

# COMMENTARY

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## ABSURDITY ABOUT THE 'N' WORD

It was a story that could have been out of an episode of "Boston Public." In fact, it actually did become one: A teacher, in a communications class, is trying to foster a discussion on hurtful speech and uses the "n" word as an example. He means no harm or offense, yet an African American student complains merely because he was a white man using the "n" word. The teacher is fired for his actions after a prominent minister threatens a boycott of the institution if the teacher is not fired.



Pat  
 Payne  
 Columnist

The difference here is that in real life, the teacher — professor, actually — went to court. Kenneth Hardy, a

former communications teacher at Jefferson Community College of Louisville, Ky., had this situation unfold on him. His employers, the college's dean and president, claimed that he did not have the freedom to speak at will in the classroom, since the classroom is a workplace and employees can be subject to speech restrictions on the job. Fortunately, the Sixth Circuit Court disagreed. Hardy was legally in the right to make such statements in his classroom as part of an academic discussion. Last month, the Supreme Court upheld Hardy's claims by refusing to take Jefferson Community



Steve Baggs Emerald

College's appeal.

It's easy and proper to argue that these words are inappropriate in most settings — just not this one. It wasn't as if the teacher was a raving racist who had accosted the first African American student he saw and shouted the word at him or her. He didn't scrawl it out of malice on a locker or a house. He didn't intone it menacingly as he burned a cross. What Hardy did, instead, was to use the words to a positive end: using the speech of the racists to explain to his students just how the words hurt others, in the hopes of instilling in them the reasons for not using racial

slurs. To then turn around and accuse him of racism for the mere utterance of the words, even with no racial animus attached but merely because the professor was Caucasian, is the height of absurdity.

The college's actions explicitly state what has become an unspoken reality on campuses, including here at the University. Free inquiry and legitimate speech are only allowed as long as they are politically correct or will not subject the school to any embarrassment. This is the feared "pall of orthodoxy" that in many cases was the impetus for preserving the free speech of the classroom in

the courtroom.

Yet should there be a clamor to fire these professors, no matter how personally distressing and offensive their speech is? Of course not. Even evil speech (and mark my words, the "n" word is as evil as speech comes) can be a springboard to discussion in an academic setting if used in a constructive manner, as Hardy apparently was trying to do. "It is the purpose of the free speech clause ... to protect the market in ideas ... to an audience to whom the speaker seeks to inform, edify or entertain," as the court put it in their ruling.

I am one who can claim an al-

most unending hatred of the Nazis, the Klan and others who would seek to impose an artificial "superiority" over others through words or violence. Their views deserve no First Amendment protection that we rightfully give to more constructive speech. Yet, once we stop legitimate discussions aimed at trying to come to grips with the mindset of those who would use such words, then it is the beginning of the end of academic debate as we know it.

E-mail columnist Pat Payne at patpayne@dailymerald.com. His opinions do not necessarily reflect those of the Emerald.

## Pledge shows students care

It's about caring. The Graduation Pledge of Social and Environmental Responsibility is not a hippie fad coming from the "backwoods of Eugene." It's about caring. The pledge is not a "political agenda" or "misplaced environmentalism" that "taints" the graduation ceremony. It's about caring.

The editorial board argues in its April 9 editorial, "University shouldn't hop onto pledge bandwagon," that the pledge of responsibility detracts from the graduation ceremony and should only be done "on their own time." On the contrary, to many students, the pledge is what their graduation is all about. And after 17 years of school, from kindergarten to college seniors, they have earned their "own time" at graduation.

Even the editorial board members admit that the University allows the pledge as an option, but they do not explain that the idea is completely student-developed and student-initiated. Thus, the University has no more connection to this form of expression than it does to a peace sign plastered on a grad cap or a lei around a neck. Personal expressions at graduation are not-

ing new. At graduation, it's customary to show who we are and who we want to be.

The pledge is an opportunity for students to show others that they will examine their future employers' relationship to our world and the people that inhabit it. Pinning a green ribbon on a graduation gown

### GUEST COMMENTARY

Michael  
 Bendixen

is simply a symbol that shows where a student's values lie.

The pledge is a vow that reminds a student to ponder how caring fits into the job search. It does not define how a student should critique a job but leaves the choice open to the student. The pledge just asks the ribbon-wearer to consider environmental and social implications.

Because it is often frustrating to find work that doesn't exploit others, the pledge cards conveniently list places where a student could look for jobs. The pledge is an idea that celebrates a student's accomplishments but also reminds them

to look to the future and make responsible decisions.

It's not a political scheme, but just a personal decision to care about others and our world. In this sense, the pledge is quintessentially what our education stands for. It's a chance where we can take all we learned in school, from algebraic expressions to business management, and use it in a practical and moral way — to help others.

We get a chance to step out of the sphere of our selfish interests, even just for a moment, so we can improve our world and society even by the slightest margin.

Those who wish to stop others from the benign option of signing a card and wearing a green ribbon on graduation day need to hear Bob Dylan's cry, "Don't stand in the hall," in his song, "The Times They Are A-changin'."

We should look to those wearing green ribbons as heroes for caring, and we can pick up an article of the April 9 Emerald to see who's in the way.

Michael Bendixen is a senior English and environmental studies major.

## Letter to the editor

### Campus protesters take a break

Where have all the University of Oregon student activists gone?

The theory of an Oregon daily newspaper is activists have chosen to hide under a rock, along with other paranoid people, after the Sept. 11 attacks. Someone else suggested all student energy was dissipated in euphoria over football and basketball success.

Can this be the campus where student insistence got the University to join the Worker Rights Consortium despite the administration's greedy reluctance? If so, it's time for them to make more noise over the cave-in of the State System of Higher Education when the University begged it to make membership in the WRC illegal with retroactive state rules. None of us was there to

hear that secret discussion. But can anyone doubt such a conspiracy?

Those shenanigans to get "Saint Philip" to honor his stadium promise are trifles compared to silence of students about Israel's invasion of Palestine. Horrors of dozens of Israeli children dying in suicide bomb blasts and of hundreds of Palestinian children dying at the hands of Israeli invaders should have students marching in the streets. They should be demanding that this nation deserves a leader unwilling to play the psycho-patsy role of George Bush to the psychopathic militarism of the Israeli prime minister.

But it's spring quarter — a time for fun on campus, no matter the guilt one eventually will feel for being a quiet accomplice, instead of the nation's conscience.

George Beres  
 Eugene

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