

Editorial

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Words, works Religion more than rhetoric

Last week the Daily Nebraskan ran a series of articles that indicated UNL is experiencing growth in religious interest among students. Similar results have been reported nationwide: After decades of decline among youth, theologically conservative religious expressions are growing.

Too often the tendency exists to dismiss this trend as due to "mere" social trends. Some of the more obvious dismissals are that the increase in religious activity is due to the growing general conservatism among youth; that youthful idealism is



being expressed through piety rather than socially; that "youth needs something to believe in" and seeks out authority to give "easy" answers; and that the natural rebellion of youth against parents, ironically, now means rejecting parents' irreligion or religious disdain.

Yet it is much too presumptuous for the rest of us to describe these trends only in these categories. Few believers, for example, would say, "I voted for Reagan, so I became a fundamentalist." Rather, believers are more likely to explain it in terms of

divine activity. Such students at least have a right that their own interpretation religiousness at least be partly acknowledged.

Certainly religion is one institution among many, and religious trends may be partly explained in terms of grand social trends, but it is the height of presumption and bigotry to ascribe all these students' experiences to naturalistic causes.

Nonetheless, even a more open approach in allowing for the possibility of divine activity does not lead to uncritical acceptance of students' claims. For example, while studies show religious profession to be increasing, those same studies show a disconcerting lack of religious depth in the lifestyles that devotees adopt. Polls indicate that as far as daily activities go (including activities many widespread religions teach as immoral) professed believers differs little from non-believers.

The faith of those who act as though they believe what they say they believe is easy to observe, and is many times quite respected: for instance, Mother Teresa. But one has a legitimate right to doubt those who say they believe but have no works to back their profession up.

It's too early to tell whether the current religious renewal is just a minor blip on a long-term path of decline or if it's the beginning of a significant turnabout from the secularism of modern America. Ask again in a decade or so.

Prairie beauty better before...

Backyard affluence brings 'Chemlawn,' transistor future

Animals surrounded us once, and we killed them. Giant flocks of passenger pigeons covered the fields and stripped away the grains. But all that is past now, and the passenger pigeon is, too.

Forests once surrounded us, real forests, and we destroyed them. There is no sign of them left now. The wood of the 19th century is ashes and fungus today — at the end of our century. And the rows of yield-bred clones the forestry corporations put in the forests place are a wasteland of life in comparison. Rows of pine trees are not a forest. Neither are rotting timbers and fallen barns teeming with termites. But most of the old forest, the real forest is gone.

Any evil has its benefits. But at what point does it become a good? Space cleared to line in and space cleared to grow crops made this nation the agricultural giant it is today. The present farm crisis, whatever its causes and its course, should remove from danger some of the remaining slivers of wild land that were missed the first time around. But as it is, in many areas there remains only the roadsides and rail right-of-ways for wildlife to live in. Eminent domain for the trains has given the only world there is to millions of animals.

Biologists look at a wilderness community the way we might observe a mind. The more diverse, balanced and stable it is, the more healthy it is. We've caused madness in our wilderness communities, and much of the past's harm is out of reach. Yet the time-honored principles of nation, corporation and wallet have survived our discovery of where they lead. We need to love the land, not its flag. And we need to be concerned with the exact damage done to our wilderness communities, and not how it looks from the road. It's easy to ignore the effects of acid rain on a lake; it stays just as blue

and sparkles just as clearly. But beneath the surface its life is dying or dead. Fish lie on the bottom, turning black with decay.

Our attitude towards the ecological leftovers of our fathers still remains concerned with symptoms and not remedies. We are not trying to rebuild the unique environments that were lost in even a thousandth of their number. The practical goal of biology should be the restoration of communities. But identifying what the damage to the old communities has been, and how to reverse it, is not a task the public recognizes. The approach of many ecologists today seems to be one of trying to maintain the state of things.

