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TRIGGERED BY TRIGGER WARNINGS:
A LOOK AT DIFFICULTIES THROUGH
COLLEGIATE UTILIZATION

Levi Elliott

Black Beauty is an insightful children's book that contains an intense allegory for rape and sexual abuse. I only realized these analogies in my First Year Seminar where our class intensely discussed the character of a horse named Ginger, and the implications her allegorical rape had on the life she lived inside of *Black Beauty*. Our discussion's tone was very serious and, as part of the preliminary reading prior to that discussion, the class read material by Ruth Padel. Her piece "Saddled with Ginger" was incredibly thoughtful and was an excellent addition to our conversation, but contained direct excerpts from erotica involving forceful sexual situations. It wasn't overtly inappropriate; the erotic context was centuries old and was extremely supplemental to Padel's argument. However, the nature of rape does not change and the portrayal of it was still gruesome in both *Black Beauty* and Padel's writing. For the sake of discussion in our class and gaining as much from my course as possible, this gruesomeness was something I had to deal with head-on; despite my own experiences with the topic at hand.

I felt unable to breathe as I sat next to my classmates. I was sitting in seminar, in the second chair to the left of the back table, and I felt paralyzingly overwhelmed. I could feel the panic inside of me creeping through my entire body; it took as much effort as I could muster to not get up and leave the room. I was flashing back to the time that I myself experienced what rape felt like. Just the discussion caused my mind to jump back to the mental state that I was in after my own incident. I remember the brief moments I had to pull myself together before my parents came home, dealing with the nauseated feelings that come from being so violated, and contemplating the disgust I felt with myself and the situation. My mind seemed to be stuck in memories of weeks after my incident, when I was trying everything I could to get the feeling of my rapist off of me. I reverted to the mental state I was in whenever my life became increasingly complicated and painful, all due to the way I spiraled after the incident. In mere seconds, all of the thoughts and emotions associated with my rape came boiling back to the surface and demanded to be dealt with.

After class, I barely talked to my boyfriend for the rest of the day. Even though I knew he was nothing like the man that had raped me, I still felt sick talking to someone in such an intimate way after reliving every aspect of what had happened. However, I find myself thankful that the triggers this time were not as bad as the times last month, and that the triggers last month were not as bad as they had been before. Every month I believe I've been growing as a person. I'm trying to live life to the fullest and not let my past negatively define who I am today, and I know that this outlook is helping me improve little by little. I am thankful that I was able to talk to my boyfriend at all afterward, because in the past I would not have been able to. I have just recently gotten to the point where I feel comfortable opening up emotionally to someone again, even with my constant worrying that a setback could come from being reminded about the rape. I have recovered immensely to where I am comfortable with sharing my experiences, but sometimes I am still caught off guard. Without being warned about rape discussions, I find it hard to hold myself together when I talk. I continue to struggle with some aspects of my story whenever I tell it. I still cannot listen to "Follow Me" by Uncle Kracker because it reminds me of a person who sexually abused me. It was his favorite song, one that he showed me during one of our deepest talks; he loved explaining the meaning of the lyrics to it, and played it whenever he could. Every time I listen to that song, I panic and have to dedicate all of my focus to not falling apart in front of whomever else is in the room. It troubles me that after so long something as simple as a song can still control me in that way, but it does.

I doubt that there will ever be a day where I am not reminded of my experience whenever someone discusses such sensitive topics, or plays that song. With that said, I do find peace in the fact that one day I might be able to discuss the incident without having to remind myself I am not in that moment. I recently stopped doing a double-take and feeling shock every time someone said the phrase "on cloud nine." This phrase is what one sexual abuser of mine said he felt when he thought of what happened, and for a long time I was forced to take a moment to pull myself together each time I heard that phrase. Now, I don't have to. I do not say that phrase myself because of how it has made me feel, but I do hope to maybe start trying to use it again to slowly use a crude form of exposure therapy on myself. Over time, as things like this start to bother me less and less, I might even be able to listen to the song. With that on my mind, I pondered a question that I believe will, if it has not already, sweep across college campuses: do trigger warnings actually help people like me, or do they simply hinder me both in recovery and in my education?

