

INTERVIEW WITH  
HEAVEN'S LOVE THRIFT SHOP  
CARTOONIST, KEVIN FRANK

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN A CARTOONIST?

For as long as I can remember. When I was a young boy, my grandmother worked for the local newspaper, and she would bring home the ends of newsprint rolls, which I just covered with drawings. It wasn't until later that I realized these drawings were "cartoons". To me they were just pictures and words together, which seemed like an obvious combination.

DID YOU GROW UP IN A CREATIVE HOUSEHOLD?

My dad enjoyed painting as a hobby, so I was exposed to the arts from an early age. And my mother was an avid reader, which meant there were always books around. But they weren't creative professionally, if that's what you mean. My mom was a great encouragement to me as an artist--she got me my first paying gig by forcing me to respond to an ad in the paper. The local weekly newspaper ran an ad in search of an editorial cartoonist and my mom made sure that I got some drawings together and then she drove me into town to apply. I was 13 or 14 at the time, and I did get the job, but it might have had more to do with the fact that I was the only person to respond than to my amazing talent.

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN A CHRISTIAN?

My parents were people of faith, and I grew up in the church. My own spiritual journey has taken its own varied twists and turns, as well as a few outright detours. You'd think I'd be a holy man by now, but after all these years I feel like I'm still just scratching the surface of my faith.

AT WHAT POINT DID IT OCCUR TO YOU THAT THESE TWO ASPECTS OF YOUR LIFE COULD BE COMBINED?

There was never a time when it was otherwise. I've always understood that who I am -- including being a person of faith -- would somehow be reflected in my work. Sometimes it's overt, sometimes it's just a background presence. I've done some work for religious publishers, where they want the faith component in the foreground. But when I work for non-religious publishers, I don't stop being who I am.

DO YOU BELONG TO A PARTICULAR CHURCH NOW? WHICH ONE?

Our family has been a part of a church community near where we live for many years. Identifying it more specifically would probably go against my inclination to keep my comic strip as inclusive as possible.

YOU'VE HAD A VARIETY OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES IN DIFFERENT KINDS OF CHURCH SETTINGS, HAVEN'T YOU?

Well, most of my life I've been in the wider "Evangelical" orbit, conventional or otherwise. I was raised in a little country church, but I've gone to city churches, lived in an intentional Christian community, and worked in religious shelters for the homeless.

TELL US ABOUT THE INTENTIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY.

When I was a teenager, my mother lost her battle with cancer. This left me with, among other things, an awareness of the brevity of life. So after High School, I felt very strongly that I needed to do something that would have an immediate impact. I had a cousin who had already joined Jesus People USA, and I knew that you could join up one day and be feeding the hungry the next, which was a huge factor in my decision. So I left rural East Peoria and headed to the big city, Chicago, where Jesus People USA is based. I met and married my wife Kathryn there and we stayed long enough to have the first two of our three children there.

THESE EXPERIENCES NO DOUBT ARE FELT IN YOUR COMIC STRIP.

Certainly. My experiences with Christian community run deep throughout the strip. The characters interact with each other and their neighbors, as genuine brothers and sisters in Christ. In real life, I've had people very much like "Dag" as roommates, so the realities of living life together in community and of doing mission work come naturally when doing my comic strip.

IN YOUR COMIC STRIP, THE HEAVEN'S LOVE THRIFT SHOP IS A MEANS OF RAISING FUNDS FOR THE STORE'S CHARITABLE EFFORTS. WHAT ARE THOSE CHARITABLE EFFORTS AND WHO IS THE GROUP BEHIND THE THRIFT SHOP? IS IT RUN BY ONE CHURCH IN PARTICULAR, OR BY A GROUP OF CHURCHES, OR BY SOMEONE ELSE ENTIRELY? WHO IN THE STRIP DECIDES WHERE THE HEAVEN'S LOVE THRIFT SHOP'S PROCEEDS GO?

The thrift shop serves three intertwined purposes. In ascending order: first, it recycles used goods, cutting down needless waste. Second, it offers products and clothes at a reasonable price--sometimes even for free depending on the needs of customers. And third, the money generated by selling these goods is used to support the local neighborhood soup-kitchen, shelter, AIDS clinic and other programs. I suspect such a place would be sponsored in some way by a large church behind-the-scenes, with Wilson being responsible to a board of directors -- but I leave the particulars unaddressed and all very much in the background. I'm interested in the street level operations of the thrift shop and its relationship to in the community.

