

ANDY FREDERICK

Society becoming too intolerant

Is it tense in here, or is it just me? I've been asking myself that question a lot lately. Everywhere I turn, people are overreacting to the most trivial of matters.

Take Gang Lu, for instance. Lu, a student at the University of Iowa, was upset that another student had won some silly little academic honor. So he shot and killed three faculty members and the student who had been nominated for the honor. He also shot an administrator, who died later, and a staff member. And then, as all good madmen do, Lu shot and killed himself.

I'd call that a trifle extreme. Is an academic honor worth the deaths of six people? Death is serious, mass murder even more so, but to kill over something as trivial as an academic honor is absolutely ludicrous. It is, to say the least, an overreaction.

But, of course, a shooting spree such as Lu's is hardly a rarity. Many people have been shot down by people who have suffered the traumatic, devastating, life-ending blow of being fired. But really, is anyone's job so important that a dozen or so people deserve to die when it is lost? I don't think so.

And we kill ourselves for other trivial reasons as well. People kill each other over sports, rock concerts and movies. And, of course, sex and money have always been "good" reasons to kill.

If tension were only causing a few people to go nuts and kill people, then there wouldn't be much point in talking about it. Murderous lunatics are not really the type to pick up a copy of the Daily Nebraskan, read my column and come to the realization that a husband's snoring is not enough of a reason to sentence him to death.

But trigger-happy psychopaths are not the only evidence of our society's increasing tension. Everywhere, people are taking bites out of each other over the most trivial of personal "violations."

For examples of deviant social behavior, I always like to turn to Ann Landers. Lately, many of her readers have been having conniptions about the silliest things.

One reader told Ann that she had had enough of people asking what her nationality was. She wanted Ann to tell her something rude that she could shoot back at those who dared to show any interest in her. Apparently it was far too difficult for the woman



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to simply open her mouth and say "Chinese." But do people deserve to be rebuked for simply being curious?

Another of Ann's readers was furious that people kept asking her whether her two adopted children were brother and sister. "Yes" would obviously be too much of a strain on the vocal cords. And "They weren't, but they are now" wouldn't even be close to being rude enough. Again, a case of simple curiosity that someone refused to tolerate.

It's getting so that no one can say anything to anyone anymore because everyone is so tense. Everyone has a little list of things that really tick them off and cause them to foam at the mouth. The problem is that people keep the lists to themselves but expect everyone they come into contact with to read their minds and know what they should and shouldn't talk about.

As if I didn't have enough problems making small talk already. Are there any safe topics left? I don't think so.

A recent news article reported that many students at the University of California at Berkeley are afraid to open their mouths for fear of being labeled. Sounds familiar.

A couple weeks ago a group of people at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln protested Clarence Thomas' appointment to the Supreme Court. A man who watched the rally had the gall to scream the vile phrase, "inno-

cent until proven guilty." Such fair-minded thought was obviously too much for one woman to handle, for she shouted back, "You're a sexist, just like Thomas."

Tension. It's everywhere, and it's making it harder and harder for people to deal with each other. But what's causing it?

I have no idea. All I know is that it exists. People have less patience with each other than ever before. People refuse to tolerate inconvenience or discomfort. Therefore, we must all be on guard against those who will snap at the drop of a hat. If we do or say the "wrong" thing, no matter how innocent, eventually we'll encounter someone so tense that we will wish we had stayed in bed that day.

Teachers and administrators, be careful about choosing who will receive those awards, honors and scholarships. Choose the wrong person, and you'll be gunned down by a disgruntled student.

Likewise, employers are forced to be extremely careful about firing certain employees if they don't want the blood of a couple dozen innocent people on their hands.

And the rest of us are forced to be extremely careful about what we say. Does anyone want to be labeled a sexist for upholding the rights of all Americans? Does anyone want to be chewed out for saying the wrong things or asking the wrong questions?

Fear is slowly eating away at our freedoms. Where there once was kindness, there is now anger. Where there was patience, there is impatience. Where there was calmness, there is tension. So people would rather give up their right to speak and behave normally than to suffer the slings and arrows — and possibly bullets — of the irrational irritations of others.

I see only two solutions. The first is for everyone to look out for themselves. If someone crosses you, rip their head off. And to avoid having the same done to you, let your fear be your guide. If you don't know what will set a person off, keep your mouth shut. Better safe than sorry.

The other solution is for everyone to put others first. With 5 billion people looking out for the best interests of every individual, wouldn't this be a nice world to live in?

But get real. That will never happen.

Frederick is a senior news-editorial journalism major and a Daily Nebraskan photographer and columnist.

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