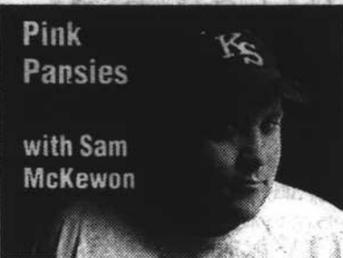


Hell hath no fury

Idea that heaven must be earned is unfortunate



Pink Pansies

with Sam McKewon

Thousands of people got damned straight to hell last week on the UNL campus.

I know not the damners' names, but I know their faces, and I know what they say. I walked by them more than a few times last week outside the Nebraska Union and promptly got damned, straight to hell, after refusing to take a pamphlet from a 5-year-old girl.

(Ever wonder why it's straight to hell? I wonder if there's a circuitous route, sorta like the trip Dante took through the Inferno. If there is, I'd prefer it.)

Anyway, I've been here long enough to know those people will say what they say, probably over-exaggerate for effect, argue with those they damn and ignore those who try to appeal to their more civil side. But while most Christians condemn those who stand in judgment of others, they're not really any different.

Because all most Christians focus on, to get right to it, is hell.

What a concept hell is. I don't believe it exists, personally. It's not that I don't believe in pain and suffering. I do.

I just think hell was mankind's creation, made by and for the spiritually insecure who felt they needed fear to keep them on the straight and narrow. I say, God will save us no

matter what.

Nevertheless, hell has made its way into the vernacular of today's society. It's our favorite curse word. It fits well as a noun (just plain "hell"), an adjective ("hellish") and an adverb ("hellishly"). Once, at a church retreat I got scammed into by a friend, I heard it used as a verb.

"You do not want to be helled," the youth leader said.

Cartoons have been named after hell. A neighborhood in New York has been named after it. An AC/DC song has, too.

Not that heaven hasn't been (I am reminded most specifically of that Belinda Carlisle tune about heaven being a place on earth). But, certainly, human nature finds it much more appealing to talk about how bad hell is as opposed to the greatness of heaven.

Hell has always been so damn exclusive. No one dares describe it.

"I couldn't possibly do it," one religious friend said to me this week-end when I asked. "It is beyond anything I can imagine in my mind."

Happiness is inconceivable. Even when people get to heaven, I still think they try not to like *too much*, lest they be thrown out.

Hell is different. Everybody's got an opinion there. I've seen spiritual videos where it was a dark prison. In others, a fiery pit of demons and ghouls. In that movie "Ghost," it was a bunch of nasty black shadows that went "UNHHHH!" all the time.

Spiritual folks, (not all of them, but some of them) punish themselves with hell. Don't stray, or you'll go to hell. And they banish others to hell as if it were in their power to do so.

My question is why. If heaven is so glorious, would it not be better to preach the greatness of it? Why

focus on not-so-sweet damnation? Why are so many of our spiritual leaders trying to scare nonbelievers into seeing God's word?

So much of it has to do with the human failure to communicate. People, in general, don't respond well to threats.

People respond to kindness. I like the Gideons on campus the most, because they understand that. They just pass out a miniature version of the good book and move on. The Mormons, too. Plus, they're snazzy dressers.

Of course, they have a little more money than Crazy Joe Preacher who wants, more than anything, to spread the damnation.

Hell has become so ingrained in our minds, I'm pretty sure that everyone who believes in God also believes that most of the world will end up in hell.

But what if everybody got into heaven regardless? How would that make the super-religious feel? I wonder if that would piss them off. I think it would.

"They haven't put in all the work I have," they'd think.

"They don't go to church. They don't bake cookies. They don't picket against abortion. They don't love the death penalty like I do.

"They don't have a porcelain baby Jesus in their hutch, which they take out and stroke softly at least once a week. They don't have a Jesus fish on their car. They don't have sex using the rhythm method. They aren't me."

Since I don't believe there is a hell (and therefore, will be

damned to it by some who read this column), I'm banking on everybody getting a free pass. My alternative is much easier and simpler than the myriad rules that every other religion goes through.

The mantra is simple: You're going to heaven anyway, so why not love God? There's nothing to lose. And I think if it were pitched that way, no strings attached, people would buy it.

