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OPINION...

"In conversation with an "army brat" last evening, it was quite clear that the only thing the military ever teaches impressionable 18 year olds is how to become alcoholics and really good ones at that."

-Melynda Jarratt
 Brunswickan Staff
 Opinion column 14 Mar 86.

The above is quite an amazing statement for a number of reasons. One is it does a great disservice to thousands of dedicated people who have devoted much of their life trying to combat the effects of alcoholism in our society. The second reason is it is a prejudicial statement. Perhaps it wasn't meant that way, but still it remains a statement that dehumanizes an identifiable group and attributes certain characteristics, be they positive or negative, to members of that group, based solely on their participation in it. The above quotation actually makes two serious and erroneous statements: one against the alcoholic and the other against the professional soldier.

This column is certainly not meant as a slight towards Ms. Jarratt and I hope no one would interpret it that way. I haven't really met her except in the most superficial of circumstances but I certainly wouldn't describe her as a prejudiced person. So while this is not to be construed as a personal onslaught against Ms. Jarratt, I would still like to comment on her statement which I find highly offensive.

First, I would like to ask how one becomes a "really good" alcoholic? Do you study it in school? Are there a series of provincial and federal examinations to write or is it an apprenticeship program? *Challenge '86*, maybe? How would Ms. Jarratt determine a really good alcoholic from one that was merely mediocre?

Related to this is the medical opinion that alcoholism is a disease. It is not a personal weakness, a sin, or any other moral judgement we care to make about it. It is a treatable, not curable but a treatable disease that victimizes people from all social classes regardless of their colour, creed, ethnic group, religious convictions, sexual orientation or any other personal variations, including occupation. I personally believe it is both insensitive and unsubstantiated to label some 80,000 Canadians as alcoholics because they wear a uniform to work. While there is a higher than average rate of alcoholism in the military, statistical evidence also points to a high incidence of chemical dependency in both the legal and medical professions; however, I don't believe it would be correct to state that the only thing medical school teaches impressionable students is how to become alcoholics, regardless of how "good" they become at it. Nor would I care to make the assumption that every lawyer and every physician in the country is an alcoholic just because some of them are. Some students at this university are alcoholics, but not every student is, nor will they necessarily become one because they attend UNB. By now, I hope I've made my point on this matter.

The second offensive statement was made against the professional soldier. I gathered from her column that Ms. Jarratt has no desire to join the military and if that is her choice, I will respect it. At the same time, I don't think it is terribly unreasonable to request that Ms. Jarratt respect the decision of those who decide to enlist. The fact that a person wears a uniform and has voluntarily relinquished certain Constitutional freedoms does not give Ms. Jarratt or anyone else the right to haphazardly slur them by publically labelling them as alcoholics.

Narrow-minded stereotyping of an identifiable group personally offends me. I am an "Air Force brat", which gives me as much credibility as Ms. Jarratt's unnamed source, and when I was an impressionable 18 year old, I was in the military. Now that I've confessed this much, I have to ask Ms. Jarratt if she thinks I'm an alcoholic? If so, how dare she make such personal assumptions about me? Hell, she doesn't even know me. If she did, she would also know that I do not consume alcohol in any way, shape or form under any circumstances, including when I was 18 years old and in the Army.

Prejudice is a strange thing. Literally, it means to prejudge. I am most certain that Ms. Jarratt would not make a statement like the one she wrote on March 14 about blacks or Jews or Italians. Even if she did, I can't see Ken Quigley, our beloved, albeit hungry, editor, allowing a statement like that hit print, and if by bad luck, or the curse of the Gremlins that inhabit our typesetting machines, such a statement did get published, Ken's desk would instantly collapse under the avalanche of enraged mail, and rightly so.

Prejudice is much more than anti-black, anti-women, anti-semitic statements and attitudes. It happens as soon as we start dividing people into groups of "us" and "them". Whenever we arbitrarily divide people into categories of black/white, Jew/Gentile, soldier/civilian and start making assumptions about that person based on our silly little categories, we are being prejudiced. Every single time we talk about a "them", while ignoring their fundamental humanity that goes beyond our petty name-calling we are being prejudiced.

As I mentioned at the start of this column, I am not attacking Ms. Jarratt personally. I can't, because like everyone else on this planet, I too have my prejudices. It would appear that being prejudiced is just another one of our many human foibles but that doesn't mean we don't have an obligation to restrain them.

Perhaps today is as good a day as any for us all to take a moment to examine our taken-for-granted assumptions we have about one another. When we look at the beliefs we "know" to be "true", do they stand up to the cold light of reason? I suspect that often they don't. In the process of that reflection, we will hopefully begin to see the humanity that resides in each of us. We may not be able to eliminate our prejudices, but if we learn to control them, it will be a step forward in our coming to realize that we are all human, despite our apparent differences.

KATE MACKAY