

Stepping in it!

By Ron Wheeler - January 2021

"Wheeler, you have created more '\$#!&%@' today than in the history of this newspaper!"

This was the greeting my normally mild-mannered managing editor gave me as I stood at the entrance of the Daily Nebraskan campus newspaper office. I did not even have a chance to deposit my Doritos and Dr. Pepper onto my desk yet. The moment he saw me descending the stairs of the Student Union, he leaped from his desk and "greeted" me in the broad doorway to the spacious newsroom. His nose was two inches from mine, and all I could see was the fire in his eyes.

I cocked my head to the side and looked over his shoulder. I saw several desks with typewriters clacking away, my drawing table in the corner was piled high with callback notes, and along the back wall were two dozen African American students chatting among themselves ... as if they were waiting for someone.

"Hmmm! This must be because of that comic strip I drew yesterday," I said. Before he could respond, the editor-in-chief saw me and rushed toward me. She yanked me into her office, slammed the door, and leaned back against it.

She looked at me, paused for a moment, and then said, "Well, what are you going to say to them?"

"I guess I'll just apologize, I suppose. I didn't realize that cartoon would be so offensive." I felt a little uneasy, but nothing like how I knew she felt. She tried to hide it, to act professional, like she knew what she was doing. We were all just college kids, trying to figure out life, pretending we knew something when in reality we all knew nothing ... and we knew it. But we were about to learn something.

I watched as she leaned her head out the doorway and began to talk to the crowd that was gathering. By this time the visitors realized I was the person they were waiting to see. Until now they did not know what I looked like. As she leaned out the doorway, she steadied herself with her hand on the door jam. I couldn't hear what she was saying, but I remember there was a lit cigarette between her fingers. Her hand was shaking so much the ash kept falling off of the end.

After a few minutes she stepped back from the doorway and three or four black students walked into her tiny office. I don't exactly remember how many. I only remember two of them, and they changed my life.

A woman spoke first. She didn't take a seat like the others. She marched right up to me, and with the same fire in her eyes as my mild-mannered managing editor, bellowed, "Mr. Wheeler, aren't comic strips supposed to be FUNNY!?! " She paused, staring at me with eyes ablaze, waiting for an answer. Suddenly a knot began forming in my stomach. All I could think of was to apologize. "I am really sorry. I didn't realize this cartoon would be so offensive." I couldn't look at her. I just stared down at the floor in front of her.

She didn't relent. She held a printed copy of the comic strip up to my face (once again, two inches from my nose). "I want you to read this comic strip to me ... OUT LOUD ... and tell me EXACTLY where the humor is!" She paused again, staring at me, waiting for a response.

The knot in my stomach grew. I thought I might throw up. I had never felt that cold chill of terror and regret before. I knew I had "stepped in it." There was nothing I could do. I wanted to run away. I certainly couldn't read the strip out loud to her. All I could say was, "I ... I'm so sorry ... I'm so, so sorry."

After what seemed like an hour (it was probably only a minute or two) she tore up the comic strip, threw it on the floor, and stormed out hurling profanities at me as she went. I was left to ponder what had just happened. I had never been "dressed down" like that before. I felt shame. She was not only angry ... she was HURT! There was nothing manufactured or manipulative about her reaction. What I did hurt her deeply. As I stood in stunned silence, I began to question my purpose as a cartoonist. I thought, "Why did I draw that? What good did it do? Did I do it just to get a laugh ... or to make a point? Could there be a deeper more benevolent purpose to my talent? If so, how would I get there?"

One of the remaining visitors broke the silence in the office. He was an African American male student with some really cool wire-rimmed glasses. They suggested the intelligence he possessed. He sat quietly in a chair watching what had just transpired. He spoke in calm, measured tones, wanting his comments to be constructive. I don't think he and the woman who confronted me first planned this, but the two of them formed

something of a "bad cop, good cop" routine. She got my attention, so when he spoke, I listened intently.

I felt comfortable enough with him to ask, "Why was it okay for me to make fun of a country bumpkin on the football team yesterday, but not a black player in today's paper? I should be able to make fun of everyone if I do it indiscriminately, shouldn't I?"

