

## Nobody is in their right mind

Ever wonder what is wrong with people? Do you read the paper or watch the news and say, "What?"

Sometimes I consider the likely possibility that I am the only person on this crustal plate who isn't loony, or at the very least practicing the art of looniness.

For example, why is it that virtually every union in the United States finds it necessary to go on strike? (Actually, why are they even necessary at all anymore? Their purpose has been served.) This transcends the silliness of the current baseball strike, the former hockey strike and any other professional athletic organization's refusal to play a game. I repeat: A GAME!

Honestly, who cares? Baseball players can stay on strike permanently and I would still go see a game. But the auto workers union is always complaining about something. About seven months ago it was concerned with too many hours.

What? There are thousands of unemployed folks out there who would love a shot at working 50 hours a week. I did it for three years before coming back to school full time; it can be done quite easily.

Maybe they're concerned with auto workers freaking out like the postal workers have been. Yet another letter carrier has been found hiding mail in his house, this time in Velda City, Mo. He allegedly kept more than 13,000 pieces dating back two years in his basement.

What? Well, that can't be true, because an ex-Ford Motor Co. worker's trial began early last week on charges that he killed two union co-workers and attempted to kill two more.



**Michael Justice**

Oliver French allegedly lost his cool last Sept. 10, and now he faces losing his life.

To be fair, these factions have been taking a lot of heat lately, and to make examples of them is not accurate. After all, real people aren't screwed up like that, are they?

Well, there's Dr. Richard Hammond, who used sodium cyanide to commit suicide in a Denver motel room, according to police. He was probably a good doctor, with the possible exception of his hobby that involved videotaping houseguests in a bathroom at his home.

What? Charges were filed against him for this, but it never made it to court. It makes you curious about those examination rooms, doesn't it?

That's not a good barometer of the nation, though, because Denver is a large city and things like that don't happen anywhere else, right? Well, that's not true.

In Dover, Del., (yes, Delaware is still a state, not a county) Le-Vaughn Walker, 16, was arrested in connection with the stabbing death of Nicole Mosley, 17. He told police that Mosley had threatened to sic her dog on him and he accidentally stabbed her while trying to stab the dog. He

said he felt he had to "finish her off" because she would tell.

What? Why was he around this woman, why did he have a weapon, and most importantly, how dumb is this guy? Anyway, he faces murder charges. Surely, there must be some sane individuals left. Of course! Your friendly neighbor is always trustworthy. He lives next door and would never lose HIS mind, would he?

Well, uh, that's not really true either. Eric Nenno, 34, of Hockley, Texas, went off the deep gorge of lunacy when he, according to an admission to police, murdered a neighbor's child. Nicole Benton's body was found in Nenno's attic, ending a community-wide search. She was seven.

What? OK, I've got it. No crime or violence takes place where there is law and police in abundance, correct? No.

Three women and an unborn baby were killed March 2 in a shooting at King County Courthouse in Washington. There was minimal security, because who in their right mind would bring a gun to a courthouse?

But that's the thing. Nobody is in their right mind. Except me, of course. But to those of you traveling in another dimension, the one with all the nuts, you'll probably think I'm the one a few cards short of a deck when you see me walking around with my head in my hands and talking to myself.

Justice is a junior broadcasting and news-editorial major and a Daily Nebraskan columnist.

## Medical mistakes hurt public's trust

How do you react to a medical horror story? What is the proper etiquette of emotions that rush up from your gut to greet such a tale?

Just two weeks ago, when a Tampa surgeon cut off the wrong foot of his patient, I read the news with equal parts of bleak terror and black humor. After all, what do you say? That you want a surgeon who knows his right from his left. That you will wear one sock into the operating room.

Days later, a small item in the paper told about a Michigan woman who had the wrong breast removed. What do you say to that? That if you ever go to the hospital, you will cover your body with instructions: X marks the right spot.

These are stories that elicit anger as deep as our own vulnerability. Yet even anger wars with the truths wrapped inside cliches: accidents happen, no one is perfect, the "human factor" includes a capacity for the most terrible of mistakes.

But this time, it's happened to one of us, to Betsy Lehman of all people. A friend, a colleague at The Boston Globe, a 39-year-old mother of two small daughters who had reached for the promise of a breast cancer cure in bone-marrow transplant, writing, "I'm resigned to the idea of going through hell for the hope of a chance." A chance she didn't get.

I can't reduce Betsy to a paragraph. She had warmth and smarts, a fine-honed skepticism and a delicious, playful sense of humor. She had as generous a spirit as I've known.

I've been to dozens of funerals and by now I know the ones you don't want to go to. The ones where parents bury their children. The ones where young children sit, bewildered and restless, without a mother to comfort them for the loss of their mother.

If, as the Talmud says, each person is an entire world, Betsy's death last December left a hole the size of a crater. But we chalked up this loss to bad odds, to high risks, to gawd-awful rotten luck.

Then we learned last week that it wasn't the roll of the dice. Betsy Lehman was given a fatal overdose of the anti-cancer medication. She was given four times the right dosage. She was given it for four days in a row.

At best, a bone-marrow transplant is a crude attempt to bludgeon the cancer cells to death and save the patient. But the overdose killed Betsy and left another woman with a devastated heart, and went undetected by



**Ellen Goodman**

whole layers of doctors, nurses, pharmacists. They missed the warning signs, the lab tests, the electrocardiogram.

