

I don't know about other schools, but at _____ University, political philosophy seems to be the ugly step-child of the political science department. Only two full-time professors are willing to take political philosophy classes, so most of the teaching load is left to TAs like me. What's more, the lab I teach is not required and the classroom I'm assigned is at the far edge of campus: a cold room deep in the bowels of the Chemistry building, with a periodic chart on the wall and a lab table for a podium. It's a section no one has to attend of a class no one wants to teach in a room no one wants to use.

I love it.

I love it because they come anyway, and once in a while we have a moment of intellectual euphoria. I love it because I get to step into the shoes of long-dead philosophers, to bring their ideas and words back to life and defend them against all comers. This is especially fun when I can defend someone like Friedrich Nietzsche who, along with Freud and Marx, is occasionally referred to at my conservative school as the Unholy Trinity of postmodern thought.

One chilly morning last April, I led the class in a discussion of Nietzsche. I admit that I may have been pulling my punches just a little that day because one of the students present happened to be my sister, and I couldn't help wondering what my parents would think to learn that I had convinced their little girl that "God is dead." Still, I was relishing the conversation. We were focusing on Nietzsche's essay "On the Genealogy of Morals" in which he attempts to trace the creation of morality back to the master-slave relationship. I was arguing for Nietzsche's fluid view of morality rather than the Christian view of a fixed, God-given morality. I knew that Nietzsche's arguments—if I could get the students to really listen—would make the students squirm...and Nietzsche definitely has a way of making himself heard! His incendiary language is one of the things I love and hate most about him. When he argues, for example, that Christian "love" derives from concepts like cruelty, hatred and persecution, he knocks a leg out from the stool on which I sit. His arguments are too logical, his examples too compelling, to easily be dismissed. He demands that we consider another, often unsettling, point of view. That's why I read him again and again, and that's why I love playing the advocate for him, trying to step into his shoes.

Many of the most meaningful events of my life have occurred when I was in the role of an advocate. As an LDS missionary in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, I had the chance to serve as translator for the Mission President as he dealt with difficult situations. I remember getting a late-night call informing me that one of our missionaries, a native Cambodian, had raped a teenage girl. A crowd of her friends were gathering, apparently planning to seek revenge. I sent some trusted church members to talk to the teens and prevent further tragedy while I contacted President _____ to explain the situation.

In the Khmer language, the word “rape” (*cap rumlop*) has a wide range of possible meanings. On further inquiry I discovered that the missionary had actually pushed the girl into a bathroom and kissed her, against her will. While that might be viewed as a much lesser offense in the U.S., Cambodian law is more harsh against something like that, often giving 10-15 years imprisonment for a similar offense. The fact that the perpetrator was a missionary made it worse. Soon the girl’s father was in our office enraged and seeking retribution.

I was impressed at the way President _____ listened sympathetically to the father and his protests, then helping the father see the situation from the missionary’s point of view. Eventually, after an anguished apology from the missionary, the father decided that legal action would not help his daughter and would only ruin a boy’s life. My own feelings of outrage and disappointment were mollified somewhat when I watched the missionary confess his actions to his mother. She had raised him alone (his father had abandoned them years before for a younger bride), and she had been so proud of her son because of his missionary service. As I watched and translated the scene, I ached for the woman and her son. I was glad that in their crisis they’d had President _____ to advocate for them. In the moment when society is tempted to turn against a wrong-doer and seek retribution, someone needs to be there to remind us of the perpetrator’s all-too-human story. Before we hack off our offending limbs or pluck out our offending eyes, someone needs to remind us that we’re all connected in vital ways.

Advocacy is more than intellectual argument to me. It is a widening of vision, a reaching for clarity and truth, an act of redemption. It is human connection and love. It is what I want to do with my life.