

Checking My Fly: The story of a compulsive critic

By J.J. Wylie
Staff Opinion Writer

Quick, answer this question: Can you tell me without looking whether or not your fly is open?

Now, before I explain, let me just say that, in gatherings of people I know, I am routinely told to shut up. This is done jokingly at first, but sometimes it escalates into outright hostility—especially if the topic of conversation is controversial, like the question of abortion or which brand of beer is best.

These are my friends, mind you (I am too insignificant to have enemies) and rarely do the hard feelings last longer than a few minutes, especially once I offer to pick up the check. They've known me long enough to know that, although I know better than to go out of my way to upset people I care about, I can't help myself.

Let me confess now: I have a problem and I know it. I am a critic. Is there a 12-step program for people like me?

This is not going to be some highbrow tribute to the noble pursuit of criticism. To the contrary, I'm here to tell you that the talent which allows me to tell the difference between a work of art and a piece of trash is born of something that is considerably less than heroic. It comes from a deep-seated self-doubt.

Right now, you're reading the work of a guy who is constantly second-guessing himself. This impulse, which often manifests itself as a nagging fear that I'm walking around with my fly open, has so sharpened my critical faculty (i.e., the ability to poke holes in anything) that it's easy to turn it outward onto, say, whatever my friends are talking about—especially when they're talking about me.

Do you think Arnold Schwarzenegger ever has any doubts about his chin? I've got plenty about mine (it's too rounded, with too much skin hanging from it, etc.). It doesn't end

there. Sometimes I even wonder why I wonder so much. I actually have doubts about my doubts! Often, I'm at the point where I begin to think about getting professional help. But how do you go about asking for a good therapist? If you ask a crazy person, you might get a bad therapist. And how do you tell the sane people with good therapists from the ones who never needed one in the first place?

My friend once said to me, "Don't you ever stop thinking?" "Sure," I replied. "Whenever I go to sleep."

Yes, I knew what he meant. But in my experience, when someone stops thinking, they start acting like that drunk at every party you've ever been to who thinks he's being funny when he's just being an ass. This is my fear: I dread ever becoming that ass. So, instead, I become a different one. I become the ass whom everyone believes is too conceited. I become the guy everyone sums up by saying, "He thinks he's so smart..."

In fact, the opposite is true: I know I'm not smart (well, I know that I'm no genius, anyway), and I'm scared that I'm actually dumber than I think I am, which is why I have a tendency to criticize everything around me. It's a defense-mechanism: I'm paranoid that someone will notice whatever I'm criticizing before I do, and thus make me look stupid—all of which leads to a paradox: I don't think

that the people around me who don't constantly criticize everything are stupid, so why do I have to do it to give off the impression that I'm smart? Look in the dictionary under the word *neurosis*, will you? Then tell me whether or not my picture is there. (It has to be. What do you mean it isn't?)

Now, I'm not rude (at least, not at first). I never mean to hurt anyone's feelings or to offend anyone. But when someone next to me, no matter how near and dear they are in my affections, actually wonders why Stephen King doesn't get the Nobel Prize for Literature...well, I'm only human (yes, this actually happened).

Lest you start speculating about what my parent did wrong to create such a sorry state of affairs, let me tell you this: Critics are made, not born. It isn't enough to know what you like or dislike (even a cow knows what it likes). You've got to have the critical wherewithal to back up your opinions. You've got to have ammo.

My ammo comes from a pro-

longed education—both in and out of class—in the liberal arts, that multidisciplinary curriculum designed to engender a well-rounded person capable of critical thought, someone who can be sent out into the world with the ability to adapt to any situation. Talk about too much of a good thing: My own critical thinking has cost me more than a few dinner invitations.

In his latest book, Tobias Wolff tells the story of a book reviewer who gets caught up in a bank-robbery. This poor guy, who is constantly criticizing what's going on around him, eventually makes such a nuisance of himself that the bank-robber shoots him in the head. I think about this story a lot (especially whenever I'm waiting in line to make a deposit) and I wonder when one of my friends will finally have had enough. Hopefully it won't take a bullet for me to figure it out.

