

Vigilantes' actions reveal policy flaw

To the satisfaction of Wild West fans everywhere, the time-honored tradition of lynching is alive and well, at least on this campus.

But instead of a length of hemp rope and a low-lying tree branch, today's lynch mobs are using Xerox machines. Our modern justice system is replete with all manner of rules, regulations and rights, and yet sometimes people still feel the need to sidestep procedure and take matters into their own hands.

Tuesday morning, two individuals (one of them a student) took it upon themselves to distribute informational leaflets outside of the classroom of Professor Arnulf Zweig of the philosophy department, and then proceeded to inform the students entering his class of the sexual harassment charges that have been filed against him.

The University has investigated the charges, and action on the matter is reportedly "being taken." The findings of the investigation are closely guarded. Indeed the very fact that there had been an investigation would not have been generally known had it not been for the two women and their actions.

Their choice to tell students about the alleged findings against Zweig was immediately described as ignoring the principle of "innocent, until proven guilty." On the surface, that's how it appears. But consider this: At the University, no matter what the decision is in a sexual harassment case, favorable or not, that decision will not be publicly revealed. If a professor is found guilty, he will be quietly reprimanded, but students will not be informed of the finding.

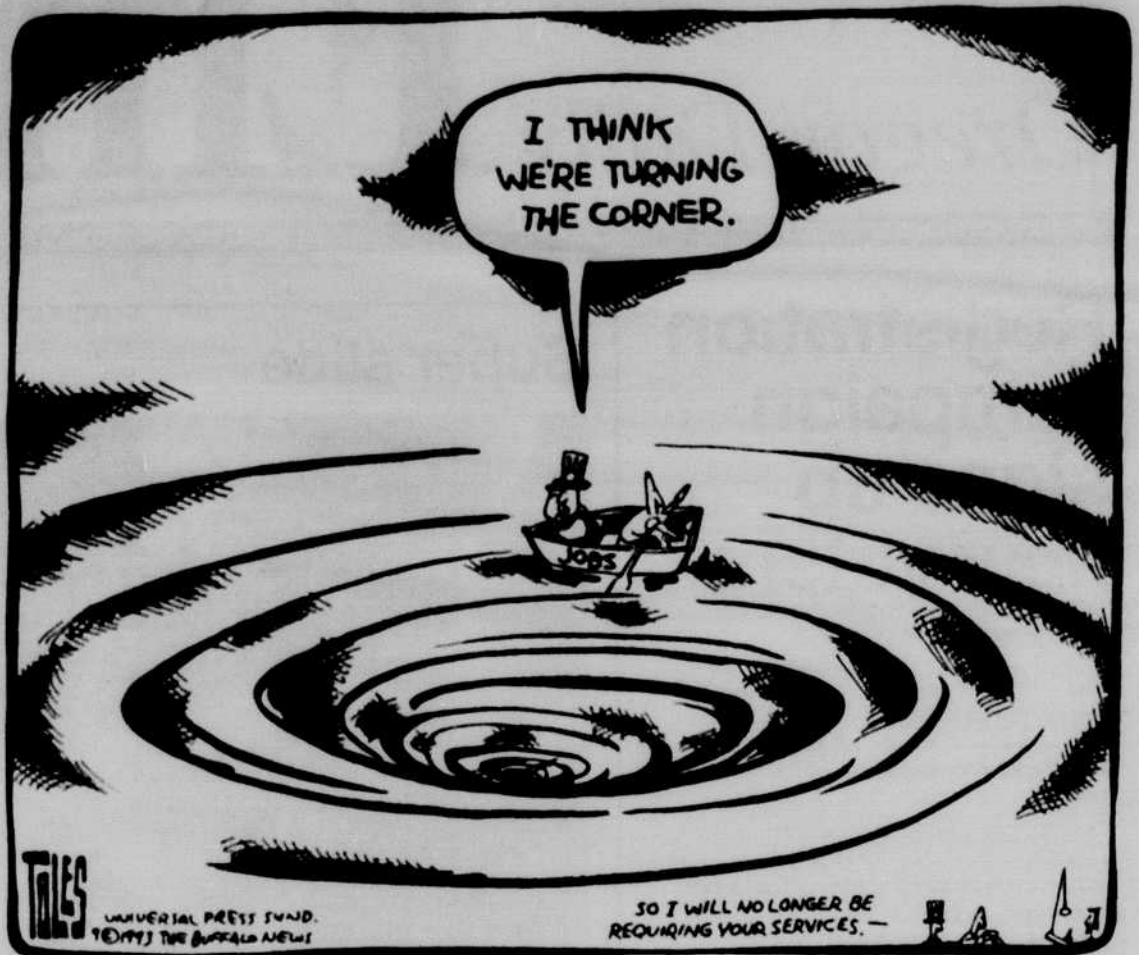
This case, regardless of its outcome, points to a serious problem with the University's policy in dealing with sexual harassment charges. If students are not informed about their professors, they will not be able to make choices that are absolutely essential to their safety and the preservation of their rights. The University has a responsibility to reveal any decisions it makes that directly affect the students.

