The focus was on getting paralyzed people ready for the world."

At the end of his *Atrium* article, Peace made clear, "I am not suggesting we return to our primitive past." But he wanted, with his own history, to convey to readers how the act of compassion by this nurse "gave me myself" when he was so afraid he was lost. His article questioned what happens now to newly paralyzed men, "shipped out within weeks and so . . . in my estimation set up to fail." Peace wondered

9780143108115_MiddleFinger_i-xiv_1-354_1P.indd 280 12/18/15 1:23 PM

whether we have really come any further in dealing with the sexual needs of people with disabilities.

The "Bad Girls" issue of *Atrium* was published in February 2014, a year and a month before *Galileo's Middle Finger* would hit the shelves. A month after that issue's publication, the dean of our medical school, Eric Neilson, read the issue. According to various people in the know—and our public accounts of this since have not been refuted by Northwestern—Neilson became alarmed that Peace's article might violate a branding agreement. And so he gave the order to censor it.

To understand what happened here, you need to know that about a year before all of this, the medical school's faculty clinical practice had been purchased in a deal worth hundreds of millions of dollars by the parent corporation of Northwestern Memorial Hospital. This meant that the hospital corporation took over much of what used to be under the medical school's control. While technically still part of Northwestern University, those of us who were faculty in the medical school were suddenly subsumed under a brand called "Northwestern Medicine." You could feel the change in the air. I personally felt the change in my wallet as my small annual research budget was immediately set to zero. One administrator told me that part-time faculty like me now counted as "the underbrush" to be cut away. What had been for me a place of vigorous scholarship and teaching quickly became a place of corporate budgeting and branding. I was particularly appalled by a new advertising campaign at our hospital that encouraged people in that area of Chicago to "Shop and Dine Northwestern." I had not come to Northwestern to shop and dine.

When Neilson got upset by Peace's article, he could not censor the paper copies of the "Bad Girls" *Atrium* issue; they were already out in the world. But he could demand that the online version disappear, and indeed, that is what happened. I was asked to keep quiet by Katie Watson, the editor in chief of *Atrium*, in the hopes this would be internally resolved. Worried about my colleagues' jobs and associated health

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9780143108115_MiddleFinger_i-xiv_1-354_1P.indd 281 12/18/15 1:23 PM

insurance, I did stay quiet even while, in the most shocking of developments, Neilson also required that all future issues of *Atrium* be vetted by a new committee including representatives of the dean's office and the PR department. Katie had one meeting with this group (we called them "the censorship committee") and decided "no more." We could not be free to produce challenging medical humanities scholarship in *Atrium* if we had to worry about the hospital brand. Katie started to look elsewhere for funding of the journal, for a system in which *Atrium* could keep its intellectual integrity and not become a PR tool of a hospital brand. I came to realize fully how a brand is necessarily the opposite of academic freedom; the former is about a singular message, and staying on it, and academic freedom must mean tolerating an unpredictable plurality of ideas and voices.

By December 2014, nine months into the censorship, nothing had changed, and our program colleague Kristi Kirschner resigned in disgust. Kristi is a rehabilitation physician and a disability studies scholar, and at my request she had contributed to "Bad Girls" an article about the sexual lives of women with disabilities—a companion to Bill Peace's essay. Ironically, both Bill's and Kristi's articles were about cultural attempts to suppress the sexualities of people with disabilities—exactly what our own medical school was now doing!

When Kristi resigned, I went to our deans' office and told them in no uncertain terms they had to restore *Atrium*. I pointed out to them that Neilson was supposed to *defend* my academic freedom, not suppress it. I told them they could certainly decide not to fund *Atrium* in the future, but that they did not have the right to censor already-published work. I showed them the advance press on my book and explained that there was no way I could keep quiet on censorship by my own dean while I had a major book coming out calling on others to stand up for academic freedom.

The only response I got was downright Orwellian: "Congratulations on your book." They also told me that they had the right to control what they had paid for. When I asked them if that meant I was

9780143108115_MiddleFinger_i-xiv_1-354_1P.indd 282 12/18/15 1:23 PM

supposed to have run my book manuscript past them for approval, they had no response.

I told the two representatives of the dean's office with whom I was meeting that this situation was breaking my heart. I had managed to accomplish *Galileo's Middle Finger* specifically because deans and provosts before them had protected me when they received complaints about my work. Now I faced a situation of having to call out Northwestern on censorship. They told me I could "go to Evanston"—that is, I could speak to the provost's office—but that I should expect the same response.

At this point, despite Kristi's resignation, I was still staying publicly quiet, still worried about my colleagues' jobs. But in the public, Northwestern was looking very bad for another case. Laura Kipnis, a faculty member in the university's school of communications, had been brought under an extensive Title IX investigation by the university following her mockery of the university's sexual harassment policy in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. A couple of students had filed complaints that Kipnis was creating a place hostile to women with her amusing and politically incorrect public remarks about sex between students and professors.

It was true that Northwestern had *had* to follow up on the students' complaints—the federal government requires that all complaints made under Title IX be investigated. But legal experts commenting on the case agreed Northwestern could have quickly processed and dismissed the complaints against Kipnis. Instead they had brought in a high-powered legal team from out of state and put Kipnis through hours of very stressful examinations, while telling her she couldn't bring a lawyer to defend herself. To virtually all who commented on it, Northwestern's handling of Kipnis's case looked like a kangaroo court meant to frighten other faculty from criticizing Northwestern's administration.

