

THOUGHTS ON TEACHING

The Joke's on Us

BY BOBBY ANN STARNES

AFTER MY son and I had lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, about two years, I decided it was time for him to get some culture. So we headed south to Morgantown, West Virginia, and our first-ever academic conference. In those days, the Appalachian Studies Association ran a concurrent youth conference, a great opportunity for my boy to get in touch with his Appalachian-ness. Of course, being the ultra-hip urban kid he had become, the thought of spending time with a bunch of academics in a rather small mountain town was not all that appealing. However, after three carefully planned days designed to help Appalachian children understand the stereotypes of the larger culture and how they might have unconsciously accepted them, he was glad he had come.

A few days after we returned to Cambridge, we attended his high school's annual talent show. Sitting in the balcony, my son, his new consciousness, and I watched as ultra-liberal kids so far from our mountains performed a skit crammed full of stereotypes of mountain people — ignorant, lazy, uneducated, incestuous . . . you know the ones, right? As the laughter filled the auditorium, I felt my son tighten up. Having spent days strategizing about how to counter just this kind of stereotyping, he asked me as we walked home that night to help him explain to his teachers why he had found the skit so offensive.

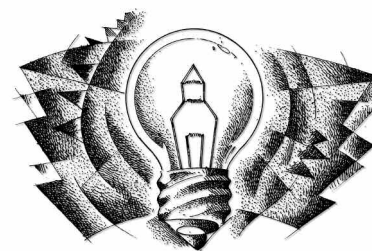
So I wrote the best letter I could, spelling out the issue and suggesting that the offensive public display we had witnessed

BOBBY ANN STARNES is chair of the Education Studies Department at Berea College in Berea, Kentucky, and is the executive director of Full Circle Curriculum and Materials, a nonprofit organization in Helena, Mont., that supports teachers' implementation of Montana's Indian Education for All Act. E-mail her at bobbystarnes@gmail.com. Full Circle's website is www.fullcirclem.org.

might indicate a need for students to have a fuller understanding of Appalachian culture. I even offered to provide videos explaining how these negative stereotypes affect Appalachian children. I got no response. My son said one teacher informed him that he was "too sensitive." After all, they had lifted the skit off the "Carol Burnett Show," so it must be okay. *He* was the problem. This time, the humor would be at his expense, and his pleas to be understood by his teachers and peers would be met with flat indifference. I hoped he would find in it a lesson that would be long remembered.

Not long ago, my nightly MSNBC news updates on the paternity of Anna Nicole's baby were interrupted by the big news that Don Imus had spewed a racist and sexist slur. I couldn't quite imagine how this could push Anna Nicole out of the spotlight. I mean over the years, I've tuned in to the Imus show, generally for less than 15 minutes, or however long it took him to get through one of his "comedy" bits. And frankly, I always wondered how he could book such big-time guests as Bill Clinton, Vice President Cheney, and the rest, given the sludge he spewed. But I am my son's mother, so maybe I, too, am too sensitive. Then again, my mother always told me that I'd be judged by the character of the company I keep. Was she wrong, or had Imus' bigwig guests not had mothers as instructive as mine?

So Imus finally got fired. But he *didn't* get fired when he commended the *New York Times* for letting "the cleaning lady cover the White House" — the cleaning lady he referred to being African American reporter Gwen Ifill. He wasn't fired when he referred to "cheap Jews" and later apologized for "being redundant." And he wasn't fired for all of his "towel head" tirades or even for calling Hillary Clinton a bitch. In his commentary, MSNBC's "Countdown" host Keith Olbermann spoke to his bosses: "Okay,



we understand why you didn't fire him the last 10 times [he made such comments]. But this time he has to go."

Why this time and not all those other times? I wondered.

Well, according to Leslie Moonves, head of NBC News, a big factor in his decision was the pressure brought to bear on him by employees, including Olbermann and, perhaps most prominently, "Today Show" host Al Roker. Roker wrote a piece on his blog titled "Not in My House" outlining why this comment hit far too close to home. In announcing his decision to end NBC's long relationship with the I-Man, Moonves pointed out that the effect of such language "on young people, particularly young women of color trying to make their way in this society . . . has weighed most heavily on our minds." And of course those uptight advertisers added to the outcry by pulling their ads from his show. Said Sprint spokeswoman Sara Krueger, "We do not want our advertising associated with content which we, our customers, and the public find offensive." Women who work their way into those high-level jobs are always humorless.

I know we can never predict which straw will break the camel's back, but I remained confused. That is, until commentators started comparing what Imus said to rap music. The link between himself and Imus was too much for rapper Snoop Dogg to tolerate. In a many-expletives-deleted MTV interview, he eloquently explained the difference between the lyrics he writes and performs and Imus' horrible racism. Use of the word "ho" by Imus "is a completely differ-

THOUGHTS ON TEACHING

ent scenario than the use of the word in rap lyrics. Rappers . . . are not talking about no collegiate basketball girls who have made it to the next level in education and sports. We're talking about ho's that's in the 'hood that ain't doing sh—, that's trying to get a n—a for his money. These are two separate things. . . .”

Barack Obama further clarified Snoop's explanation in an ABC interview. Imus “didn't just cross the line,” he said. “He fed into some of the worst stereotypes that my two young daughters are having to deal with today in America.”

Ah . . . at last . . . some clarity. “Ho” should be used only when referring to poor and undereducated young women. Women of accomplishment should be called something else. And insults are okay unless they hit close to *our* homes.

