

# KeizerOpinion

KEIZERTIMES.COM

## Care for the abuser, not the abuse

By ERIC A. HOWALD

The friend request arrived earlier this year, nearly 20 years since our last conversation.

That one went something like this:

“Eric, phone call.”

“Thanks, mom.”

“Hello?”

A pause.

“Hi, Eric, it’s Mike. I’m in the hospital.”

This is how my former best friend opened the conversation after twelve months of radio silence.

“Why are you in the hospital?”

“I had an accident. I OD’d. I was dead for four minutes before the medics revived me.”

“Oh.” Another long pause. “Are you okay now?”

He sniffed hard. This was something of a nervous tick he’d had ever since we first met at age 12. We were 19 at the time of the phone call.

“Yeah, it was about six weeks ago, but I’m trying to contact some of my old friends, now.”

This didn’t sound like Mike. This sounded like it was coming from someone in the hospital room with him telling Mike this is what he should do.

“Okay, are you still in the hospital?”

“Right now, yeah, but I hoped I could call you after I get out.”

“Sure, just let me know.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

Click.

As far as I was concerned, our friendship had ended the prior autumn. After five years of near inseparability, with Mike spending entire weekends smashing Nintendo buttons with me at the foot of my bed and taking three-week vacations with my family, I could no longer suffer being the one driving him to his dealer’s house and being asked to wait in the car. It all ended as we stood on his mom’s porch on a sunny day in October. I was in tears and yelling as I confronted him over his drinking and drug abuse. He was drunk, and probably high, but it hurt like hell when I told him I loved him like a brother and he giggled.

Now, for reasons, I struggle to fathom, he’s tracked me down through Facebook. On one hand, I’m relieved. I’m relieved to know he either made it through or is making it through. At the same time, it’s like having Jacob Marley rise from

moments  
of  
lucidity

the grave and start rattling chains about. It may seem harsh, but I compartmentalized Mike’s “death” as a

suicide. Never speaking to each other again after that phone call made that easier on me.

Before I confirmed his friend request, I sent Mike a private message hoping to talk about how our friendship dissolved. He still hasn’t responded. I stopped looking to see if he would update his profile with photo – some sort of proof of life – after a week.

For a long time, Mike’s substance abuse was the lens through which I entered every conversation about the topic. It infuriated me, not that people would use narcotics and alcohol to excess, but that they were even available at all. With my whole heart, I believed that drugs killed people, not that people killed themselves using drugs. But the latter is what it actually is, isn’t it?

It wasn’t until I was working on a master’s degree in communications that I learned what it truly meant to think critically. I learned to question motives and ask the right questions to get me there. That’s when I discovered a Mike – and more broadly, a country – in an entirely different light. The veil was pulled back, and I saw how socioeconomic forces are typically one of the biggest influences on substance abuse, and I could connect that line right to Mike. He and his sister, and his father, and his uncle were all living under his grandmother’s roof. I saw weed for the first time taped underneath the lid to a toilet basin in his house – his uncle’s stash – and I’ve seen circumstances like his reflected elsewhere in our country.

Which brings me to the lack of needle exchanges in Marion County. I’ve talked with an addict as part of this paper’s recent series on heroin abuse in Keizer. I know what it’s like to watch someone struggle with addiction and hope beyond hope that they are at least being as safe as possible. And the absence of a local needle exchange makes me fearful.

Earlier this year in Austin, Indiana, nearly 150 people tested HIV positive; the disease was primarily transmitted via sharing needles while injecting an opiate named Opana. Tales of whole families do-

ing Opana together are coming to the surface. Until the governor there declared a state of emergency – in only the affected county – there was no needle exchange program for drug abusers. Now it must contend with that lack of foresight at an exponentially greater cost.

Opposing sides try to frame the needle exchange debate as either “saving lives” or “enabling abusers.” In reality, it is both. It’s saving the lives of drug abusers, and there is no wrong there.

I’m not certain how far Mike fell before overdosing, but it likely involved needles and he might have been saved from catastrophic illness by exchanging dirty needles for clean ones. I want to believe that everyone can agree his life was worth saving at age 19. But, I don’t even care about the age of an abuser, I care about the abuser. Even though I left our friendship in the rearview, I value Mike’s life and everything he meant to me.