SOME PEOPLE MIGHT FIND IT ODD THAT A CHRISTIAN CHARITY DEVOTES A SIZABLE CHUNK OF ITS REVENUES TO AN AIDS CLINIC. DO YOU THINK THIS ASPECT OF YOUR COMIC WILL BE CONTROVERSIAL?

Yeah, it's kind of weird that sometimes it can be controversial for Christians to act like Christians. I want my characters to be examples of how it might look if Christians were actually to demonstrate the compassion of Christ to people suffering from AIDS or any other situation of great need. My brother works for World Vision, a Christian humanitarian organization, and they are doing great work with AIDS orphans in Africa right now, so the problem continues to be very much on my own mind.

YOU HAVE THREE CENTRAL CHARACTERS IN YOUR HEAVEN'S LOVE THRIFT SHOP COMIC: WILSON, THE RATIONAL AND LEARNED DIRECTOR OF THE THRIFT SHOP AND ITS OUTREACH PROGRAMS; CASSIDY, THE PERHAPS OBSESSIVELY SOCIALLY CONSCIOUS DAY-TO-DAY MANAGER OF THE THRIFT SHOP; AND DAG, THE WELL-INTENTIONED, BUT SOMEWHAT SCATTERED WORKER BEE OF THE SHOP WHO IS ALSO A RECIPIENT OF THE SHOP'S EFFORTS TO HELP PEOPLE WHO NEED HELP IN BECOMING SELF-SUFFICIENT MEMBERS OF SOCIETY. WHICH OF THESE CHARACTERS BEST REFLECTS YOU?

Naturally they are all me to one degree or another. Dag is the overzealous new convert, which I certainly was (on a smaller scale). Wilson is more like who I am now, a little older and --hopefully-- wiser, but still prone to his own weaknesses, like worry for instance. And Cassidy is more of the person I'm striving to be: very generous and kind hearted, as well as very socially conscious. Even Shelby, a character who is a regular customer but not a person of faith, is a means through which I can reflect my own doubts. She is a vehicle for me working out that side of me that which seems to be a little resistant to the ongoing process of conversion.

DO YOU FREQUENT THRIFT SHOPS YOURSELF? HAVE YOU EVER WORKED IN ONE? IF SO, WERE YOU THE BOSS (Wilson), THE MANAGER (Cassidy) OR THE WORKER (Dag)?

I am a connoisseur of thrift stores. Partly out of necessity, as a starving artist with a family to clothe, but also just because I enjoy it. There's an element of anticipation in thrift shopping, because you really never know what you might find there. When I was doing inner city mission work, I spent many afternoons working for a thrift store

the organization ran. I was definitely the Dag character there, just labor. We had this beat up old van that was perpetually out of gas, and we would drive around the city picking up donations from people. Of which, of course, I got "first dibs". The van was one of the older ones, where you could get into the engine from the driver's compartment, and part of its unique character was the fact that you had to stick a butter knife into the engine to open the carburetor each time the van died.

DID YOU SEE YOUR COMIC STRIP AS AN EVANGELICAL ENDEAVOR? IS YOUR GOAL TO CONVERT PEOPLE TO CHRISTIANITY?

Along with entertaining people, I'd like to occasionally remind them that they are loved by God. If I can accomplish that in the Sunday newspaper pages, I will consider the feature a success.

I KNOW THERE ARE COMIC STRIPS AIMED AT SINGLE PEOPLE, FAMILIES, PET OWNERS, OFFICE WORKERS, WORKING MOMS, DIVORCED DADS, AND EVEN JEWISH COMIC STRIPS, REPUBLICAN AND DEMOCRATIC COMIC STRIPS. DO YOU FEEL A CHRISTIAN COMIC STRIP IS ANY MORE UNIQUE THAN SOME OF THESE?

It's hard for me to think of this as a "Christian" strip, as opposed to strips about working moms, office workers, divorced dads or single parents. A Christian can be all of these things. My strip simply takes my own angle on things, as a person of faith, and reflects it through my characters and the situations they find themselves in. I like to think there's an audience for it among all kinds of people.

