

Stone the Christian!

By Peter Worrall



Six!

In my Bible college classroom, I cover the broad sweep of education. I write goals and objectives that grow out of our scope and sequence. My lesson plans apply to all, and I try to differentiate my instruction by teaching in groups and allowing multiple book choices.

But I know that there is a better way to teach.

In my office, I have placed a rocking chair and an armchair under the window. This is where the truly differentiated instruction really takes shape. Many students want to discuss worldview issues, identity formation, and relationships. My office is where we peel back the façade and see what is underneath. My office is where I see the heart of my students. And what I see is not far removed from what others see.

In “The Coddling of the American Mind,” Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt observed, “In the name of emotional well-being, college students are increasingly demanding protection from words and ideas they don’t like.” This is “disastrous for education—and mental health” (2015).

In Britain, *The Telegraph* and other papers are talking about what they call “Stepford Students”—students who keep a Pollyanna perspective on life. These young people make sure that any views which are too far from their own are universally marginalized—labeled “intolerant” or “hate speech.” Manchester University’s Student Union event “From Liberation to Censorship:

Does modern feminism have a problem with free speech?” is a clear example of how far things have gone. Both the radical feminist Julie

Bindel and right wing provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos were disinvited after complaints from students about their stance on the issues (Ardehali 2015). It used to be that the diversity of the perspectives in a debate testified to its potential for learning. Now it is reinterpreted as the potential for harm to the student.

Tim Urban’s article “Why Generation Y Yuppies Are Unhappy” posits that twentysomethings are depressed because reality does not meet their expectations. They have been told they are special, even exceptional. They graduate from college with an erroneous belief that the world is waiting for them. Urban’s article has nearly 600,000 shares.

These trends of entitlement and a lack of resilience could be dismissed by Christians as “pagan trends.” The world is going to hell in a handbasket, we could argue, so the spoiled, sheltered, coddled products of grade-inflated public schools are now reaping what has been sown. But Christian schools and homeschools can’t so easily let themselves off the hook. Christian Smith has shown that the children in our churches have much the same worldview as those from other religions (2009).

David Kinnaman has uncovered what our church children believe when they enter their twenties (2011). As a fifth grade teacher in a Christian school, I

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Addressing the Coddling of the American Mind

personally experienced the overprotection of helicopter parents who wanted to make sure their children never felt uncomfortable.

However, discomfort is a catalyst to learning. We have a special word for discomfort in education; we call it “disequilibrium.” The mind tends to return to a state of equilibrium. When we challenge students’ perceptions, they are forced to learn so that they can reestablish an inner sense of calm. Are we really challenging children enough that it rocks their world? Have we become so afraid of accusations of hurting a child that we do not challenge them? We have to think about whether the students in our Christian schools have an expectation that life is safe and predictable and Mom and Dad will come to the rescue if things get too hard.

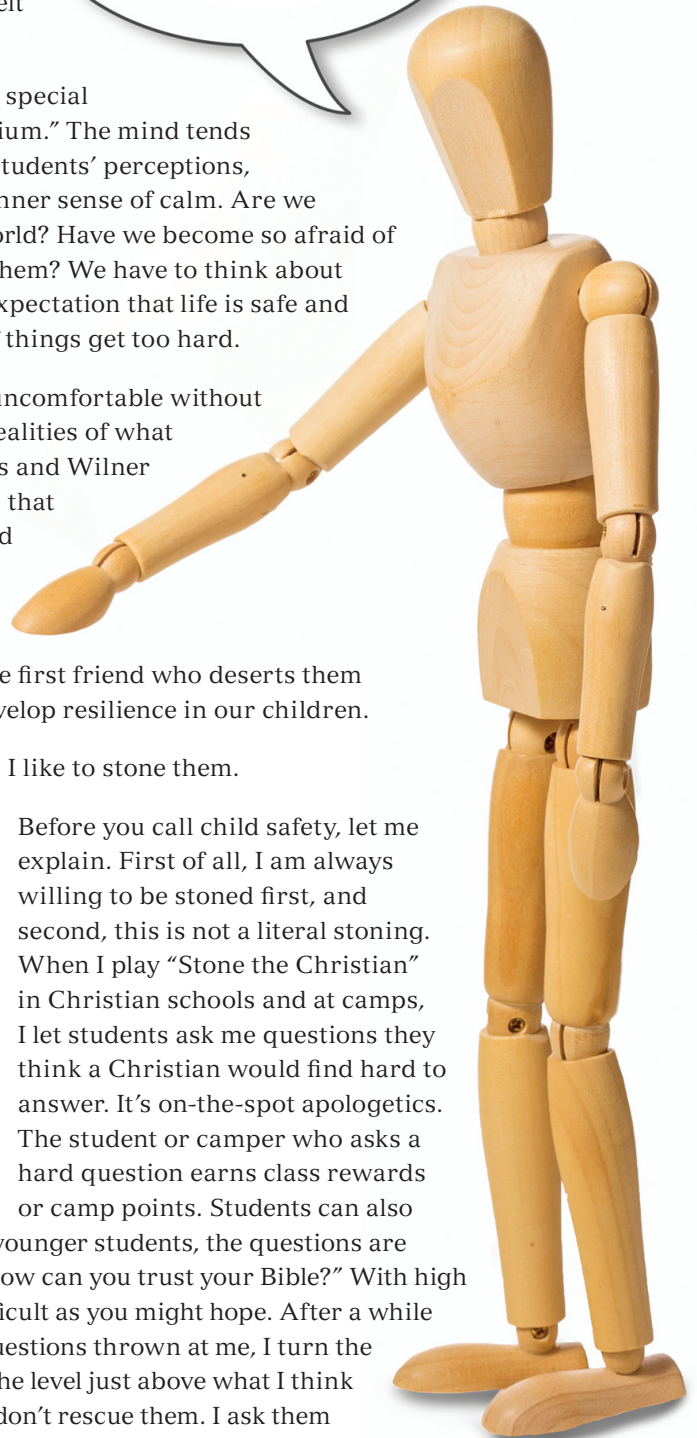
We need to challenge students in ways that make them uncomfortable without destroying them. We must prepare them for the harsh realities of what some commentators call the “quarterlife crisis” (Robbins and Wilner 2001). We need to help them develop the critical analysis that can engage with an agile, technological culture. We need to expose our children to the realities of the world. Cocooning them in a safe, Christian environment is not a kindness; they will emerge too fragile to resist the first college professor who calls them a moron, or the first friend who deserts them because of their religious views. In short, we need to develop resilience in our children.

