Commentary on "Speculation on the Nature of Religion"

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Olivia Cox’s “Speculating on the Nature of Religion” is an excellent example of a personal essay. Most first-year students are put to the difficult task of writing a personal essay, and it may be especially daunting when many high school English teachers demand that students never use “I” in their papers. Thus, writing about oneself can be hard, and to add to that, Olivia’s prompt asked her to explore the nature of religion, which is certainly not an easy task either. But Olivia, exhibiting an impressive vocabulary, does an excellent job tackling a very personal and complex subject. Her work is clearly written, well organized, full of useful examples, and most importantly, it brings up many thought-provoking ideas about the nature of religion. However, as Olivia explained to me, her polished and well-crafted essay did not appear from thin air; she actually visited the Writing Center twice before turning in her final draft. At the Writing Center, Olivia said she received advice on how to write a personal essay that also made an argument. Hannah, a Writing Center Consultant, helped her gather her thoughts and ideas into a cohesive thesis. Olivia expressed that she was very appreciative of the help she received, and her essay goes to prove that even skilled writers, as Olivia most definitely is, can benefit from an extra set of eyes.

As with any historical event, people construct a variety of conflicting narratives based on their different interpretations of the event. Some narratives may focus on the positive outcomes from an event while others may emphasize the sorrowful results. However, in constructing the collective memory of the past, the public emphasizes a particular storyline over another for such reasons as to maintain the continuity of the past, or in the case of a tragic event, reduce the horror behind a certain story. When the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City was bombed in 1995 by Timothy McVeigh, 168 people were killed, nineteen of whom were children from the Murrah day care center. Since the children were exposed to such destruction and violence, the public naturally became concerned with how to help the children comprehend such a tragedy. To explain why such attention was directed towards the children, Joan Menefee, Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Stout explains in her article “From the Mouths of Politicians: Representing Children in the Public Sphere” that children “are less equipped to deal with the uncertainty and anxiety associated with large-scale violence and destruction” (Menefee 105). In constructing the children’s memory of the bombing, adults emphasized how rescue and humanitarian efforts that occurred after the bombing helped the community recover and heal, and they thus downplayed the negative consequences of the bombing in favor of a “progressive” narrative of the event. By focusing on the positive story-line of the bombing for the children, adults began to incorporate this explanation into their lives and therefore felt a sense of hope for the future. In addition to the adults helping the children, the children’s words, as seen through their letters to volunteer workers, firefighters, and