THE NEWSPAPER READING AUDIENCE IS A HUGE, HIGHLY DIVERSE ONE. WILL NON-CHRISTIANS FEEL LEFT OUT BY YOUR STRIP? SHOULD THEY?

I love "Beetle Bailey" and "Hagar the Horrible" and I'm neither in the Army or a Viking, so, no, I don't think it should be a problem.

WHAT PRINCIPLES DO YOU LIVE YOUR LIFE BY?

I'm less a principle guy than a community guy. I try to live my life among people who seek to follow Christ together, and find my bearings in that context, as well as the context of my family.

WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOURSELF AS BORN-AGAIN?

The term comes with too much colorful baggage. My faith experience is more like being born again and again and again and again. A work in progress, not a finished product.

WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOURSELF AS A CHRISTIAN FUNDAMENTALIST?

Uh, well, there's some more colorful baggage. Let's just say I think there's room in this world for all kinds of people, including those who think differently than me, even think differently about God.

WHAT IS YOUR OPINION OF THE DEBATE OVER EVOLUTION VS. INTELLIGENT DESIGN?

This is one of those political traps that Jesus was so good at saying something that would leave his opponents speechless. I'm not that smart, but I'm smart enough not to jump into the debate. Let's just say people hold all kinds of views of the world and where it came from and how it works. The same holds for my characters, allowing me to work out my own opinions and doubts through their questing and interaction.

DO YOU PLAN ON ADDRESSING SUCH ISSUES IN HEAVEN'S LOVE THRIFT SHOP?

I'm not a political person. I'm interested in finding a world overseen by a God of love and mercy and how that world of that Creator can be glimpsed in the fictional setting I've created.

DO YOU ANTICIPATE ANY DISAGREEMENT OR CONTROVERSY AMONG CHRISTIANS ABOUT HOW CHRISTIANS AND THEIR BEHAVIORS ARE PORTRAYED IN YOUR STRIP?

People always disagree, and not just Christians. And if I tried to please everybody, I'd be very unhappy myself. I'm sure there will be people who like and dislike what I do. That's how it always is for everybody.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE MIX OR THE BALANCE OF ENTERTAINMENT AND RELIGION IN YOUR COMIC?

Nobody goes to the Sunday funnies for deep theological insights. If I make people smile, and maybe can also make them view the world in a more redemptive or open or giving way, so much the better.

INCREASINGLY THERE IS MUCH DEBATE ABOUT THE WHAT CONSTITUTES "SEPARATION OF CHURCH & STATE." WHAT DO YOU SAY TO PEOPLE WHO FEEL THERE SHOULD BE A "SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND ENTERTAINMENT" IN COMICS?

You can't separate religion from anything that has to do with life and ideas. Politics, too -- and where the lines are seem to be in the eyes of the beholder. Some papers put Doonesbury on the editorial page. I love Doonesbury and don't feel threatened by the views expressed there. Hopefully readers will feel the same way about my work.

ARE YOU PERSONALLY CURRENTLY INVOLVED IN CHARITY OR COMMUNITY OUTREACH WORK?

Not as exciting as in years past when I did my share of driving around homeless people to shelters in the middle of winter. I live in a small town now, and volunteer in ways that seem appropriate to this context. I do some work for my church, taught Sunday school, things like that.

YOU'RE AN AMERICAN LIVING IN CANADA HOW DID THAT COME ABOUT?

I married a Canadian! After we'd been married awhile and had two kids, we decided to make a change and come back north -- where we joined the local church and added another Genuine Canadian to the family --my daughter!

WHAT IS THE BEST ITEM YOU'VE FOUND IN A THRIFT SHOP?

I found a great pair of winter boots once, in exactly my size, for about three dollars or so. Of course, it was the middle of summer and I was looking for shorts at the time, but I had to get the boots. Which is the secret to successful thrift shopping in my opinion. You have to be ready to take the bargain that presents itself, even if it's not the bargain you need at exactly that moment. My wife might disagree with this nugget of wisdom, like when I come home with yet another cool 1950's era toaster... but I think it holds true nonetheless.