So maybe walking around with my fly open isn't something I should be so worried about. Then again, I might get arrested. Or just laughed at.

'It isn't enough to know what you like or dislike (even a cow knows what it likes). You've got to have the critical wherewithal to back up your opinions. You've got to have ammo.'

'Let me confess now: I have a problem and I know it. I am a critic. Is there a 12-step program for people like me? This is not going to be some highbrow tribute to the noble pursuit of criticism.'

Letters to the Editor

Fleischman responds

To the Editor,
As a CSUN Executive Board candidate I feel the need to respond to Mark Clark's opinion article, which appeared in Thursday's edition of *The Rebel Yell*.

I for one choose not to put any of my qualifications to hold office on my fliers. My reasoning is that most students do not have time to sit during class and read the bulletin board. I further chose not to pass out any candy or handbills and requested that students vote for me on my merit instead. I stood outside and personally spoke with a good number of students concerning my goals and qualifications.

I am sorry that I apparently did not reach Mr. Clark but for him I will, as I did in my published autobiography, list my e-mail address: fleischj@nevada.edu. Next time I hope that instead of writing about some candidates' campaigning strategies, he will write about why students should vote.

—Leia Fleischman,
senior,
fine arts/criminal justice

Milmeister responds

To the Editor,
After reading *The Rebel Yell* Staff Opinion Writer Mark Clark's "A closer look at CSUN Executive Board Elections," an article appearing in Thursday's edition, it is apparent that Clark is not familiar with the "real world."

The pun "Make It A Safe Election" that had a condom attached flew right over his head. There are dangers in the "real world" other than physical violence that affect many people's lives on a daily basis. AIDS is the leading cause of death in people ages 24 to 44.

Due to HIV's incubation period of between five to 10 years, many of these people were infected at the ages of 18 to 35.

The fastest growing population

to contract sexually transmitted diseases are traditional college-aged people, ages 17 to 25. Chlamydia affects 10 to 15 percent of the student population in any given year. Although condoms do not provide 100 percent protection, they do provide the best protection currently available.

I want to reduce the risk among my peers. After counseling as a peer health educator and developing an overall concern among my community, I have seen the feelings of guilt, shame and embarrassment of those who have come into contact with an STD.

I have been overwhelmed with sadness when a man I knew well had to suffer a cruel death from the AIDS virus.

I do not want to see this tragedy happen to my fellow students. So, Mr. Clark, maybe you have been at your desk hiding from the "real world" or you suffer from extreme unattractiveness, negating the need for a condom.

Maybe you have not reached puberty yet. But for those who need condoms and are shy, I took the

responsibility of going up to the counter and risking my own embarrassment for the group.

I was thanked by many, who often came back for more. If my campaign material prevented one contraction of an STD, and if it saved one student humiliation and discomfort, my campaign was a success. The "statement" I was "trying to make with such trinkets" (of which most college students understood) is that I am concerned about the students on this campus and hope that I could bring about awareness of safe sex for any event.

—Randy Milmeister,
senior, psychology

Career Day kudos

To the Editor,
The staff of Career Services would like to thank the University community for an outstanding Career Day event on Feb. 26, which was held on the Thomas and Mack Center concourse for the first time in its 18-year history. With 180 employers participat-

ing and significant student and alumni participation, we can now speak of UNLV's Career Day event as one of the largest career day events in the country. In addition to the good work of our co-sponsors—CSUN and the UNLV Alumni Association—we are grateful to have the support of our faculty, staff and student leaders in establishing Career Day as a prominent event on our campus in recognition of students' talent and in support of their career aspirations.

Our employers have expressed their enthusiasm as well as shared ideas to enhance the event for next year. We welcome your ideas, feedback and suggestions. If you can offer suggestions for additional employer participants, campus involvement and/or improvements in future career day events and related activities, please do not hesitate to call Eileen McGarry, director of Career Services, at 895-3495.

Thank you,
Career Services Staff

Land of Nott

By Alex Raffi/Rebel Yell