If we are to challenge our students, how might we start? I like to stone them.

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collaborate to come up with really hard questions. With younger students, the questions are usually simple: “Why are there so many religions?” or “How can you trust your Bible?” With high schoolers, the questions are more difficult, but not as difficult as you might hope. After a while of showing them that I am unafraid to have their stony questions thrown at me, I turn the tables. I have them answer my questions. I try and pitch the level just above what I think they can answer comfortably. And, importantly, I don’t rescue them. I ask them hard questions, and I let them sit with the questions at least overnight. This is where disequilibrium does its work.

Nine!



Instead of discouraging or deconstructing the children's faith, this method is a positive challenge. Then I go a little deeper: I let them choose which of the worldviews we've studied will attack them. The fifth graders I taught usually did well against the naturalist, but the postmodern perspective was like a greasy pole they couldn't get a hold of. They often found the postmodern worldview rather enticing, as well.

Some parents were skeptical about my talking to their children about their beliefs in such antagonistic ways. However, when I explained carefully that I was preparing them for difficult conversations after high school, the parents were quickly on board. Some of them helped their children think through the questions overnight, but others joined me in letting the disequilibrium simmer.

If we intentionally let students engage in situations where they struggle and fail, they will not collapse when they encounter hardship, because their identity has not been built around unrealistic expectations.

The solution to the coddling of the American mind needn't be "Stone the Christian." However, we must work with God to disrupt the comfort of the feathered nest. In Deuteronomy 32:11, God is described as an eagle—not the eagle soaring high and majestic in the clear blue sky, but the eagle busy snuggling up to its young and then pushing them out of the nest. The eaglet plummets toward the ground, flailing wildly; the parent eagle swoops down and catches the eaglet before it is dashed to pieces. Then it repeats. Finally the flailing becomes flapping, and the eaglet learns to fly. If we want our students to soar, we must emulate our loving Father who throws adversity our way. We need to expose our children to some things that trouble them and let them flail before we raise them to the safety of the nest.

We want resilient students who engage the world. The peace of God—His shalom—will guard their hearts and minds as they engage the most difficult situations. Can you imagine the effect of students who have sharpened their worldview by having it attacked? The reality of dorm floor debates and watercooler conversation might seem trivial compared to the paces we have put them through. They will already be used to the discomfort of disagreement, and rather than responding in fear and anger, they will respond with poise and grace. If we have regularly pushed our students outside their comfort zones, when they need a job, they will knock on doors or make cold calls until they find someone who will give them a chance. If

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We are already seeing that the Christian worldview and its values do not have dominance in the marketplace of ideas. There will be arguments, bartering, and badgering. Those who stand strong will have a voice. Those who allow themselves to be silenced will be marginalized. Those who speak up in adverse conditions must be born from adversity—even if it is a rigorous simulation in our classrooms.

As an administrator, you might consider coordinating sequential steps into more adverse environments, possibly through social studies or Bible classes. Both subjects address societal conflict, so they can house simulations of current cultural contexts or past biblical narratives.

As a classroom teacher, you can think of ways to upset the nest. If your students study *The Hiding Place*, roleplay a Nazi looking for Jews and do not be nice about it. I did this after a Corrie Ten Boom reenactor had come to tell my fifth grade class her story. I was delighted at how vehemently the students fought to keep her whereabouts a secret and vowed to defend her with their lives.

Some of the first Christian schools were martyr schools (Kienel 1998). These schools met in secret and prepared their children for the persecution which was to come. They did so by drill and simulation. We would do well by being equally prepared to engage the culture in which we live. Let's train our children vigorously to be able to withstand the post-Christian attacks that will come their way. Let's prepare them for the rigors of life in their twenties. Let's bathe the whole process in prayer and petition to our God.

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