But so many Christians can't do that. The brutishness of humanity, not religion, has taught us there's always a catch. Even with our God. If we don't play by his rules, we're screwed. I am screwed, for example, for my failure to capitalize "his" in the above sentence.

Still, I think some people,

because they're so miserable and selfish, would be lost without that approach. Obviously, they'd say, not everybody deserves to go to heaven.

What a sad way to look at heaven — that it must be earned. And if it is earned, some will say, you're going to hell.

These people, I believe, have not learned the grace of God. Or they learned it and have forgotten about it in the wake of chapters, verses, sermons, pulpits, demagogues, celebrations and church retreats.

Since my exposure to all these things is limited, I can look at a tree ('cause heaven's not just a place for humans) and know it will go to heaven someday and feel pretty good about it.

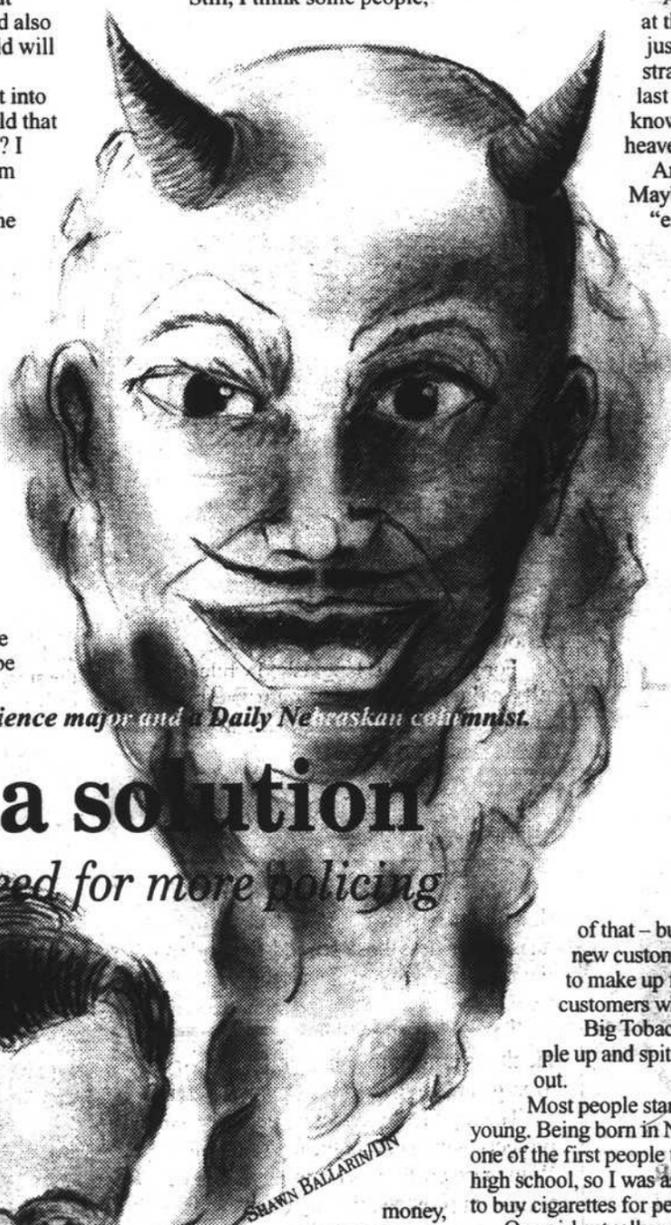
And I can look at the guy who just damned me straight to hell last week and know he's going to heaven, too.

Am I naïve? Maybe. I prefer "enlightened."

But I'm not going to hell for it. Even if you say so.

Maybe you need a God to fear.

Me? I have a God to love.



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Searching for a solution

Big Tobacco's legacy leaves need for more policing



When I walked out after Michael Mann's latest film, "The Insider," I felt a detest for Big Tobacco that I've never felt quite so strongly before.

It wasn't as though these were new feelings — my father smokes, and I think I've hated the smell ever since I was a kid — but they had never been really this intense before.