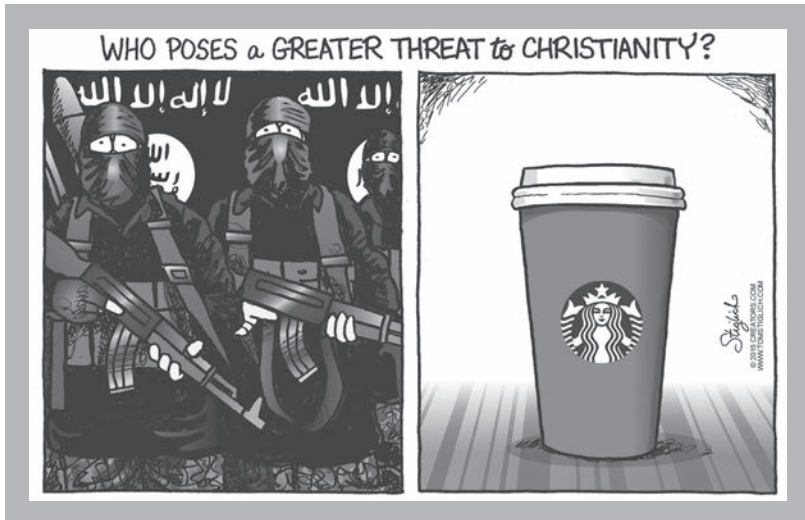
In the same way that I had gotten distracted with the drugs being the things that killed people, the debate over needle exchanges only keeps us from getting to the heart of what is ailing this country. It’s not meth or heroin or Opana or whatever-the-hell-comes-next that is the problem. The problem, as I see it, is the shattered narratives we were told we, and everyone else, should be living.

When Prince Charmings don’t arrive, when success is no longer guaranteed by way of hard work, when we discover that there are forces working against us through no fault of our own, it’s actually kind of nice to have something to take the edge off. But there will always be those who carry it too far, and sink in over their heads, before realizing what’s happened.

Sadly, the narratives we believe in, like the opposing sides of the needle exchange “debate,” are becoming ever more fractured and diminished. And no one is offering up anything to replace what we’ve lost, least of all me when my 11-year-old asks the big questions. I wish it were different.

What I still believe in is Mike. I want to believe that one day he’ll read that Facebook message (maybe this article) and discover that I still care about him and never stopped. I hope he replies. Maybe then we can both have a good cry about it.

(Eric A. Howald is associate editor of the *Keizertimes*.)



## GOP voters’ love of the unserious

By MICHAEL GERSON

Welcome to the vetting season, in which presidential candidate resumés are pumped full of air, submerged in water, and tested for bubbles like an inner tube.

None of the Republican candidates, even the few with actual governing experience, has ever suffered the level of scrutiny given to a top-tier presidential prospect. It is part journalism, part tax audit, part fraternity hazing and part—especially when it comes to Republicans—ideological hit job. (The last, consulting Aristotelian logic and CNBC, does not need to be true of every journalist to be true nonetheless.) Only Democrat Hillary Clinton has made a career of sailing in this hurricane. And even she is taking on water with an ongoing FBI investigation.

Ben Carson, amazingly, has been asked to substantiate the claim that he actually tried to hit his mother with a hammer. Was it kept on the mantel as a souvenir? Are there pictures of the event in the family scrapbook? And, by the way, did he embellish his resume through the hazy high school memory of a recruiting meeting?

Carson’s claim that his treatment is unique—“I have not seen that with anyone else”—is disproved by, well, just about everyone else. Marco Rubio is being called to account for questionable purchases as a state representative on a GOP American Express card, including some flooring. In my book, hardwood would indicate disqualifying extravagance; laminate, reassuring practicality.

What is the actual charge? One of the CNBC debate moderators asked Rubio if his expense record demonstrates “the maturity and the wisdom to lead this \$17 trillion economy.” First of all, an American president does not lead the economy. He helps create laws that marginally improve or complicate economic conditions. And second of all, what utter garbage. How does properly balancing a checkbook relate to presidential economic leadership, which is actually determined by ideology and legislative effectiveness?

For Jeb Bush, the vetting process has been more about performance. How does he distinguish himself from the wallpaper in the debates? His town hall meetings, by one media account, are “charmingly anachronistic,” apparently because political discourse is better served by Twitter sarcasm. The real question: Is Bush’s stated refusal to be an “angry agitator” disqualifying in a political party that seems to view angry agitation as the sum of the po-

litical enterprise?

All the while, Donald Trump lobs sarcastic tweets, appears on late-night television and leads the *Real Clear Politics* average of polls. Trump is somehow enjoying the presidential vetting season as a spectator instead of a target. For about a quarter of the Republican electorate, there is apparently no scandal that could rock their high regard.

Think for a moment. What would it even mean for Trump to inflate his resume when his whole campaign is a hyperbolic inflation of his resume? How do you accuse Trump of mishandling his checkbook when he brags of bilking hapless investors through the bankruptcy laws, or makes money through gaming businesses that prey on gambling addicts and low-income people? How do you hold Trump to performance standards when part of his appeal as an outsider is a blustering, appalling ignorance of policy?

