

On Giving a Hoot

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor

Tuesday, 23 June 2020 12:25 - Last Updated Tuesday, 30 June 2020 10:38



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Here's an embarrassing story I've never told outside my own living room.

Thirty years ago, I was a young graduate student in the English Department at the University of Alabama. I had finished my MA and was working toward a PhD, while also teaching freshman English. And I was getting antsy.

I'd done well academically – I think everybody makes straight As in grad school – but something felt off. Back then, graduate studies in literature were shaped by a theory called deconstruction – a perception that language, along with concepts like truth and justice, is irreducibly complex, unstable, and impossible to pin down. While I was able to grasp the concept intellectually, my spirit was rebelling. I had “followed my bliss” to graduate school in hopes of becoming a writer – or maybe a professor of literature – but somehow, it seemed I'd ended up in the social sciences. I felt tricked. My bliss had evaporated.

While home for Christmas that year, I ran into an old friend at a party – the big sister of one of my childhood besties – and she asked me about graduate school. I shared my discontent and she said, “Hey, I'm living in Atlanta working for an ad agency. I need an assistant. Would you be interested? It's a great job!”

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And just like that, I changed my life. I left the Ivory Tower, moved to an apartment in midtown Atlanta, and began a new career in advertising.

But the advertising gig wasn't exactly as advertised. The "ad agency" turned out to be a screen-printing company. Tee-shirts were our main product, but we also did specialty items like towels, sweatpants, caps and cups. Though the job was far less creative than I'd imagined, I consoled myself with the fact that that we *did* have an "art department" and I *did* get to do a little "copywriting." Mostly, though, I just took orders from clients over the phone. We had lots of clients all over the country, but my hometown friend and I handled one big client exclusively.

Hooters Restaurant.

Yes, *that* Hooters. The one where sexy young women serve up an endless variety of wings and beer, dressed in tiny shorts and even tinier shirts featuring an owl logo across the chest. Owls hoot. Hooters. Get it?

This was around 1990, and Hooters was only a few years old at the time. But even though I'd never heard of it – I'd been in the Ivory Tower, remember? – it was an American sensation. There were hundreds of restaurants around the country, and several in Atlanta, and we were their screen printer. We printed not only their tiny waitress shirts, but also a colorful and ever-changing array of Hooter-themed tee-shirts and caps that sold like hotcakes at their restaurants. People literally collected "Hooterwear."

And I was fit to be tied.

Though I'd left academia happily, this was some serious culture shock. After four years of college and three-plus years of grad school in the humanities, I was fully steeped in all the requisite movements and causes, a "social justice warrior" before the term even existed. A postmodern feminist.

And now here I was, handling Hooters. Pardon the pun.

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Every day, I called Hooters managers around the country, trying to sell them tee-shirts. “We have a new design!” I’d tell them. “It’s selling really well here in the Atlanta stores!” I’d add, feigning enthusiasm. Sometimes they’d bite. Other times, not. Even when they didn’t place an order, they were typically cheerful and respectful. But I quietly burned with indignity. Clearly, this work was beneath me. *Selling* was beneath me. Selling tee-shirts was *really* beneath me. And most of all, Hooters was beneath me.

One day after work, my hometown friend/supervisor took me to the flagship Atlanta restaurant to meet the managers there. My memory is spotty, but my vague recollection is that these two young men were attractive and perfectly polite. We all settled into a booth together, and they ordered up some wings, along with a pitcher of beer that kept refilling itself as if by magic.

Now comes the point in my story when you probably think it’s going one way, but it’s actually going somewhere else.

I can’t seem to access exactly what happened during that meet-and-greet – can’t quite remember what I said, or how I said it. Blame that bottomless pitcher of beer, I suppose, or maybe I’m repressing the details. But what I do remember – vividly – is what my hometown friend/supervisor said to me afterwards.

“What is *wrong* with you?” she snapped, this smart, kind woman who’d never uttered a cross word in my presence. “Those are our *clients*! Also, I’ve known them for years, and they happen to be really good guys! They invited us for a meal – we were their *guests*”

– and you lectured them about *politics*?”

Seriously? They were nothing but warm and friendly. You were rude and condescending. I don’t know what happened to you in graduate school, but I d

o know your family, and I know you were raised better than that.”

She was right. And I was mortified. I’m still mortified.

These days, we talk a lot about being “woke.” Well, this was an awakening of a different kind. And it has stayed with me for 30 years. I’m not sure why I felt compelled to tell

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you about it now. Maybe because I don't feel qualified to weigh in on the pressing issues of the day? Or maybe because I'm afraid to?

In 1990, we academics in the humanities – masters of deconstruction that we were – fancied ourselves the wokest of the woke. By today's standards, we were knuckle-dragging Neanderthals. Thirty years from now, our current crop of progressives will likely seem backward to their successors.

Will future Americans extend forgiveness and mercy to their benighted predecessors? Will they see them as the beautiful, terrible, complicated human beings that they were . . . or simply write them off as cardboard casualties in the march toward utopia? Statues to be toppled, myths to be busted, biographies to be burned?

I'm not sure we have to wait for the future to answer that question. In the year 2020, illustrious public figures are being "canceled" in real time, every day. And nobody is safe.

Think I'm exaggerating? Hey, if it can happen to JK Rowling – with her impeccable progressive credentials – it can happen to anybody.

Rowling recently made a few controversial comments about the transgender movement on Twitter. I believe the comments were misunderstood, but nuance is not Twitter's strong suit. Within hours, the beloved author had been viciously denounced by millions of former fans, and even "called out" by the Harry Potter actors. Never mind that Rowling has been a mentor and mother figure to those young actors, or that they owe her their careers. Gratitude? Loyalty? Respect? Love? None of that seems to matter in this brave new world where it's all politics, all the time.

When we allow our political commitments to devour our personal relationships, I believe we lose something very precious. If we can't prioritize and protect our human connections – our friendships, familial bonds, social networks, etc. – what are our politics even for? Aren't we trying to build the beloved community? Doesn't that depend on love?

I started thinking about this question 30 years ago, long before there were social justice warriors or social media or even much of an internet – after dinner at an unlikely place called Hooters – and I've been thinking about it ever since.

Margaret Evans is the editor of Lowcountry Weekly. [Read more of her Rants & Raves here.](#)