



Claudine Gay, Jimmy Lai, and the truth of things

What happens when there is only “your truth” and “my truth” and our “truths” collide?

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To my mind, the most cringe-inducing moment in the drama of Claudine Gay and her resignation as president of Harvard University was not when she whiffed at unambiguously condemning genocidal threats against Jews as violations of Harvard’s norms for student behavior. That was horrible, to be sure. Even more telling, though, was Gay’s subsequent apology, in which she expressed regret for having “failed to convey what is my truth.”

Hard as it may be for normal people to grasp, the notion that there is only “my truth” and “your truth,” but nothing properly describable as *the* truth, is virtually axiomatic in the humanities departments of American “elite” universities, and has been for some time. Now, following the Orwellian script in *Animal Farm*, the woke plague has created a situation in which some of those personal “truths” are deemed more equal than others’ “truths” — the superior truths being the “truths” of political correctness.

As dean of the Harvard faculty, Claudine Gay was a vigorous proponent of the new axiom that some truths are truer than others. But in her apology, she reverted to the basic, postmodernist absurdity that “truth” is a matter of personal conviction rather than conviction anchored in reality. Her downfall thus illustrates another axiom, one that antedates post-modernism by almost two centuries: the Revolution devours its children (Jacques Mallet du Pan, writing from Paris 1793 as the tumbrils rolled).

When post-modernism first reared its head decades ago, some Christian thinkers suggested that its mantra of your-truth/my-truth might provide an opening to serious intellectual exchange with non-believers, which was impossible with those academic nihilists and relativists who denied that there was any truth at all. This always struck me as a forlorn hope. For what happens when there is only “your

truth” and “my truth” and our “truths” collide? Absent any agreed horizon of judgment (call it “*the truth*”) against which we can settle our difference, either you will impose your power on me or I will impose my power on you.

Which means the death of serious conversation, of scholarship and, ultimately, of democracy.

7,494 miles away, I doubt the thought occurred to my friend Jimmy Lai; but the fact that the Claudine Gay affair coincided with the beginning of Jimmy’s trial on charges of having violated Chinese “national security” by defending the basic human rights of his fellow Hong Kongers nicely illustrated Oscar Wilde’s point about life imitating art — including the arts of irony.

For there was President Gay, trying to save herself by an appeal to “my truth,” while Jimmy was risking life imprisonment at a Stalinesque show trial because he had courageously borne witness to *the truth*: the truth that today’s Hong Kong regime is a thugocracy terrified by free speech and a free press; the truth that the Beijing regime that controls Hong Kong is comprehensively violating the commitments to honor basic human rights it had made when Hong Kong reverted to Chinese sovereignty in 1979; and, perhaps above all, the truth that Catholic faith demands solidarity with those defending their God-given rights — rights that express built-in truths about the inalienable dignity and infinite value of every human life.

Jimmy Lai has become a Christian artist during his three years in solitary confinement; few, if any, gifts that I have received in my life have touched me as deeply as the two sketches he has sent me from Stanley Prison. Both embody his commitment to truth — not just “his” truth, but *truth*, period — and his understanding that truth-telling is risky business in this world. The price of truth-telling is expressed in a crucifixion scene, rendered in colored pencil on the kind of lined paper we once used in elementary school. The commitment to live in the truth is captured in a beautiful Madonna with the simple inscription “Yes!” (cf. Luke 1:38).

Once asked what sentence he would wish saved if the rest of the Bible were somehow destroyed, John Paul II responded without hesitation, “You will know the truth and the truth will make you free” (John 8:32). Jimmy Lai’s life and art luminously express that conviction about the liberating power of truth. We must hope and pray that Claudine Gay and the rest of the post-modern academic establishment — which has turned “elite” American higher education into a playpen for rabid antisemites, pampered snowflakes, and madcap ideologues — eventually come to understand what Jimmy understands.

Because that would set them free, spiritually as well as intellectually. Thus liberated, they could be true educators rather than enforcers of woke ideological conformity.

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George Weigel is Distinguished Senior Fellow of Washington's Ethics and Public Policy Center, where he holds the William E. Simon Chair in Catholic Studies. He is the author of over twenty books, including *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II* (1999), *The End and the Beginning: Pope John Paul II—The Victory of Freedom, the Last Years, the Legacy* (2010), and *The Irony of Modern Catholic History: How the Church Rediscovered Itself and Challenged the Modern World to Reform*. His most recent books are *The Next Pope: The Office of Peter and a Church in Mission* (2020), *Not Forgotten: Elegies for, and Reminiscences of, a Diverse Cast of Characters, Most of Them Admirable* (Ignatius, 2021), and *To Sanctify the World: The Vital Legacy of Vatican II* (Basic Books, 2022).