Lee
Basham



In the Dakota marshes and pothole lake lands, farmers are draining thousands of tiny lakes that dot the northern prairie to increase their wheat production. The ecological push is to have them stop this. There is no political demand that the farmers are responsible for restoring this habitat for migrating birds. As the lakes are emptied, the birds return to die on the open plains. A year's good hatching means their young will arrive only to find dry lands. As things now stand, it's no one's responsibility.

Once the present generation passes, it is hoped that restoration will become a political reality. But we see in many instances the older attitudes being recultivated under the guise of economic pride and the call for American world economic dominance. The need for restoration now is great, but if it is

delayed beyond the next generation — our generation — it will become increasingly impossible.

Man's phenomenal expansion doesn't represent a new community, it represents an impoverished environment of humans, livestock and human parasites. Man has done much for his diseases, his cockroaches and rats by conquering the world. But as individuals it's not always clear that we have done much for ourselves.

Another summer returns to Nebraska, and the tall grass prairie isn't coming up through the sod. The gold finches are not teeming in the thickets. The cattle are there, moving through the muck of their feedlots, but the prairie is gone. We could restore it in many places, but there is a world of humans to feed, and little sympathy is felt for what we can't see dying in the streets of Calcutta on the nightly news.

There's even less hope for children's concern. God help our children.

Nature will be something their talking teddy bear tells them about, and only things with grand names and thrilling description will reach their transistor-obscured minds. And the advent of "chemlawns" sterilized even the backyards of our affluent lives — our children need never fear again the sight of a dandelion, the nuisance of the crickets chirping at night, or even the confusion of being told the caterpillar they found will become a butterfly.

If we were bold enough, we could turn even local park land into prairie. We could do it for our children; we could do it as an example of what many of us have discovered: It was better before. But I fear our lives and ambition have shrunk with the prairie, and we will pass the task to a future which has no idea what we mean or what they've lost.

Basham is a senior political science major.

Medical technology moves faster than potential victims might want

A friend of mine, prone to misplacing her keys and the names of colleagues, marks this weakness with some offhand remark about it being "a symptom of early Alzheimer's." She says this lightly, mind you, but she says it frequently. It isn't hard to hear in her words the accent of anxiety.

The woman has, in fact, seen this disease rob others in her circle of their memory, and then their ability to reason, and then their lives. If each of us focuses on some future dread, hers comes with a name.

Ellen
Goodman



Not surprisingly, it was this friend who pointed out the article. A biochemist, Miriam Schweber, has announced a new blood test that may diagnose Alzheimer's in its early stages, that may indeed be used in the future to identify healthy people who are at risk. Would you, she asks me, want to know? Would you want to see, clearly, the handwriting on the wall?

I don't answer her right away. It occurs to me that I have thought a great deal more about the right to know than about the desire to know.

Twenty years ago, doctors and families often conspired to keep the truth about terminal diseases from patients. Even today, in the glasnost Soviet Union, doctors regard openness about cancer prognoses as cruel. Yet it has always seemed clear to me that adults should know if they are sick, should have the name for their "long illness."

But what about people who are healthy now? What if we can make a prediction for a disease that will strike, not today, but in five or 15 or 25 years?

What if there is no cure for that disease? Would I want to know?

These are not arcane questions today, when medical futures are not seen through crystal balls but through microscopes. If a test for Alzheimer's is in the future, a test for Huntington's disease is available now and so, of course, is a test for AIDS. There are already thousands, perhaps millions, of people trying to decide whether and what they want to know.

Those who test positive for HIV infection many not get symptoms of AIDS for three or five or eight years or, perhaps, ever. It is my impression that people at low risk may express enormous desire — even an urgent need — to be tested while many at high risk express equally enormous reluctance.

The gay neighbor of a prominent California public-health official checks himself daily for symptoms, but rejects entreaties that he be tested for infection. "I couldn't stand it," he has said. A well-known doctor who had a number of transfusions after his own surgery a few years ago tells me that he, too, has consciously decided not to be tested.