What are we to say? Accidents happen?

To those of us who count ourselves her friends, this second mourning is compounded by anger. For those who didn't know Betsy, it should be compounded by fear.

There are times, when you are sick and scared, that you try to add up the things in your favor. Betsy was our personal health columnist. She had researched and written about cancer treatments, including her own. She had written about doctors, the good and the bad, the humane and the arrogant. She knew how and

Moreover, Betsy was a patient at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, a cutting-edge cancer hospital that gives Boston pride in its best. Add to that Betsy's husband was a scientist who worked at this hospital.

Yet it happened to her; she was still killed by carelessness. By the human errors that add up to a system's error. By a hospital whose own self-confidence may have been a fatal flaw. By an institution that never installed the computer program that might have flagged this mistake.

Accidents happen? No one is perfect?

I haven't a doubt that the people who mishandled her case, her life, are in their own pain. In journalism, Betsy's profession and mine, the worst errors we make can destroy a reputation. In medicine they destroy people. It's the stakes that differ, not the fallibility.

If this had happened to anyone else, Betsy would have been mad as hell. Mad, without forgetting that no system is really mistake-proof, no hospital human-error-proof. Mad anyway.

So what do you say? In December, when Betsy died without a trace of cancer left in her body, the world lost her generosity. In March we lost something else in short supply. A huge portion of trust.

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## Injury shows value of health

When I was about 12, my friend Carol's father died right after jogging one evening. The first question people asked said was "How could that be? He was so fit."

He wasn't even 50 years old. That's when I learned that being physically fit isn't a guarantee. We expected that being in shape would somehow make a person immortal.

That was also during a time when people were just beginning to talk openly about cancer. It was called the big C back then. No one wanted to say the word. I suppose the thought of something that powerful causes a kind of denial. The things that can take or interrupt a normal life are scary, and no one wants to talk about them.

Most people thought cancer was mostly incurable, anyway, so what was there to talk about? It wasn't until about 25 years later that I learned differently. A member of my own family had some malignant tumors removed and has recovered fully. On the other hand, my oldest brother Ronald had an incurable stomach cancer last year and died.

My friend Carol's father didn't have cancer. Nobody knew what he had, if anything. He just plopped over and died. He ran all the time. He was so alive. So lean. So fit.

Nowadays people talk about cancer like the weather. We know that cancer and many other illnesses can be beaten. A woman can be treated for breast cancer and go on to live a long and productive life. Many, however, die from it. Ovarian cancer is another killer of women, but it too can be beaten. Men can die from prostate cancer, which can be treated and beaten as well.

A perfectly healthy person can become incapable of living normally because of many things. Cancer is only one of them. Anyone, at any time, anywhere, can have something



**E. Hughes Shanks**

happen to them. There are no guarantees. I recently had a prostate scare. I call it a scare because the prostate is known to be associated with problems for many men who never get well.

Like cancer 25 years ago, it isn't something you talk about at dinner. In fact, it isn't spoken of very openly now. But everyone knows that prostate trouble could spell major illness for males. Luckily, that appears not to be the case for me. However, it's one hell of a wake-up call. One day I'm doing a three-hour run or a two-mile swim. The next day I'm face down on an examination table wondering if I'll see 40.

At about the same time I was having my scare, my niece, Mandy, sprained her ankle and ended up having to do everything on crutches. In an odd way, I identified with her. I imagined she was probably just going about her normal routine one day and CRUNCH! Crutches. No real explanation. Just a freak accident. A sudden change of life.

And that is exactly what happened. No warning. Just crutches. She was rushing around to get to her confirmation, landed too hard on her ankle and that was it. I asked her if she made to her confirmation. She said yes. During the ceremony Mandy said, "I just hobbled up to the bishop. He said I didn't have to go all the way down on my knees, but I did anyway."

One minute she's Mandy the supergirl grade-schooler and overachiever. The next minute she has only one good leg and is in

constant pain. Curbs became retaining walls. Steps take forever. "I can't find a comfortable position," she said.

Now she can't carry her own things and has to be helped with the simplest of things. Her younger brother Cody and sister Krista have to help her out at home. Mandy told me her younger brother had been impatient with her and had complained, saying, "Why do I have to do it? She says that she's not helpless."

"Now when I get to a curb (that doesn't have curb cuts or wheelchair ramps) I have to get right up close to it, set my crutches up and swing my legs over it. Before, I'd just run." Mandy said. "My friends Kristal and Ashley take turns getting me on the bus to school."

Mandy not only needs help with just about everything, but the crutches, which are supposed to help, can add to her misery. Her underarms are sore from the tape that wraps around the towels which are supposed to make things softer. "It rubs through my shirt and makes my skin sore and really, really dry. And it hurts," she said.

Her good ankle is sore now too, because it does all the work. Her neck gets stiff from looking down all the time and her lower back aches from always bending. "My crutches are a little short. I have to slouch. I have to crouch. It makes my back really, really sore."

Mandy said that the best time of the day was "when I get to lie down in bed and do nothing. It feels like your leg is going to be handicapped forever." When she's off the crutches for good, she said she's going to "jump for joy and run around my room."

I guess you don't miss some things until they're taken away from you. Even small things like fitness or a short walk across the carpet.

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**Mike Luckovich**