I worry that we are losing our national sense of humor. Poor Ann Coulter is always getting in trouble for her jokes — like the one about John Edwards being a “faggot.” We don't even laugh at sophisticated Ivy League humor these days. For example, Native and non-Native people didn't get the joke when the *Dartmouth Review* ran a full-page, front-page, knee-slappingly funny illustration. The illustration showed a savage-looking Indian holding a scalp in one hand and a knife in the other and was run under the headline “The Natives Are Getting Restless.” So many of those humorless activist types raised a ruckus that the *Review* editors issued a non-apology. They regretted using the illustration, they said, *not* because it was offensive, but because it distracted from

the *Review's* “serious journalism . . . [and] people are discussing . . . the scalp and the offense felt by [Native] Americans,” rather than the real issues. Furthermore, the two pointed out, “There are no ‘racists’ or people who ‘hate’ at *The Dartmouth Review*.”

The outcry against the illustration surprised *Review* editor Daniel Linsalata. After all, he said, it was all in good fun — just a “tongue-in-cheek commentary on ‘unreasonable’ demands of American Indian students and faculty leaders.” You know, like their unreasonable reaction when fraternity pledges disrupted a drumming circle (considered sacred by some Native Americans), or when homecoming T-shirts showed a Holy Cross knight performing a sex act on an American Indian, or when the *Review* persists in selling “proud symbols of the school's past,” such as Indian head canes, T-shirts, and neckties, so many years after Dartmouth dropped its Indian mascot.

Not long ago, someone sent me a link to an Internet dictionary he thought I would “get a kick out of.” After clicking the link, I found myself on a page defining “trailer trash.” One definition included characteristics such as “poor hygiene, foul language, slovenly or slutty clothing, and general ignorance.” Another questioned the humanity of anyone to whom the label is applied, saying that trailer trash is “a person (and I use the term loosely) whose most noble purpose in life is human sacrifice to the tornado gods.” Having gotten such a good laugh out of these definitions, I was compelled to check out the definition of “hillbilly.” The dictionary didn't let me down. Hillbillies are “dumb-assed Americans who have babies with their siblings [or] pets . . . and call them gay names like ‘Mary-Beth.’” Wow. A two-fer-one assault — hillbillies and gays.

And I was heartened to learn that Boston University's College Republicans bravely pledged to fight the “worst form of bigotry confronting America today” — a terrible injustice suffered by their white ancestors — race-based scholarships and job discrimination. To illustrate their point, they offered a \$250 scholarship to students who are “at least one-fourth Caucasian.” To be considered for the scholarship, applicants must submit two essays, one describing their ancestry and one discussing “what it means to

be a Caucasian-American today.”

The College Republicans explained that the scholarship is just a tongue-in-cheek way to “trigger a discussion on . . . the morally wrong practice of basing decisions in our schools and our jobs on racial preferences rather than merit.” I think they are rather late coming to this game. Where were they, I wonder, when the “morally wrong practice” gave preference to *their* parents and grandparents and helped to keep many promising nonwhite students down? White privilege? Nah. No such thing. As someone recently explained, “We [white people] always want to think that we have earned the successes we've had.” Yeah, I know. I always want to *think* that, but I know better.

But these are only words, after all. And I'm a grownup. I know that none of my relatives actually had babies with their pets or named them Mary Beth. But here's where I get puzzled. Grownups are not the only ones subjected to this “humor.” Imagine a 6-year-old girl watching a TV sitcom that portrays trailer trash and their slovenly, ignorant, incestuous ways. As she looks around, she notices that *she* is poor, and *she* lives in a trailer. The humor has helped her define herself and her place in the world. She'll get more and more help over time. Moreover, her classmates watch the same program in their comfortable tri-level homes and form similar understandings about their trailer-park-dwelling peers.

And I'm a teacher. The next morning I have all of these kids in my classroom, and I'm responsible for teaching them. The trailer trash girl will struggle, and the guidance counselor will suggest I use a self-esteem-building program since the girl doesn't seem to think very much of herself. And a little middle-class girl is going to make fun of her poor classmate and feel superior. So maybe the principal will buy me a character education program to help that little girl learn to be more accepting of others.

Yes, I can turn Imus off. I always did. But 6-year-olds can't turn off the barrage of sludge that comes at them day after day, year after year. If we want to think about obstacles to learning, about alienation and bullying, and about the impact of class on our schools, perhaps we should start by examining our national sense of humor. ■

Moving?



Register and log in at pdkintl.org to update your mailing address — OR — phone Membership Services at 800-766-1156 today!

Please allow six weeks for processing your change of address.

File Name and Bibliographic Information

k0706sta.pdf

Bobby Ann Starnes, THOUGHTS ON TEACHING: The Joke's on Us, Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 88, No. 10, June 2007, pp. 793-794.

Copyright Notice

Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc., holds copyright to this article, which may be reproduced or otherwise used only in accordance with U.S. law governing fair use. MULTIPLE copies, in print and electronic formats, may not be made or distributed without express permission from Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc. All rights reserved.

Note that photographs, artwork, advertising, and other elements to which Phi Delta Kappa does not hold copyright may have been removed from these pages.

Please fax permission requests to the attention of KAPPAN Permissions Editor at 812/339-0018 or e-mail permission requests to kappan@pdkintl.org.

For further information, contact:

Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc.
408 N. Union St.
P.O. Box 789
Bloomington, Indiana 47402-0789
812/339-1156 Phone
800/766-1156 Tollfree
812/339-0018 Fax

<http://www.pdkintl.org>