No one is suggesting that there must be a full-page ad in the *Emerald* decrying all the infractions committed by University staff, faculty and students. But the information should be available to those who seek it — so they'll never have to learn the hard way.

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The work of another kind of photocopy vigilante appeared earlier this week that, while unrelated to the Zweig case, nonetheless bears some similarities. In this instance, flyers accusing a University student of rape were circulated anonymously around campus. The name of the accused student was highlighted in yellow, as was his alleged offense.

According to the flyer, the victim of the rape had decided not to press charges. But it was the intention of the flyer's author, who described himself as a "Concerned Male" and a friend of the victim, to warn other women away from the alleged rapist. And, undoubtedly, to gain some satisfaction by attacking the accused in a very public way.



OPINION

Heroism at the wrong time?



MARIUS MELAND

Is preventing someone from committing suicide an act of heroism? The answer depends on the way we regard suicide.

Last December, sophomore Brian Wilson saved a graduate student who reportedly tried to commit suicide by jumping off the Autzen Footbridge. A week ago, Wilson was awarded a medal for heroism by the Kiwanis Club.

Wilson said he acted on his instincts when he saved the student, and "the rescue was something that had to be done." Although few of us have the courage to act as swiftly, most people would intuitively feel the same desire to help someone whose life is in jeopardy.

But was the rescue really something that "had to be done"? After all, the student who jumped off the bridge had allegedly tried to take his own life, and Wilson forcefully prevented him from carrying out his will.

If suicide is morally objectionable, then Wilson's action was justified. If killing yourself is no different from killing someone else, then Wilson did, in fact, prevent a serious crime from taking place.

But if suicide is a matter of individual choice, then Wilson interfered with someone's freedom. In that case, Wilson did not prevent a crime, he committed one.

To complicate the matter further, we all know that people don't always act rationally. Many of our actions are based on passion rather than on reflection. There's often a conflict

between our immediate wants and our long-term wants. For instance, you might want that chocolate chip cookie right now, but at the same time you might want to get thinner.

It's the same thing with people who try to commit suicide. Many of them are so emotionally disturbed that they fail to see that there are other options besides ending their lives. Later, when they get out of their depression, they are grateful that somebody prevented them from doing what they thought they wanted.

Following this line of reasoning, some people argue that preventing a suicide is not only acceptable, it is the only right thing to do.

Yet others distinguish between what they call rational and irrational suicides. An irrational suicide is based on a passing passion, whereas a rational suicide is based on a deep-founded, well-grounded desire to die.

According to *Time* magazine, as many as half of Americans favor doctor-assisted suicides. While some people regard Dr. Jack Kevorkian as a criminal who should be punished, others think of him as a selfless saint.

But if somebody who assists in committing suicide is a saint, how can somebody who prevents people from committing suicide be a hero?

The truth of the matter is that our society is very confused about the issue of suicide. In ancient and martial literature, suicide is often portrayed as a glorious and heroic act, especially if the hero takes his own life rather than surrender to the enemy. Although the Bible states that suicide is a sin, Christians have been canonized for committing suicide instead of betraying their religious beliefs. And who would contest that somebody who gives her own life to save another is a good person?

The strange thing about moral

matters is that most people seem to agree on the basic questions of what's right and what's wrong. Everyone agrees that killing, stealing, child molesting and lying are wrong, although some people think that certain misdeeds are permissible under extraordinary circumstances.

When it comes to suicide, both sides have reasonable arguments. One argument for allowing people to commit suicide is that all people have the right to decide the course of their lives. On the other hand, one argument against is that not everyone is capable of making rational decisions.

But let's put all the judicial and moral aspects of suicide aside for a moment and visualize a situation in which somebody jumped off a bridge and a crowd of people stood and watched, without interfering, as the person was being swallowed by the river.

Isn't there something that just intuitively feels wrong about that? Isn't there something deep inside, something that cannot be explained, that touches our humanity and tells us that not helping is wrong?

There is, and that's what morality is all about: feelings. Morality is based on emotions, not on reason. To paraphrase David Hume: If morality were based on reason alone, there would be no moral difference between pricking my finger with a needle and killing everyone in the world. One thing is not more reasonable than the other.

What Brian Wilson did was to act on his gut feelings. He didn't care if he interfered with somebody's right to die. He just jumped into the river because he felt he ought to, because it was something that "had to be done."

I don't know if that makes him a hero. But I certainly think he did the right thing.

Marius Meland is a columnist for the *Emerald*.

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