What if (entirely hypothetically) Trump had gold-plated fixtures in his bathrooms, put his name on a shady diploma mill, issued misogynist personal attacks and took credit for buying politicians? That would be a Tuesday. Stepping back, what does it mean that a significant portion of prospective GOP voters are seriously considering a leader who can’t be embarrassed because he is incapable of shame? A leader who can’t be disgraced because expectations are already so low?

The choice of a president, at least in theory, should have something to do with character, policy views, temperament, governing record and political philosophy. Trump is judged by his followers on an entirely different set of standards, imported from reality television. Is he entertaining? Check. Is he angry? Check. Does he demolish political correctness and political convention? Double check. Is he authentic? Ah, here is the rub.

By one definition, political authenticity is defined by the impulsive expression of everyman instincts. By another definition, authenticity means taking serious things—such as rhetoric and political ideas—seriously. The former unleashes and rides political passions. The latter channels passions into useful public purposes through political and governing skill. The former culminates in the cutting tweet. The latter in Lincoln writing and re-writing the Gettysburg Address or his second inaugural, which were made authentic through thought and craft.

So far, this is the sad, overall summary of the 2016 campaign: They took unserious things seriously. (Washington Post Writers Group)

## letters

sponse. The more folks do this the better chance we have. We already go to the south Salem Winco to do most of our

shopping. I would also recommend doing the same thing if you would like to see a Costco at this end of town since the one and only in Salem is becoming a nightmare.

Michael Johnson  
Keizer

## One grocery store choice

To the Editor:

In regards to Marge Willson’s letter (*Keizertimes*, Oct. 30) about one grocery store in Keizer: she is very correct that Keizer needs another choice, especially one that is not way too expensive.

I urge everyone to go onto the Winco website and click on Contact Us and let them know we want them in Keizer. I sent them an e-mail and was very encouraged with the re-

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By DEBRA J. SAUNDERS

Activists at the University of Missouri just won themselves a trophy Monday. After weeks of protests against the president of the University of Missouri System, Tim Wolfe—and, most importantly, after the Mizzou football team threatened to boycott games until Wolfe quit—the administrator caved. “It is my belief we stopped listening to each other. We have to respect each other enough to stop yelling at each other and start listening and quit intimidating each other,” said the clearly intimidated Wolfe.

The *New York Times* attributed student and faculty demands that Wolfe resign to “racial tensions.” Black students report being called the N-word. In October, someone used feces to draw a swastika in the university’s Gateway Hall. Activists formed the group Concerned Student 1950, named after the year the University of Missouri first admitted African-Americans.

I share their anger at demeaning, racist language and the yahoos who

drove through campus Sunday in trucks with Confederate flags. I just don’t understand what Wolfe had to do with those episodes. Critics charge that Wolfe had become isolated. The fact that head coach Gary Pinkel supported his players’ threatened boycott suggests that is the case.

Last month, when protesters surrounded Wolfe’s car during the homecoming parade, Wolfe’s driver revved the engine. One protester told *The Washington Post* the car bumped another protester. Over the weekend, when students surrounded Wolfe and demanded that he define “systematic oppression,” he answered,

“Systematic oppression is because you don’t believe that you have the equal opportunity for success.” An enraged student

shouted back, “Did you just blame us for systematic oppression?” In short, Wolfe made a mistake fatal to any academic career. A university administrator is supposed to preface every statement to students who badger him with a phony remark about how impressed he is that students really care. No matter how rudely students behave, no matter how unrealistic their pursuits, the modern university president must pretend he finds their antics engaging.

That’s a difficult task, given the eight demands dictated by Concerned Student 1950. No. 1: Wolfe must give a handwritten apology, read it publicly and “acknowledge his white male privilege.” Next: Af-

ter his public humiliation, Wolfe had to go. Also: The group demanded a “mandatory” racial awareness and inclusion curriculum “vetted, maintained, and overseen by a board” composed of “students, staff, and faculty of color.” That is, the activists demanded that Mizzou indoctrinate all students with their special brand of racial politics. Their demands present the university not as a haven for an epic battle of ideas but as a steamroller for political conformity.

CNN’s Jake Tapper asked UM journalism professor Cynthia Frisby what Wolfe had done to become the focus of protest. She answered, “It was the lack of response.”

Not displaying sufficient anguish apparently is all it takes to represent “systematic oppression.” After Wolfe’s resignation, students gathered in the quad and sang “We Shall Overcome.” They think they did something positive, when to the contrary, they trivialized racism.

(Creators Syndicate)