His response was, "Country bumpkins are not oppressed minorities."

I thought ... "oppressed minorities? What makes someone an oppressed minority? I know nothing about this." In Nebraska in the 1970s there were very few minorities of any kind in my world, and I certainly didn't understand the oppression they felt.

(He didn't mention this, but I learned something later that added clarity to the level of tension the comic strip caused. A few days before my offensive comic strip appeared, an African American brandishing a pistol on his front porch was shot and killed by the local police. Community stories like this often don't penetrate the bubble of campus life ... unless it's part of YOUR community.)

Something else I first heard from him was the oft-quoted statement mentioned at almost every writers conference, "Write about what you know." His point was, since I knew almost nothing of what life was like as a black person, I should not try to act like I do. I learned the hard way that being pretentious can be a real turn-off to your audience when you don't know what you're talking about.

I said, "So now what? Where do I go from here? What do I know enough about that I can write about? What is the fall-out from all of this? Will I have to look over my shoulder all the time wondering if someone is going to ambush me as I walk across campus?" He couldn't give me any reassurance there. But he saw I learned something, and the matter was closed as far as he was concerned.

Not so for the rest of the 22,000-student campus. The next day the Daily Nebraskan editorial page was filled with letters critical of my cartoon along with an apology from the editor on her and my behalf. Then the day after that the paper was filled

with more letters, as was the day after that, and the day after that. This went on for THREE SOLID WEEKS!

After the first wave of criticism came the pushback ... "Hey! This is just a comic strip, People. Get a life!" That resulted in a pushback against the pushback ... "You have no right to tell me what I should or should not get offended at!"

At first, I wanted to disappear, or at least crawl under my desk in some of my classes. For example, in my economics class, the guy who sat next to me was from Cameroon. I saw him reading the paper. He hadn't seen the cartoon but was reading the letters to the editor the day after. He looked at me and said, "Ron, what did you DO?"

I sheepishly replied, "Oh, you don't want to know." He dug up an old Daily Nebraskan and came back to class the following day and said, "I don't know what the big deal is. I am from Africa. This is nothing."

On another occasion, I was walking to class with a fellow Daily Nebraskan co-worker when she met a friend of hers who began ranting about the "comic strip issue." Since he didn't know who I was, I began peppering him with questions. "Don't you think that Ron Wheeler guy should be expelled from school for his offensive cartoons?"

He said, "Oh, no! People should be able to laugh at themselves. They take life too seriously." I am ashamed to admit I was starting to enjoy all the attention this was bringing.

Now that the controversial comic strip is several decades behind me, I am still not sure what to make of it all. I know I learned a lot from the experience, both in my career as a 40-year professional cartoonist, and personally as a 67-year-old man.

I know I am more racially sensitive because of the incident, although I would not wish anyone to go through this kind of experience to learn racial sensitivity.

I love leading Bible studies in the inner city now, I love living in our racially mixed neighborhood, and I have proactively tried to view life through a diverse lens. So, I find that I want to bristle at the accusation of inherent bias. Yet I recently discovered an inadvertent bias in something I wrote that I felt compelled to apologize for. Where does it all

end? Will we ever arrive at racial harmony, or will we forever live under this cloud?

I also wondered if I should even write this story. In our crazy, tumultuous, racially charged climate, I wasn't sure how people would perceive it. Would it inflame tensions as some will see the police shooting in the 1970s as, "Nothing ever changes! "? Or can God use it to help people love God and love their neighbors as themselves?

Or is this a story that matters only to me? Has this experience affected me negatively? Am I so paranoid toward offending anybody now that I have hampered my own creative ability? Will I only include African-American characters in my cartoons if they are in "safe" roles?

And whatever happened to the woman who was so hurt and angry? Was this another "brick in the wall" of thought that African Americans will never get the respect they deserve? I hate to think that anything I did would have that kind of effect on someone. Has she also grown from the experience herself?

Overall, I believe the Lord used the experience to shape my perspective of God, my life, and my relationship with others. And it was a link in the chain of events that ultimately led me to place my total trust in Christ.

But that is a story for another day.