

Walk a mile in her shoes” more than a bag of laughs

May 9, 2013 by Daniel J. Bauer

I teach a 50-minute English class every Friday afternoon this semester at a public high school just down the road from my house. As I enter the campus there, I swing to the left, walk down a long corridor with a courtyard by the side, and then climb the stairs to the fourth floor. As I approach my classroom there, I see a mural on the wall.

This mural features a drawing of several pair of women’s high-heeled shoes, some petite in size, others comically large, high-heels of many sorts and colors. The following words appear next to the drawing: “Walk a mile in her shoes.” Then comes a Chinese explanation. It tells passersby how some Americans urge boys and men to “walk a mile in her shoes” in order to understand how girls and women may at times feel in life.

I like this mural so much that last week I took a picture of it and posted it on my Facebook page.

It is a fairly funny thing how tiny details in a personal life occasionally take on new life because of public events we just happen to notice.

I saw a photo in the China Post this week, for example, that made my eyes blink. “Bearing and sharing” said the words below a black and white picture, which showed a young fellow, possibly a college student, running in a business suit that a pregnant woman might wear to work in an office (CP 4 – 29 – 13, p. 15). Running, I say. This guy was running, people in back laughing and clapping, running with his right hand clutching a water bottle, and his left, trying desperately to hold what could have been a bowling ball or a basketball in place under his “shirt.” It looked like an impossible task to me. He seemed to be a sport about it, though, this chap. He wore a big grin on his chops, and seemed to be having a jolly good time.

Like the mural at my Friday school, this photo had an explanation, too. The Garden of Hope in Taipei had sponsored an awareness activity the day before, the blurb said, “and invited male participants to take part in races while wearing pregnancy suits . . . to promote better understanding of the burden that women bear during pregnancy.”

I’m all in favor of we men upping our consciousness quotient on the subject of pregnancy. Hats off to our friends at the Garden for their help. At the same time, however, there are so many moments, most quite ordinary, that can teach us to be more sensitive and more humanly understanding of what life asks of our female population. Also, about that word “burden” up there - -. Pregnancy is a burden, yes. It is also a great privilege.

I have since learned that “Walk a mile in her shoes” is an international movement, founded in 2001 by a Californian psychologist by the name of Frank Baird. The idea of “Walk” is to combine a bit of humor with races, competitions, parades, festivals - - choose your favorite term - - which challenge men to literally walk together for a mile, their feet stuffed into high-heeled shoes.

The very thought of it makes me wince. I have often seen students on my campus wearing high-heels to class. Strange, but as far as I can remember, the students were all female. Don’t ask me why women students wear high-heels to class. Life is plumb packed with mysteries far beyond my comprehension.

Material I found on the Internet a few minutes ago was marvelously instructional. “Walk a mile in her shoes” activities in cities across the United States raise millions of dollars every year to support rape crisis centers, shelters for battered women, and educational efforts to make men and women alike more knowledgeable about sexualized violence.

Let’s be clear here. We are not joking about sexual violence or the degradation of girls and women. We are merely saying that it is way past time for we men to do whatever it takes to understand better what our mothers, our sisters, our daughters, wives, girl friends, friends and nieces (let’s not forget our nieces; I’ve got four) sometimes go through in life.

The galloping around in high-heels is simply a good-natured way to ham it up a bit. It’s a way to stop the show for a few minutes, shake our heads in wonder, and do some thinking. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points:

1. Did your high school sponsor activities such as "Walk a mile in her shoes" to help male students be more sensitive to the feelings and needs of girl classmates?
2. Although women's feelings about pregnancy, and issues about fair treatment of girls and women, may seem far away from you, do you think some college students think of these matters?
3. This column speaks of art work in hallways of schools, posters and so on. Have you seen examples of art work in your school experience that made a special impact on you? Have you seen especially interesting posters at Fu da?

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