

I Dissent

I am the faculty member who posted a photo to Twitter while holding a skull. This photo was not different to many previous photos the university, college, and department used to promote anthropology. It is dishonest to portray this as an aberration of our departmental procedures.

Photography in anthropology has been a valuable tool to ignite curiosity, display human variation respectfully, and teach about the past fruitfully. As the Asian proverb states: Better to see something once than to hear about it a thousand times.

The statement includes the sentence: “All human remains should be treated with dignity and respect.” Skeletal remains – both human and nonhuman – should be treated with respect. Respect’s definition, from Merriam-Webster dictionary, is “a feeling of admiring someone or something that is good, valuable, important, etc.” There is no evidence that I have done otherwise; I continuously show respect and dignity for skeletal remains because I know how much can be learned from them.

Holding a skull and taking a photo is not about a lack of respect, but rather a demonstration that I hold these remains in high value, that I admire what we can learn from them, and that I know the serious science that can be deduced from their study.

I have no reason to apologize. I have done nothing wrong. I will continue to fight for science over sensitivity, religion, and superstition. And, I am happy to work with anyone who values truth and objectivity. And, thus, regarding this Statement on Handling Human Remains I choose to quote Ruth Bader Ginsburg, “I dissent”!

– Elizabeth Weiss, Professor of Anthropology