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Grade 11

John F. Tinker Foundation Annual Essay Contest Submission 2022

Topic 2: "What Does Freedom of Speech Mean to You?"

There is a saying that a picture is worth a thousand words. If that is the case, then how many words did it take to paint the picture of the society we live in today? Each of those words that helped form the world we live in now is a building block to the future that we will have tomorrow. Many citizens misuse this enormous power that the human race has: the power to speak. By using words to hurt rather than promote growth, society takes away the potential that one word could have. One of our greatest strengths as a species is communication, and just one word can bring change to our community. Not only does it have the power to carry a story and to convey and connect the minds of the human race, but it also can be a powerful tool of evolution. This tool affects every individual, including myself.

In the modern world, words are as valuable as time. Time is considered to be one of the most valuable resources in the world because of how finite it is. In many ways, words have the same effect. Like time, a word spent by speaking it out loud cannot be reversed. Once it is uttered, a word is printed into history; like a minute that has passed and cannot be brought back.

Words make up the history that our lives revolve around. Everything that we know so far from the past is a result of people cementing their experiences into words, which goes to show how words can carry a whole era of history without even being a physical object. The power to speak is the power to tell your story, speak your truth, and communicate ideas in order to bring society together. This power can change the fate of millions of people. It can end wars and bring world peace, or even destroy the world as we know it.

This has been the verdict in many instances of history. Many civil rights leaders have used the tool of speaking to help change the world for the better and to help it evolve into a more free and peaceful place. Such as the famous civil rights leader, Martin Luther King Jr, who changed the lives of every African American in America all because of his famous speech “I Have a Dream.” He was able to use his words to move a whole country and convince everyone to work together towards the common goal of becoming a freer people, but he is not the only instance of this. Martin Luther King took a lot of inspiration from another civil rights leader, Mahatma Gandhi. His renowned nonviolence movement was effective due to his understanding of the value of his voice rather than using brute force. He knew that his words and his voice could change the perspective of a person by influencing their mind and heart. Although we have seen great change when freedom of speech is expressed orally, we have also seen this in literature. Two young women, Anne Frank and Malala, changed how society saw different events in history by sharing their stories and fighting for civil rights through writing. It is safe to say that none of this change would be possible if the freedom of speech was not in place. A lot of the impact that was brought upon the world by these civil rights leaders would not have been taken positively in society back then, but they had the freedom to say what they felt and to point out what they saw in society, therefore creating change. This amendment has allowed these

leaders to impact everyone's lives and continue to as we keep expressing the problems in society in the hopes of us evolving and growing from them.

From a personal standpoint, my father taught me a valuable lesson at a young age: once you say something you can never take it back; which is why he encouraged me to think before I spoke and to make sure every word I said was intentional. From then on, I made sure to carry valuable intentions behind my words. I believe speech is the building block to the future we want to build. Not only can it impact our future as a community, but this freedom is vital because it allows us to create our own personal narratives. Everything one says is a representation and reflection of who they are. We can take this away from social media. Everything we write, say, or post is considered our "digital footprint." I believe that we all have a societal footprint, which is what we say out loud and act upon in society. Neither of these footprints can be erased, which is precisely why it is imperative to be cautious when we speak.

It wasn't until I joined the speech and debate team at my school that I fully appreciated this freedom that American citizens have. While I was on the podium giving my speech on incarceration in the US, it occurred to me how I wouldn't have been standing there if it weren't for the freedom of speech. We are fortunate to live in a world where we can express ourselves freely in a way that is not penalized.

The freedom of speech is analogous to a ripple effect. It starts as being an internal freedom, allowing an individual to feel safe with their thoughts and liberating those ideas inside of them. Once these ideas are spoken, it continues to affect the people around the individual and bleeds out until it creates widespread change. Freedom of speech lets me create the world that I want. It allows me to paint that picture of our world with the words that I say. We are all the artists who create the world that we continue to live in. Ultimately, what does freedom of speech

mean to me? It gives me peace with the past, gives me the freedom to live in the present, and grants me hope for change in the future.