I could have used the huge publicity around the Kipnis case and the simultaneous censorship of *Atrium* to help launch my book publicity in March of 2015. But I chose not to go public about the censorship

9780143108115_MiddleFinger_i-xiv_1-354_1P.indd 283 12/18/15 1:23 PM

during the height of the Kipnis story because I continued to hope Northwestern would do the right thing. Then, in April 2015, my provost Dan Linzer asked me to come talk with him about my book, which he had been kind enough to read. I took the opportunity to petition him personally about the censorship of *Atrium*. I followed up with e-mail that he acknowledged. But still nothing changed.

A month later—fifteen months into the censorship—I informed my dean's office that Bill Peace and I had had it. Within twenty-four hours, I received this response: "At the current time we have no objection to Katie reposting the prior published *Atrium* issues on the humanities and bioethics website." While I was relieved the administration had finally relented, I was completely disgusted that PR was the only thing that would move them. So—especially because I was unsure what "at the current time" was supposed to mean (were they going to censor it again later?) and because I had grown so frustrated by the shameless institution of a censorship committee—I decided to go public about it all.

At that time, at my request, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a nonprofit academic free speech advocacy group, composed a letter on my behalf to Northwestern, essentially looking for some shame and for an apology. FIRE told me that universities almost always respond to their letters. Northwestern, however, did not. In August 2015, I asked my provost to acknowledge the censorship and assure me it would never happen again. All I got back were vague statements about principles, and no acknowledgment of what had actually happened. And so, on August 24, 2015, about eighteen months after the censorship started, I submitted my letter of resignation, effective August 31, 2015.

In a letter I made public, I recounted what had happened and told my provost: "I now find myself in the painful position of having to choose between the work I do—which has been and presumably always will be high-risk and controversial—and loyalty to my colleagues, who are reasonably afraid that my work might further irritate the dean in the future, with unpredictable consequences for them and for our

9780143108115_MiddleFinger_i-xiv_1-354_1P.indd 284 12/18/15 1:23 PM

program. I cannot continue to work in such circumstances and in such an institution." I continued:

> As you know, because you were kind enough to read it, my most recent book, on academic freedom, was made possible because I came to Northwestern University. It happened because, as I took on one controversial issue after another—first the Bailey transsexualism controversy, then the Chagnon/Tierney fiasco in American anthropology, then the prenatal dexamethasone intervention disaster—university leaders defended my academic freedom when they received often sharp criticisms of my work. Time and again, my academic freedom was protected by Northwestern University. Northwestern University enabled me to work effectively and confidently, for a full decade, in the service of the disempowered and the wronged. For that, I am deeply grateful.
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> But I no longer work at *that* institution. I no longer work at a university that fearlessly defends academic freedom in the face of criticism, controversy, and calls for censorship. Now, I work at a university at which *my own dean* thinks he has the authority to censor my work. An institution in which the faculty are afraid to offend the dean is not an institution where I can in good conscience do my work. Such an institution is not a "university," in the truest sense of that word.

Honestly, I never thought I would be the subject of this headline in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*: "Star Scholar Resigns from Northwestern, Saying It Doesn't Respect Academic Freedom."

So now, in this first year after the publication of *Galileo's Middle Finger*, I am working as an independent scholar. In addition to continuing to do my usual academic research and advocacy work aimed at intersex clinical reform, I am traveling the country rallying academics to protect and defend their academic freedom. I had always intended to

do this when this book came out, but the urgency I feel is, um, a bit more intense than I had originally expected.

Alongside FIRE, I am encouraging faculty senates to adopt a statement on academic freedom written by a group led by constitutional law scholar Geoffrey Stone at the University of Chicago. That statement, known as "The Chicago Principles," insists that:

> The University's fundamental commitment is to the principle that debate or deliberation may not be suppressed because the ideas put forth are thought by some or even most members of the University community to be offensive, unwise, immoral, or wrong-headed. It is for the individual members of the University community, not for the University as an institution, to make those judgments for themselves, and to act on those judgments not by seeking to suppress speech, but by openly and vigorously contesting the ideas that they oppose.

This statement has been adopted so far by Princeton University and Purdue University, and several major newspaper editorial boards have encouraged all other universities to adopt it as well. If we can get universities all over the country to adopt this, we may begin to take back what we are losing.

But for now, academic freedom is under assault in America today on so many different fronts: Republican lawmakers who want to shut down "liberal" university faculty and programs; liberals who think that suppression of "offensive" speech and ideas is necessary to social progress; university administrators and trustees worried about tainting brands and offending big donors. As I explained in this book, the Internet has already caused the decimation of investigative journalism. If we now combine the loss of a vigorous free investigative press with the loss of freedom of inquiry in our universities, who will be left to find out the truths that must underlie our social policies, our justice system, our health-care practices? Who is going to be left to do the hard work of democracy?

9780143108115_MiddleFinger_i-xiv_1-354_1P.indd 286 12/18/15 1:23 PM

I can and will continue to help from the outside now. But American academics still on the inside *must* as never before take on the job of defending what it is Galileo must have died wanting—the right to seek, to know, to share ideas and knowledge without undue harassment. The Founding Fathers did not risk their lives for our rights to shop and dine. *It is much too soon for us to end the Enlightenment.*

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