

Youth Culture Lesson: Finding Teachable Moments in Culture From *YouthWorker Journal* and YouthWorker.com

Sticks and Stones: How Should We Deal with Criticism? Don't Ask Miley Cyrus.
by Paul Asay

What Happened:

Since her controversial performance at MTV's Music Video Awards, singer Miley Cyrus seemingly has taken over the entertainment world. Everyone seems to be talking about the former Hannah Montana, but the talk isn't always positive.

Cyrus' growing penchant for sexualized performances, hardly there wardrobe choices and promoting illicit substances like marijuana and MDMA (which she refers to as "happy drugs") has earned her supporters and detractors. Among the latter was Sinead O'Connor, who is no stranger to controversy herself.

O'Connor was one of the biggest stars of late 1980s and early '90s, but in 1992 her career hit a bump when she ripped up a pictures of Pope John Paul II during "Saturday Night Live." In 1999, she attempted suicide, and in 2003 was diagnosed with bipolar disorder—a revelation she made public four years later. In 2012, she had a very public meltdown on Twitter.

When Cyrus told *Rolling Stone* that her video for "Wrecking Ball" was based on a video O'Connor did in 1990, O'Connor wrote Miley an open letter, encouraging her to tone down her overtly sexual performances, arguing that she was being used.

"As for the shedding of the Hannah Montana image," O'Connor wrote, "whoever is telling you getting naked is the way to do that does absolutely NOT respect your talent, or you as a young lady. Your records are good enough for you not to need any shedding of Hannah Montana. She's waaaaaaay gone by now. Not because you got naked but because you make great records."

"Whether we like it or not, [we] females in the industry are role models and as such we have to be extremely careful what messages we send to other women. The message you keep sending is that it's somehow cool to be prostituted," O'Connor continues. "Women are to be valued for so much more than their sexuality. We aren't merely objects of desire. I would be encouraging you to send healthier messages to your peers."

In response, Cyrus tweeted "Before there was Amanda Bynes...There was..." then retweeted several of O'Connor's tweets during her frightening 2012 Twitter jag, including one that said, "I desperately need to get back on meds today. Am in serious danger." Cyrus also retweeted a picture of O'Connor tearing up the picture of the Pope.

The public feud escalated from there. "Miley...really?" O'Connor wrote in a second open letter (she's since written a third). She took Cyrus to task for mocking Bynes (an actress now receiving care for mental health issues), herself and others who have suffered mental

illness—and threatened legal action. “It is not acceptable to mock any person for having suffered,” O’Connor wrote. “It is most unbecoming of you to respond in such a fashion to someone who expressed care for you.”

Talk About It

Criticism can be hard to take—and to give. It’s hard to tell someone you care about when he or she is doing something you think is wrong. It also can be hard to know whether it’s your place to mention something. While O’Connor and Cyrus weren’t best friends, do you think O’Connor was right to write her first letter?

Have you ever had to chastise someone very close to you—a friend or a relative—for something in which he or she was engaged? What was it? Was it difficult to do? How did the person respond in the moment? Do you think your advice helped?

Has a friend ever gotten on *you* for something you were doing? In hindsight, was the person right? Was the conversation helpful? Did it hurt? Were you embarrassed? How did the conversation impact your friendship?

Cyrus didn’t gracefully accept O’Connor’s criticism. She didn’t ignore it, either. Instead, she lashed out—something we all might want to do when we’re criticized. Have you become angry when someone told you to correct something—even if the person was right? Has someone ever snapped back at you? If you were in either situation again, what would you do differently?

Sometimes, these little corrections can change relationships in big ways—for better or for worse. Have you had a situation such as this actually strengthen a friendship? Have you lost friends this way?

What the Bible Says

“The way of fools seems right to them, but the wise listen to advice” (Prov. 12:15).

“Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses” (Prov. 27:6).

“Listen to advice and accept discipline, and at the end you will be counted among the wise” (Prov. 19:20).

“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” (Eph. 4:29).

Paul Asay has covered religion for The Washington Post, Christianity Today, Beliefnet.com and The (Colorado Springs) Gazette. He writes about culture for Plugged In and wrote the Batman book [God on the Streets of Gotham](#) (Tyndale). He lives in Colorado Springs with wife Wendy and his two children. Follow him on Twitter @AsayPaul.