

from the desk of

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Chancellor Charles R. Bantz  
Indian University-Purdue University  
755 W. Michigan Street  
Indianapolis, IN 46202

Dear Chancellor Bantz:

It is with a very heavy heart that I write to you about the Keith John Sampson affair. There are times in life when moral courage and decency demands that one does the right thing. The Sampson affair is surely a case in point. I have asked myself over and over again what more decent thing could a white person be doing—short of giving blacks the shirt of his back—than reading a book (on his own time) about how whites from the University of Notre Dame played a pivotal role in successfully opposing the Indiana KKK at one point in history?

While there has been talk that it was Sampson's behavior—and not the book he was reading—that became a cause for concern, you need to understand that no reasonable person believes that. In order for that line of thought to have any credibility, Mr. Sampson would have to be a madman brandishing the book as if (for example) it were a knife.

You see, Chancellor Bantz, I am a black American who owns a copy of, and has read, Todd Tucker's book, *Notre Dame Versus the Klan: How the Fighting Irish Defeated the Klu Klux Klan*. I have always thought the book a wonderfully inspiring piece of writing. What would have happened had I been reading the Tucker's book during my free time while interviewing at IUPUI and this disturbed someone because it inclined the person to suppose that I simply had to be an "Uncle Tom", since the individual was unwilling to become properly informed as to what the book is actually about? Would your office have found away to excuse the person who had made that silly charge? I should like to think not. But I ask you: What reason would I have to believe that?

Now, of course, you will undoubtedly tell me that once I had explained to various people, especially blacks, what the book is in fact about that would have been the end of the matter. That, needless to say, is precisely how thing ought to transpire; and therein lies the problem with the fact that Sampson was officially reprimanded. The contents of Tucker's book do not change depending upon the ethnicity of who should happen to be reading it.

When it comes to being vigilant against racism, I stand with you. However, we must

be equally vigilant against frivolous charges of racism; for upholding such charges profoundly weakens the moral opprobrium that is meant to be definitive of the charge of racism. Your office has a moral duty to be vigilant in both directions.

What is particularly disturbing in the Sampson case is not merely that his civil liberties have been violated, which is bad enough, but that the very moral decency of what he was about at the time has been brazenly passed over in the name of protecting the hastily drawn and woefully inappropriate judgment on the part of Sampson's black colleague. Ultimately, no one benefits from a social environment—neither blacks nor whites or any other ethnic group or set of individuals—in which manifestly morally decent behavior engaged in by a white person can be countenanced as racism merely owing to a gross misunderstanding on the part of a black individual as to what the white person is doing.

I ask you, Chancellor Bantz, to reflect upon the ignominious pall that has been cast upon the IUPUI campus as a result of the fact that Keith Sampson's behavior has been officially reprimanded owing to considerations of racism. There is no respect in which either black students or black employees, including faculty, will be better off on account of this drama. Quite the contrary, I would suggest there has been enormous damage to goodwill. One rightly wonders why bother, when pristine decency can be so easily set aside.

Indeed, I maintain that we have nothing more than a Pyrrhic Victory in the ruling by the Affirmative Action Office of IUPUI in favor of Ms. Nakea Vincent. This is because few things are more insidious than having the manifestly good that we do be countenanced as evil. So it is whether the manifestly good behavior in question is on the part of an Arab or an Asian or a Black or a Jew or a White. What has happened to Keith Sampson is rather painfully analogous to a black person in a store being followed by a white salesperson because the salesperson is convinced that the black person, no matter how well the black is dressed and no matter how well the black carries herself or himself, will attempt to shoplift an item. Ms. Vincent would be ever so right to insist that it is wrong for the white salesperson to assume that she (Vincent) is a would-be-thief merely owing to the color of her skin. And what if, contrary to anything the white salesperson could possibly imagine, Ms. Vincent were buying clothes to help a fellow white employee who had lost all in a house fire? I need not tell you how much more Ms. Vincent's sense of outrage would be justified, given that the white salesperson could not fathom such magnanimity on the part of Nakea Vincent.

I recall the words of the man who exhorted us all to judge a person, not by the color of her or his skin, but the content of the individual's character; and the simple truth of the matter is that in order to do that it is sometimes necessary to move out of our *comfort zone*. This holds for all: those who have been a part of historically oppressive groups and those who have been a part of historically oppressed groups. From precisely this standpoint, it is offensive for there to be even the pretense that Keith Sampson's behavior was inappropriate.

You have been afforded a morally beautiful opportunity, Chancellor Bantz. Without

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accusing anyone of maliciousness, you can showcase the reality that moral excellence regarding race can express itself in the life of any human being, regardless of her or his ethnic identity and regardless of reasonable assumptions that might have been warranted in the past for people of that ethnic identity. This would be the right thing to do. This would be moral courage in action. Letting Keith Sampson be used as a scapegoat in the hopes of gaining favor with blacks is a chilling example of cowardice. For if he can be used as a scapegoat, then surely anyone—including a black—can be so used.

The issue is not whether racism continues to be a problem in America in various ways. Few doubt that it does. Still, we must not be blind to the progress that has taken place. And Keith Sampson's interest in how the Fighting Irish served to undermine KKK behavior in Indiana is a shining example of that reality. Significantly, I have evidence to this effect from a different direction. I maintain a blog, entitled [MoralHealth.Com](http://MoralHealth.Com), to which I posted an essay about the matter; and Sampson's response to someone whom I can only suppose is a racist was truly eloquent and judicious. Far from wallowing in any form of self-pity or from lashing out owing to bitterness, Sampson's response to that person unequivocally revealed that he is an individual who is capable of enormous moral insight and thoughtfulness—the kind of citizen who will make for a better tomorrow.

As I have already noted, there are civil liberty issues over which you seem prepared to run roughshod. What makes the Sampson affair so painfully disconcerting is that you seem more than willing to damage someone who is without question a morally decent person. Such behavior used to be the purview of racists and antisemites. I never thought that I would see the day when being vigilant against racism would be thought to justify using a manifestly innocent person as a scapegoat. In the case at hand, that person is white. However, there is no reason whatsoever not to suppose that in a new case the person will be Arabic or Asian or Jewish or, dare I say it, even Black.

On the IUPUI campus, the hope that whites will do their part to make for a better America was vividly illustrated in the person of Keith John Sampson; and the marvelous opportunity to affirm that salubrious moral reality has been handed to you.

Sincerely  
  
This is the signature of  
*LAURENCE THOMAS*  
13 May 2008

*Laurence Thomas*