The University of Chicago released a letter to 2017's incoming freshmen that stated it does not support "trigger warnings" or "safe spaces" on its campus, citing that it limited true academic freedom (Holmes). In essence, the university showed that they took what I would refer to as a "real" world perspective on trigger warnings. The world outside of college most definitely does not come with trigger warnings and the university recognizes this in their statement. The thought process behind their stance outlined that, in a pursuit of true academic freedom, controversial, uncomfortable, or even frightening subjects cannot be considered "off-limits." In the world outside of a college campus, there will be people who oppose your views, are hateful towards you for things you cannot control, and may even shout hurtful and triggering remarks for the sake of crude humor. In the "real" world, no one is warned before they are triggered. Rather, they are slapped in the face by topics that trigger them, and are expected to still behave as though they are fine. *The Huffington Post* wrote an article regarding this issue, specifically citing the aforementioned letter sent out by the University of Chicago, and claims the university's stance sends a clear message that "students who may be susceptible to mental health issues, like post-traumatic stress disorder or panic disorders, are undeserving of a warning that a lecture or guest speaker may aggravate" (Holmes). This writer for *The Post* believes the University's choice to not use trigger warnings shows students that the university does not care about the mental health of students who have been through traumatic incidents. Holmes goes further to say the university's stance on the issue not only portrays this disregard for the status of students' mental health, but can actually negatively impact the mental health of the students attending classes and guest speaker events at the college. By not warning them beforehand about possible triggers, Holmes believes the university could potentially shock students with triggering discussion and cause setbacks to their mental health.

The Post also cites that, contrary to the university's beliefs, trigger warnings actually benefit students (Holmes). This thought is reiterated several times in popular media, including *Times Magazine*, which released an article by Rae Ann Pickett who claimed that "Being able to know beforehand what experiences I should avoid and create an environment where I felt safe made it easier for me to share my struggles and move past them. Everyone deserves that opportunity" (Pickett). Pickett, along with many advocates of trigger warnings, firmly believe that these warnings help people regain positive control of their life after a traumatic event or mental illness. Some college professors also join in on this view and say that adding trigger warnings to their classroom has not hindered class discussion or performance; it has enhanced it (Smith). These professors claim that the warning allowed students to mentally prepare for the discussion, set a

serious tone for the class, and generally created deeper conversations instead of ones that glided over the surface of the issue. However, a survey conducted by the National Coalition Against Censorship showed that a majority of professors actually have a negative view of trigger warnings. Roughly 62% thought the warnings would have a negative effect on academic freedom, and 45% believed the warnings have a direct negative correlation to classroom dynamics (What's All This About Trigger Warnings?).

The professors from this survey voiced specific concerns they had over the use of trigger warnings inside classrooms. A significant number of the NCAC's respondents claimed that trigger warnings would practically invite students to "avoid engaging with uncomfortable course material" (What's All This About Trigger Warnings?). Other professors noted that a trigger warning actually creates an environment inside a classroom that is built with anticipation of tension and contentious conversation rather than mutually beneficial cooperative debates about controversial issues. A recurring theme in the answers given by professors was that the use of trigger warnings could eventually make it impossible to have meaningful discussion on sensitive subjects, which is vital to help create strong and well-rounded members of society. They also expressed that, while they do not support the use of trigger warnings, they feel speaking out against the concept would make them appear insensitive towards students (What's All This About Trigger Warnings?). In a world increasingly becoming knowledgeable and accommodating for mental health issues, the professors against trigger warnings don't want to appear as though they don't care about their students. They truly do, they just worry about that a hindrance on discussion also hinders the education their students deserve (What's All This About Trigger Warnings?).

Instinctively, I feel an inclination to embrace the negative side of trigger warnings. However, I feel as though this viewpoint is due to where and how I was raised. A small-town in southern Indiana that struggles with heroin addiction, has poverty levels above the national average, and that is also above the average of people without health or medical insurance (Quick) is not an ideal place for safe spaces or trigger warnings. Instead, I was definitely raised with a "rub some dirt on it" mentality. This is not to say that my family is not well provided for; I lived a comfortable and definitely privileged life growing up and still do. However, being in close contact with those in an environment that was not quite like that allowed for daily reiteration of one clear message: the "real" world, while it can occasionally be pleasant, is far from a walk in the park. For many citizens in my community, food seemed much more important than trigger warnings, and because of this I believe I have developed an inclination to "tough it out" as much as possible where mental health is concerned. This

is why I have tried to simply deal with my triggers as they come instead of trying to prevent them or even seek treatment for my issues. I am thankful for my upbringing, the community I was raised in, and the struggles I have endured, because these things have forced me to adopt a mental fortitude and toughness that many do not have. In essence, these things have taught me to smile through the pain. I use that smile as a constant shield against the world around me and it has proven to be a powerful tool to help me deal with the triggers I face. I say this simply to point out that these are skills that I've had to develop. Others have grown up able to develop skills that I could never acquire, yet they may not have the emotional mental fortitude someone in my situation does. I would consider myself ignorant if I believed everyone has cultivated those skills to the extent that I have, which is what complicates the issue of trigger warnings in my mind.

