**Is Free Speech Dead in Lawrence, Kansas?**

by JoAnn Farb

In 1996 my friend, Howard Lyman, a 4th generation cattle rancher/feedlot operator was a guest on the Oprah show. Following that show, a group of powerful Texas cattle ranchers who found what Howard said offensive filed a 20 million dollar lawsuit against him and Oprah, under a recently enacted Texas law intended to stifle free speech.

I told Howard about the recent pushback from my blogging about the Kaw Valley Seed Fair being unfair and the Kaw Valley Farm Tour where I saw animal cruelty, being greenwashed as, “Humane.” Howard reminded me that when he was on trial in Amarillo Texas, where virtually everyone had ties to the cattle industry, it was obvious the jury didn’t like him informing people about disturbing practices in that industry, and were looking for a reason to rule against him, and in support of the cattlemen. Yet through multiple trials Howard prevailed for one reason. He told the Jury, “We cannot restrict the free speech of others without also restricting our own.” And the jury, who hated Howard agreed.

I’ve taught cooking classes at The Merc for many years. My class evaluations have been excellent, and my upcoming class was full. We were discussing my proposed title for my March class, when suddenly I was informed I would not be allowed to teach at all in March because of the, “Swirl” in the community regarding my outspoken blogs. This was not a total surprise; I had been experiencing increasing censorship in recent years. For instance I was not permitted to title a class, “Forks over Knives” (referencing the popular documentary showing people’s lives being saved by a plant based diet). In fact I was specifically told to not even say that phrase in class, because it was too inflammatory. Nor was I allowed to use this popular explanation in a class description; *“Veganism begins with vegetarianism and takes it to its logical conclusion.”* They considered that “Too judgmental.”

What exactly is so terrible about being judgmental? Why is “judgmental” being used to shut down discussions that might help reduce cruelty to animals and slow climate change? I can think of plenty of ways I am judgmental that all these folks would approve of – for example I am judgmental about drunk drivers, GMOs, and policies that facilitate systemic racism, so why can’t I be judgmental about policies that harm animals, or threaten to put Bangladesh and Florida under water? Who is deciding which judgements are ok and which are not appropriate for expression. Or whose interests get affirmed while others’ are trampled?

In 1915, the University of Pennsylvania fired economics professor Scott Nearing (author of “The Good Life”) because he spoke publicly about the need to abolish child labor. Nearing’s comments offended U Penn board members who were beneficiaries of this practice. While tabling at the Kaw Valley Seed Fair in 2015 and on my personal blog, I have spoken publicly about the need to abolish animal cruelty. In various communications with me, Seed fair organizers have said I was uninvited for 2016 because my message was judgmental and even said, “The seed fair is not a place to try to influence people.”

Those who control the venues that won’t allow me their platform to speak openly about what I embrace or find ethically problematic in our community, keep telling me, “This is just one venue – there are plenty of others at which you can speak,” and often suggest the library. While it is free and open to me, it is difficult if not impossible to inform library patrons of my events. I do not have the funds to take out ads in local media, and after the library’s renovations, they adopted more restrictive policies. They will not place a notice about patron organized events taking place in their public meeting rooms on their calendar, newsletter, nor information screens. Patrons can no longer reserve display cases to share information and we are prohibited from organizing displays of library materials for check out by others. Only one public bulletin board is provided and it is so far off most people’s path, that few even know it is there. Interestingly, these new policies do not make it harder for powerful corporate entities (who make large donations to the library) from getting their message out. All these “little” decisions remove options for citizens to communicate with the community about critical issues, further concentrate power in fewer hands, and discourage minority perspectives in public spaces. Future generations may look at what is happening here and now in Lawrence the way many of us look back at things like Jim Crow Laws, Scott Nearing’s dismissal from teaching, or Pete Seeger’s blacklisting during the McCarthy Era, when we ask, “How could good people have failed to see how they were enabling such injustice?” Yet, all too often those pushing for justice and change get marginalized. In his letter from a Birmingham Jail, Martin Luther King Wrote: “I was rather disappointed that my fellow clergymen would see my nonviolent efforts as those of an extremist.”

In March of 2015, disappointed with the marketing focus of The Merc – I made and presented a short power point to the Merc’s board of directors. It pointed out, that if shoppers in America bought groceries in proportions reflective of the Merc’s advertising, it would accelerate climate change, and probably increase rates of chronic disease. I showed how this contradicted the Merc’s currently stated, “Ends.” (Which apparently the board changed some time after my presentation to be less specific. I assume this was to resolve the dissonance.) The board promised me they would discuss my presentation and give me an official response. Not only did I never get a response, but following that presentation, I was deliberately omitted from the monthly email informing instructors of available dates, and not even told, until I noticed the new schedule was up and I wasn’t on it. Only when I confronted my supervisor directly (someone with a long history of embracing social justice) with this question: “Are you telling me that as a coop member in good standing, if I see something ethically problematic and attempt to make my case to the board, I risk losing the opportunity to teach classes here?” was I permitted to get back on the teaching schedule.

I want to be clear – I am not wanting to put the Merc out of business. I love what The Merc was and could again be -- a place that welcomes diverse perspectives, instead of censoring thoughtful dissent by calling it judgmental or branding it, “Not welcoming.” (Which is what the Merc called my newsletter when telling me why they had been shredding copies of it I had left in their café.) Our local coop could nurture and empower justice, thus securing tremendous loyalty in the community – as they once had. But when those in charge actively suppress the free speech of members acting on their conscience, and then justify it, by saying this is necessary in order to survive the competition, something very wrong is happening. But rather than withdraw my membership, I have attempted again and again to dialog in meaningful ways with those who run the Merc and I encourage you to do the same. It will only get better if enough of us speak up and ask for that change, and not just at the Merc, at the Seed Fair, at the Journal World, at the Library. Let’s make Lawrence a place where free speech, and a diversity of perspectives are Welcomed!

I believe that part of what it means to be a good citizen, is to speak up when one recognizes something as ethically problematic, and I am trying to do my part. But if YOU don’t also do this, we will not reclaim what has been lost. If my free speech can be restricted yours can be too.

**This essay (with links to detail about events mentioned) can be found at**

[www.JoAnnFarb.com](http://www.JoAnnFarb.com)