

# A Kid Named A.

Michael Copperman

**A.** A TALL, THIN BLACK KID from North Portland, A. of the backward cap and the swaggering slouch, was so confused about his thesis in class that he sat tapping his pencil and shifting in his seat all class long. He needed to identify the reason he felt speech regulations on college campuses should be banned. He wanted to say ‘freedom of speech,’ was the reason, and I asked him why freedom of speech was useful to students on college campuses, and he frowned, furrowed his brow, shrugged and then stared down at what he had written as if the words might appear on the page through sheer intensity of stare.

After class, he lingered at the front of the classroom and asked again, “What should I say?”

“What you think is right and makes sense,” I told him, and despite his persistence, I would not give him ‘the answer’. That attitude of ‘just tell me’ is common among even the better students who make college out of our overcrowded and under-resourced public

schools: they care about doing well, but have rarely been asked to figure things out themselves, let alone had their own opinions valued and evaluated on clarity and merit. We went in circles, and finally he stood with his hands at his sides in despair.

I left him in the classroom and walked back across campus through a light rain, the yellowing and browning leaves of November waving against the white sky, and I felt tired, drained by the sense I have sometimes that I am doing nothing and accomplishing nothing, wasting my days teaching writing at a mid-tier public university in a provincial little town. I wondered if perhaps I should have thrown him a bone and given him choices of possible positions, and decided I’d email him so he didn’t feel abandoned.

Out front of the building that houses my office, I stopped to adjust my bag on my shoulder, heard the sound of soles slapping pavement behind me, and turned to see A. loping across the lawn. He was breathing hard, and when he reached me he put his hands to his knees and caught his breath and said, “Mr. Mike, could I say that they—the speech codes—prevent honest communication between people trying to learn?”

I swear, his earnest face, the clarity of the statement and the fact he’d come to it himself, made all the entire gray Winter irrelevant.

“That sounds exactly right,” I said, and as he

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grinned and took out his phone and began to write his thesis on the mobile device, I clapped him on the shoulder and waited for him to finish. Then I walked on, past my office toward the library because that seemed the direction he was going, A. walking a little ahead and talking faster as he caught his breath, telling me how he'd come up with it, and what examples he had about how in the real world nobody is gone save you from the offensive things that were out there that people thought, the hate some have in their hearts, how you have to confront racists head on, and more than that, how we have to actually talk about things as they are, to say what we mean even when that isn't easy, and how he had an example of his friend D. in from back home at Jefferson High, and could he use it, would it work, did I think?

I told him yes, I did think. But really, I was glad that he'd thought. 🙄