

# VIEWPOINT

Tuesday, January 21, 1997

page 7

## THE OBSERVER

NOTRE DAME OFFICE: P.O. Box Q, Notre Dame, IN 46556 (219) 631-7471  
SAINT MARY'S OFFICE: 309 Haggar, Notre Dame, IN 46556 (219) 284-5365

### 1996-97 General Board

Editor-in-Chief  
Elizabeth Foran

Managing Editors  
Patricia Carson  
Tom Roland

Business Manager  
Matt Casey

News Editor.....Brad Prendergast  
Viewpoint Editor.....Ethan Hayward  
Sports Editor.....Timothy Sherman  
Accent Editor.....Joey Crawford  
Saint Mary's Editor.....Caroline Blum  
Photo Editor.....Michael Ruma  
Advertising Manager.....Ellen Ryan  
Ad Design Manager.....Jed Peters  
Production Manager.....Heather Cocks  
Systems Manager.....Michael Brouillet  
Controller.....Tyler Weber

The Observer is the independent newspaper published by the students of the University of Notre Dame du Lac and Saint Mary's College. It does not necessarily reflect the policies of the administration of either institution. The news is reported as accurately and objectively as possible. Unsigned editorials represent the opinion of the majority of the Editor-in-Chief, Managing Editor, News Editor, Viewpoint Editor, Accent Editor, Photo Editor, Sports Editor, and Saint Mary's Editor. Commentaries, letters and Inside Columns present the views of the authors, and not necessarily those of The Observer. Viewpoint space is available to all members of the Notre Dame/Saint Mary's community and to all readers. The free expression of varying opinions through letters is encouraged.

#### Observer Phone Lines

Editor-in-Chief	631-4542	Business Office	631-5313
Managing Editor/Viewpoint	631-4541	Advertising	631-6900/8840
Sports	631-4543	Systems/Marketing Dept.	631-8839
News/Photo	631-5323	Office Manager	631-7471
Accent/Saint Mary's	631-4540	Fax	631-6927
Day Editor/Production	631-5303	Viewpoint	E-Mail Viewpoint.1@nd.edu
General Information	631-7471	Ad E-Mail	observer@darwin.cc.nd.edu



### ■ AND IN THIS CORNER

## The rising specter of societal shame in America

The specter of "shame" in American society has risen again in recent issues of national newsmagazines.

Part of this is an overwhelming desire to return to the "glory days" of Americana when life was "simpler" in the 1940s and 1950s. Part of it is the frustration of not being able to deal with the ills of society by treating the symp-

**Matthew Apple**

toms and not the cause. If only, they say, if only we had a "return to shame," we would no longer have the terrible afflictions of teen pregnancy, child abuse, divorce, rape, murder, drug use, violent television programming and political scandals — all of which are on the rise in the '90s, according to political pundits.

Funny thing, you tend to find what you seek if you look hard enough.

The concept of "shame" as it applies to society confuses the issue of morality with the issue of popularity. The fact that a certain percentage of a particular segment of society does not approve or accept certain behaviors does not make those behaviors in question "right" or "wrong." If the owner of a bar in Louisiana in 1957 refused to allow a black man to sit down and have a drink in front of white paying customers because he feared public ostracism for unacceptable behavior, did that make racism "right" in the 1950s?

If Aristotle correctly claimed, "Pain

and pleasure are the rudders with which we steer children," then it is also correct to claim that fear and shame are the emotions with which society coerces its members into behaving "properly." Fear and shame *negatively reinforce* the desires of society; one does not reward for "good" behavior, but one does threaten punishment for "bad" behavior.

The result is that, even if a member of society does something good, he or she may do it for the wrong reasons. One does not teach what is right and just; one teaches *not* to do what is "bad" or "embarrassing." Society teaches that life is about trying to get away with as much as possible, and, once you get caught, to go back and to try some more, to push back the boundaries of acceptance until you have enough money and power not to worry whether society approves of your behavior.

Simply put, the reason "bad things" happen is that there is no incentive to "do good." There is no reason to believe that our parents or grandparents lived in a society any less volatile than ours; a return to a fabricated "golden era" of pre-1960s societal mentality will not solve any problems that have always existed.

What once the mainstream had pushed to the edges of American culture and had marginalized into tiny pockets of Motown and Beatnik countercultures has now become a larger part of popular culture. To the remnants and loyal descendants of the 1950s mainstream, the taboo problems of the past have become the conspicuous problems of the present; the once-forbidden segments of society threaten the old order, and the system finally begins to realize that its monotonous, conformist hegemony is on the verge of being overthrown. "Shame"

allies itself with "family values" in an attempt to maintain a status quo which never really existed in the first place; that is the real struggle of modern American society.

Parents reward their children for doing something right and reprimand them for doing something wrong. As we grow older, only the reprimanding remains. Perhaps, as a society, we need to mature beyond the point in which we only respond to negativity. Perhaps as a culture — or loose assembly of various cultures, as the case may be — we need to reevaluate our distinctions between right and wrong, acceptable and unacceptable.

It is my hope that, after you pare down minor cultural differences, the most central, overriding morals of what remains will be a restating of the "Golden Rule": don't hurt anyone, and don't break or steal what doesn't belong to you. All else is merely the window dressing of self-appointed Decency Squads of all "generational" groups.

I suspect this will come as a great



relief to many and (I hope) as a mild consternation to some: this will be my last column for a while, as I set aside my opinionated public ramblings and finish my master's thesis of some 150 to 200 pages (oy).

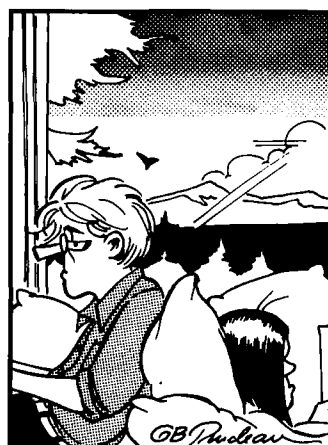
It may be that this column shall reappear within these hallowed pages, but, for the nonce, I shall endeavor to become invisible.

Matthew Apple is a graduate student in the Notre Dame English Department. He may be contacted via email at [maple@skynet.net](mailto:maple@skynet.net) or <http://www.skynet.net/~mapple>.

### ■ DOONESBURY

GARRY TRUDEAU

### ■ QUOTE OF THE DAY



"Benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and knowledge are not infused into us from without."

-Mencius