Playwright Larry Kramer speaks for many when he says, "... I don't want a sword of Damocles hanging over my head if I test positive." Yet others clearly want the verdict, even the worst, in order to plan. Some may choose the bleakest form of control (8 percent of those with Huntington's commit suicide), but they choose to know.

I do not mean to lump these diseases or decisions together. AIDS is clearly a special case. It is infectious (the men I mentioned take pains to say they are not endangering others), and there is some treatment, if not cure. Furthermore, society has motives for knowing about AIDS infection that go beyond those of the individual. There are different but real consequences for knowing a bleak medical future, in terms of

employment, insurance, social ostracism.

But each of these tests may offer healthy people the same science-fiction possibility: the morbid ability to see into the future. Increasingly, scientific tools modify the unknown with statistics of chilling likelihoods. It may be possible to predict, not the day and street corner, but the likely end. And to decide whether we want a present shadowed by a future.

"Would you want to know?" my friend asked. I confess a prejudice toward information. I don't want to shut my eyes during the scary parts. But what a curious sort of knowledge this is. I can't think of it as an unmitigated blessing. In the most graphic and immediate way, it brings up all the questions about fate and free will, how to live with certainty and uncertainty.

There is an ironic thought written by playwright Tom Stoppard: "Life is a gamble at terrible odds. If it was a bet, you wouldn't take it." Now scientists are composing a tip sheet. I wonder how we will take that.

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Goodman is a Pulitzer prize-winning columnist for the Boston Globe.

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Unsigned editorials represent official policy of the fall 1987 Daily Nebraskan. Policy is set by the Daily Nebraskan Editorial Board. Its members are Jeff Korbelik, editor; James Rogers, editorial page editor; Lise Olsen, associate news editor; Mike Reilly, night news editor and Joan Rezac, copy desk chief.

The Daily Nebraskan's publishers are the regents, who established the UNL Publications Board to supervise the daily production of the paper.

Letters

Doctorate not grounds for promotion

The lead article in the Daily Nebraskan, April 15, quotes Connie Neal as saying that "another possibly discriminatory case was against a woman in the English department who was denied full professorship even though she held a doctorate."

Whether Neal made such an absurd statement or the DN garbled what she actually said is not clear. In any case, I would expect a good reporter to check facts before purveying them. The doctorate is not grounds for promotion; we don't hire anyone at the beginning level without the Ph.D. or equivalent. The faculty member mentioned was

indeed denied promotion, but not on those grounds.

Lest DN readers be misled by Neal's allegation, I remind you that the permanent staff in English includes 11 women; by next fall, we expect five of them to be full professors, three of them associate professors and four of them assistant professors. There is no salary differential between men and women professors in this department, given similar rank, years in rank and overall performance.

Frederick M. Link
professor and chairman
English

'Party house' no fun for the neighbors

As a citizen of Lincoln, I take extreme offense at Geoff McMurry's feature in the April 16 Diversions. I wish McMurry would explain to his readers why it is necessary for supposedly mature college students to act like morons in order for a party to be considered a "success."

Nowhere in his story does he remind these post-pubescent alcoholics that "party houses" are invariably located in residential neighborhoods inhabited by people who work for a living and are trying to teach their children to be responsible citizens.

Alas, I live next door to a "party house." I take exception to seeing alleged adult males urinating on (not near — ON) my car in my driveway. I take exception to the broken beer bottles on the sidewalk where my children play. I take exception to the constant

litter of plastic beer cups in my yard. Most of all, I take exception to the total disregard of my right to the peaceful enjoyment of my property.

I will give McMurry the benefit of the doubt and assume his article was written tongue in cheek; however, I have doubts that the intelligence of my next-door neighbors is sufficient to grasp that notion.

Joanne M. Voelker
Lincoln

Letter Policy

Letters will be selected for publication on the basis of clarity, originality, timeliness and space available. The Daily Nebraskan retains the right to edit all material submitted.

Anonymous submissions will not be considered for publication.