Being reminded about rape or any other traumatic experience that one has had to experience is unbelievably painful. For many, the abstract discussion of religion, terrorism, xenophobia, sexuality, poverty and other subjects can incite emotions or beliefs held so firmly that they can become quickly irritated by a few opposing sentences. This is what supplements my belief towards a broad acceptance of trigger warnings. Perhaps, if given time to mentally prepare themselves for such discussion, these students would be able to participate and hear multiple sides of an issue without as much emotional bias. This is the hope of some professors who choose to utilize trigger warnings in their courses. One particular professor shares their thoughts on this specific subject in the report released by NCAC, saying, "I've warned students that I was about to show them an upsetting or potentially offensive image, but I've never not shown it. Giving students the tools to prepare themselves to engage with potentially upsetting material, if they choose, is a good use of such warnings" (What's All This About Trigger Warnings?). This professor does not give the students an opportunity to not partake, view, or hear the material that comes with that trigger warning. The basic thought behind this approach is that it is impossible to truly learn about these issues without properly discussing them. Instructors using this approach can only hope that students heeded their warning and mentally prepared themselves for the discussion ahead.

Unfortunately, some people are in the early stages of mental recovery from a traumatic event and simply allowing time for mental preparation is not nearly enough to avoid becoming triggered by a sensitive topic. This is why some instructors allow students to opt out of material that they may find particularly disturbing. While information reported by the NCAC's survey definitely does not show this to be the norm, many instructors see it as the future of what it means to issue a trigger warning.

They also fear that, by opting out of the given material, students lose a valuable part of the course (What's All This About Trigger Warnings?). This unique balance between mental health and education is what troubles college campuses nationwide. While professors realize that their bottom line is to cover the appropriate material, and that the classroom is certainly not the appropriate place to deal with an individual's mental health issues, they still prioritize the wellbeing of students.

The issue certainly is not a simple one, and there is no systematic formula for this type of precaution. However, speaking from the perspective of my own experiences, I can say that there is no way instructors can tag every trigger in the world with their warnings. There is simply too much individualism involved with mental health issues.

Triggers are unique for every person; any number of things can bring back memories that are difficult for someone to handle. For example, I can barely stand to listen to "Follow Me" by Uncle Kracker, and, until very recently, struggled every time I heard the phrase "on cloud nine." Both of those things are inherently associated with happiness, summer days, and a positive attitude. Ultimately, there is no reason why these things should be flagged as potentially triggering by instructors. Even if there were an appropriate way for my instructor to be forewarned of everything I have experienced, it would be impossible for them to know such individual and unique triggers. However, there are definitely general issues that all instructors could give warnings about. An abstract discussion about a reality I have experienced could affect not only my experience in the classroom that day, but also my experience in the course as a whole and even my personal mental health.

This is an issue of growing relevance, and one that undoubtedly requires more research than what is currently available before making a conclusive decision. With such a vast range of issues, it is possible that this debate will never have a concrete resolution. However, a majority of scenarios can be covered if professors use their common sense about what a sensitive topic could be. Professors have experienced extensive education to teach at a collegiate level, and therefore should understand that life is a continuum of learning. They can implement this strategy in their classroom by thinking of a list of general topics that could be sensitive and issuing warnings before these are discussed, and then as they learn throughout the years of other topics that they may have missed, they can simply add that to list of things they issue a trigger warning for. This is not a perfect method, but it is a start, and is the best method that can be used with the current research.

However, it is important for instructors to reiterate the importance of participation in these sensitive discussions to students. They continue to be a vital part of the education students will receive, even if

the discussions are hard to handle. Personally, I know how hard it is. It is excruciating to confront these scenarios; the pain from the experience never actually goes away, and these discussions inflame the pain all over again. The only thing that changes is how well you can deal with the emotional turmoil from what happened. Discussion in a classroom is a great way to slowly and constructively deal with the issue, while receiving an education and fulfilling course requirements. With a little bit of warning, but not the ability to avoid, classroom discussions have actually helped me better deal with the experiences I have been through.

A perfect example is this paper. A year ago, I could not have written this. I would not have been able to openly say that I was raped; it felt like a secret I had to carry with me until the end of time. Honestly, I sometimes still feel uncomfortable saying it. The discomfort ranges in reason; sometimes I feel like I should be ashamed of myself for being raped, sometimes I feel like if I do not say it for long enough then maybe it will eventually cease to be a part of my history. Neither of these reasons makes logical sense, but they are still in my mind. Thankfully, talking about serious issues in a classroom with some warning and an empathetic professor has allowed me to progress my mental health so I can write a paper like this. This is what the true effect of a trigger warning is: the creation of mental fortitude through knowledge of an inevitably approaching difficulty.

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