

Humor Me

By Ronald P. Culberson

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“The Freedom of Speech Impediments”

My son’s first assignment for the new school year was to come up with a “creative” license plate that revealed something about him. Apparently middle school students not only get an opportunity to expand their minds through innovative projects, they get a glimpse of life in the State Penitentiary should the education thing not work out. I guess the “No Child Left Behind Bars” program actually works.

Being the creative genius that I am (which by the way, my son does not fully appreciate), I helped him brainstorm different ideas. I suggested “IM GR8” (I’m Great), “10 S N E 1” (Tennis anyone) or “3 PT-R” (Three Pointer) which I thought were pretty darn clever. But, in the end and against my better judgment, he chose “GTR HERO” which describes the addictive video game Guitar Hero that consumes most of his time when he’s not thinking about his schoolwork or prison duties. And even though *his* idea was not as creative as mine, the license plate *did* represent who he is and that *was* the purpose of the assignment.

If you look around, you’ll see lots of examples of T-shirts, ball caps, bumper stickers and license plates that represent the personalities of their “owners.” While I’m a big proponent of free speech (although as a professional speaker, I prefer to be paid for it), there’s a part of me that would love to offer my own commentary to the many personal statements I see coming from all of these varied forms of visual communication.

Like the story I read about an older gentleman who emerged from the grocery store to find a cop writing a parking ticket. The man said, “Can’t you give a senior citizen a break?” The cop kept writing. The man berated the cop for writing the ticket. The cop wrote out a second ticket for expired tags. The man was furious. Afterwards, a passerby stopped to console the man. The old guy replied, “Oh, I don’t care. My car’s parked around the corner. I’m a Republican and this car had an ‘Elect John Kerry’ bumper sticker on it. I just try to have a little fun now that I’m retired.”

If you’re like me, and I know I am, you’d love to make this kind of anti-statement statement in response to some of the freedom of speech’s we’re bombarded with every day.

For instance, in recent years, girls have stooped so low as to use their rear ends to send text messages. Teens and young women everywhere are sporting “babe,” “cutie” and “cheerleader” on the backsides of their short shorts. And there are hundreds of

them. I know there are because I read as many as I could as research for this article. But when it's *your* daughter, you don't want some creepy old guy looking at her derrière just to read the message. That's why I'd prefer to see, "What are you looking at?" on my daughter's shorts.

And if we really want to eliminate this fashion trend for good, we should encourage mothers and grandmothers to wear their own short short advertisements? There would certainly be more room to display a message. And if our daughters saw "Menopausal Momma" on their mother's behind, I'm sure they'd no longer think their own shorts were so "hip."

Then there are the philosophical bumper stickers. I saw one that read, "Visualize World Peace." Now, this is concerning. Is the driver really paying attention to the road or instead, is she lost in the imagination of a Gandhi-esque utopia where everyone eats tofu and sings Kum Bah Yah? I was delighted to see that I was not the only one thinking about this. Shortly thereafter, a bumper sticker showed up that read, "Forget World Peace, Visualize Using Your Turn Signal." Exactly.

One of my all-time favorite statements was on a T-shirt. It said, "I march to a different accordion." It's simple, clear and awkwardly clever. And while I'm drawn to the person who displays that kind of fun sentiment, I wouldn't want him renting a room in my basement.

I own a very cool looking Harley Davidson T-shirt. On the front, it says, "Life is Simple: Eat. Sleep. Ride a Harley." I love it. Unfortunately, the back reads, "If you can read this, my wife fell off." Sometimes, the negative nature of what we communicate undermines the very freedom of what we're allowed to say. Of course, in the case of my T-shirt, it's funny enough to overlook the negative!

Until next time, just humor me.

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Ron Culberson, MSW, CSP, CPAE is a speaker, humorist, and author of four books including Do it Well. Make it Fun. The Key to Success in Life, Death, and Almost Everything in Between. His mission is to change the workplace culture so that organizations are more productive and staff are more content. He shows people how to have more FUN while preserving the integrity of the work they do and the lives they lead. For more information, visit www.RonCulberson.com.