For the first hour after I left the theater, I hated Big Tobacco. I felt the 1998 settlement wasn't enough. Not only should it pay, it ought to keep paying.

Maybe we should even ban cigarettes.

It was a tough internal moment for me, coming to terms with the fact that I, who has always advocated personal freedom, actually wanted to deny someone something.

Damn, Mann's good.

I suppose I'd always known most of the facts behind the story — Big Tobacco knew that nicotine was addictive and covered it up. I suspect the point that really drove it home, though — not only had Big Tobacco known, it tampered with the recipe to make it more addictive.

Big Tobacco was actually breeding a culture of junkies, and it was getting away with it.

There's a moment early on in the

film, which is set in 1993, that epitomized the whole thing. One of the producers for "60 Minutes" says "Toyota, they recall a whole line of trucks after 10 or 12 deaths; hundreds of thousands every year, and Big Tobacco has never, ever lost a lawsuit."

So herein lies the question — what do we do about it?

Our hands are tied by millions of people who can't mentally, physically or psychologically afford to give up their oral nicotine fix. Dozens of reports have claimed that nicotine is even more addictive than cocaine.

People would be up in arms if the government decided to ban cigarettes. It would be Prohibition all over again. Organized crime would spring up all over the place, and ordinary citizens would

once again casually break the law. And that

doesn't sound any better than where we're at now.

I thought for a while that we might establish a cut-off age. Say some year in the future, we'll pick 2002 for sake of example, is the last year 18-year-olds are allowed to buy cigarettes.

People who were 18 before 2002 would still be allowed to buy cigarettes until the day they died. This would give the big shots in Big Tobacco a chance to go and find another career without stepping on anyone's rights, because the younger people wouldn't know what they were missing.



Would it work? I don't know. It was something I thought about for a while, tossing the idea back and forth inside my brain, hoping that it might suddenly click and that I'd have the answer.

When the lawsuit was announced last year, it was all anyone could talk about for months. Was it too much? Should Tobacco have to pay anything at all? Aren't the Surgeon General's warnings enough? Doesn't it matter that they aren't allowed to advertise on television anymore?

No, it still wasn't enough. The

money, the warnings, the lack of television advertising — it all doesn't make up for the millions killed, the millions deceived and used.

The Surgeon General's warnings were a start, but a weak one at best. They're wishy-washy and often too soft to have real impact. I've seen warnings that talk about causing low-birth weights or being "hazardous to your health."

Let's put an accurate warning on cigarettes that reads something like this:

Surgeon General's Warning: Smoking can

KILL YOU.

Maybe we should go one step further on the advertising ban — ban tobacco advertising altogether. It surely won't hurt sales that much — Big Tobacco has a nation of addicted smokeheads who will do almost anything to avoid giving up their fixes. Taking away the advertising will only cut down on the number of new customers it gets.

See, that's the heart of the smoking problem. Big Tobacco doesn't have any trouble keeping the customers it already has — addiction will take care

of that — but it needs to get new customers all the time, to make up for all the old customers who die off.

Big Tobacco chews people up and spits them back out.

Most people start smoking young. Being born in November, I was one of the first people to turn 18 in my high school, so I was asked all the time to buy cigarettes for people.

One girl actually whined and followed me around for nearly two hours before she finally gave up and tried to "bum a smoke" from someone else.

I saw desperation in her eyes like I'd never seen before. She wasn't behind them, her addiction was. If she didn't get her fix, she was going to go crazy, she told me. Her hands were shaking, and she was pacing about like crazy.

She was 17.

It's something we've got to deal with soon, because despite everything we've done against Big Tobacco, it shows no sign of quitting, and that means the death toll will continue to rise.

I'm not asking you to give up your cigarettes — it's already been proven medically that most of you don't have the willpower to quit — but we need to find some way to beat this problem.

Maybe establishing a cut-off year is the answer, maybe not. I don't claim to have all the answers; I just know we can't stop looking for one.

Communiqués to the rebel in the field should be sent to journalisticwarfare@hotmail.com.

All pleas for mercy will be duly ignored.

Cliff Hicks is a senior news-editorial and English major and a Daily Nebraskan columnist.