When armed with a voice, don't shout — argue instead.
By Addison Schmidt

In the open expanse of Boston University's Marsh Plaza, an abstract statue stands.

Made of rust-covered sheets of hammered Cor-Ten steel molded into doves, the statue, titled "Free at Last," stands in memory of Martin Luther King Jr., arguably BU's most famous alumnus.

Many quotations of King's are inscribed into the statue's granite base, but one in particular caught my eye the first time I saw the statue, as I was walking to my first day of class at BU. It reads, "The command to love one's enemy is an absolute/necessity for our survival."

It is a quote which I have found applies to many aspects of my collegiate life: working with difficult classmates, reconciling arguments between friends, making amends with affronted teammates. It also extends, I believe, to a more abstract concept: the ability to converse with those whose opinions might differ from my own.

This strength is part of what drew me to BU. The university's College of Communication — of which I am currently a student — is ranked among the best in the country, heralded for its award-winning staff and deep connections to world-renowned newspapers, such as The Boston Globe. I longed for a school in which freedom and diversity of thought thrived, and in which my opinion was valued, both ideologies which BU's "Statement on Free Speech and Expression" seemed to champion.

And, in my time here so far, I've felt the reassuring presence of these statements in my classes. As a person who considers themself left-leaning on the political spectrum, the opinions that I've shared in scholarly debates have mostly been met with support, and certainly never with anger. I've never felt afraid to share my thoughts. Since I first stepped into a BU classroom, I've known that most of my peers are going to accept what I have to say.

But this is a privilege not felt by all BU students.

"[Other] students are free to make comments that castigate entire groups of people without even batting an eye," said Declan Donahue, president of BU's College Republicans organization, in an email. "But if I voice a mainstream conservative viewpoint, it becomes controversial."

Donahue, who described himself as someone who holds Republican values that do not align with "whatever left-wing media [has said] about right-wing Republicans," further elaborated on the limitations on speech that he and other members of his club feel as conservative students attending BU, a historically liberal institution.

"I've found that the way some graduate TAs grade assignments is stifling, as I've had comments on assignments before that are political in nature, and not related to the structure or fortitude of my argument," Donahue said. He added that "because of the culture at BU, many members choose not to talk about their membership in the club," and that "inhibits [their] ability to grow."

While I'm sure Mr. Donahue and I would not agree on most things regarding politics, it is concerning to me that any of my peers, regardless of their political standing, feel as if they are being silenced — even outside of the classroom. But it appears that this is a problem that extends beyond the limits of Commonwealth Avenue.

All across the United States, freedom of speech has become an increasingly contentious topic — one that has transitioned from tiffs over the integrity of deceitful social media accounts to the rewriting of classic children's literature. But despite the growing national presence of these threats, it seems that there is one place where the argument over freedom of expression has taken on an acute form: private liberal universities.

In March, Stuart Kyle Duncan, a conservative federal appeals court judge, was invited to speak to a class at Stanford Law School by the Federalist Society, a conservative organization with chapters in multiple universities across the country. Duncan, who has spent a large majority of his career fighting against marriage equality and LGBTQ+ rights, was verbally harassed by the students, who spoke over him to the point where he was unable to utter more than a few broken remarks without being drowned out by the angered shouting.

Rather than quieting the students — many of whom repeatedly shouted names at Duncan such as "scumbag" and "idiot," as he traded back insults — Tirien Steinbach, the associate dean for diversity, equity and inclusion at Stanford Law, stepped to the front of the room and questioned Duncan's motives for agreeing to speak to the class. Despite sending Stanford's free-speech policy to the students in an email blast prior to the meeting, Steinbach defended the student's actions, remarking that Duncan's

rulings had “caused harm.” While an apology was later issued to Duncan from the law school’s dean, Ducan’s speech was not rescheduled.

Similar events occurred at Yale Law School in 2022, in which a conservative speaker’s event — also organized by the Federalist Society — was interrupted and partially derailed by student protests. And in 2021, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology also faced a censorship debacle — a renowned geophysicist was uninvited from speaking at the university, after students and academics caused uproar over recent comments the speaker made concerning affirmative action.

The free-speech issue at these universities is complicated, a concern that presents itself as an argument over words when, in reality, it is a critical debate over protection. Often, the speech that these students are attempting to drown out is sensitive in quality, targeting marginalized groups of people and subject material that can dramatically affect a student’s learning experience. The actions of these students, then, can be best interpreted as attempts to defend their fellow peers from speech which they deem to be dangerous.

It is a question that is impossible not to ponder — if such censorship is done in the name of safety, even in the name of good, is it right to stop these students from drowning out the voices of their opponents? Is there any merit in letting such opponents speak?

Despite what the students at Stanford and Yale may believe, there is. And it goes back to a crucial aspect of law itself: the power of the argument.

As idyllic as universities often seem, with their ivy-covered stone walls and rolling quads full of youthful students, they are not representative of real-world environments — they are microcosms, subsets of individuals with mostly similar interests, in pursuit of similar aspirations. Rarely on campus are we faced with truly difficult ideas — ones that put our knowledge, and our ability to defend such knowledge, to the test.

If freedom of speech on college campuses deteriorates further, a crucial aspect of academic growth will be lost. There needs to be an outlet for students to strengthen this crucial muscle — to stand up for their beliefs, rather than fruitlessly attempt to drown out the voices of others.

“One of the core aims of education is to make you articulate when you encounter distressing ideas,” said Andrew Koppleman, John Paul Stevens professor of law and professor of political science at Northwestern University, in an email. “The only way you can develop that capacity is to actually encounter them.”

It seems that many students at liberal universities have overlooked this crucial point. Without the ability to argue — and to face controversy with facts, rather than with emotion — our education is effectively useless.

Keith E. Whittington, the William Nelson Cromwell professor of politics at Princeton University and founding chair of the academic committee of the Academic Freedom Alliance, elaborated further in an email about the importance of welcoming a wide-variety of opinions in higher education.

“One hopes that students learn on campus how to conduct themselves as citizens of a diverse community,” he said. “Disagreements should not be settled by who can yell the loudest or mobilize the most force.”

It’s an understandable fear that these students seem to hold, a desire to protect their friends and loved ones from what are — as exemplified by Duncan’s case — cruel and vicious modes of thought.

But little has been accomplished from the Stanford Law student’s yelling — Duncan will continue to believe what he believes, ruling in favor of his bigoted ideologies, unchallenged and unaffected by the articulate contradictions of another.

One cannot help but wonder — what would have happened if those students had argued instead?

This, I hope, is the goal of my fellow students, both at BU and across the country at other universities: not to overpower, but to learn. The beauty of an argument is that it is based in logic, not in voice — our education gives us the power to win over those whose opinions are based in bigotry rather than fact. All we have to do now is use what we have been given — and let the other party speak their piece.

I am looking forward to a time where I am sitting in class at BU, face-to-face with someone whose mind differs from mine, whose opinion is one I cannot fathom having. I want to hear what they have to say. I want to prove them wrong.