

Well, I asked for it.

Remember when I used to write a lot about my daughter and the joys of motherhood? Sure you do. Some of you actually liked those columns, and, to this day, urge me to return to that topic. Others of you let me know, in ways both kind and not so, that you'd rather read the fine print on your water bill than one more word about my beloved offspring. Fair enough. I finally got the message (we doting moms can be a little thick) and set off for topical ports unknown (not as much fun as tropical ports unknown, but still exciting); I began writing about a host of other issues that seemed important to me. I knew I was wading into murkier, more turbulent waters, and that I might get roughed up a little. But I figured, Hey, once you've had someone tell you to 'shut up already about your freakin' kid,' (yes, in those exact words) nothing can touch you.



I had no idea.

Note to masochists: Fancy a deluge of criticism and insults from friends and strangers alike? Publish an essay or two in praise of traditional Judeo-Christian values and attach your email address to the bottom. Then just sit back and let the good times roll. And be sure to wear a helmet.

Funny thing is, I've written plenty over the years about religion and politics – those two forbidden “polite company” topics – and it never seemed to bother a soul. Maybe because I never expressed a strong opinion or particular set of beliefs? I guess I seemed more open-minded and objective back then. In reality, I was just lazy and apathetic. I hoped my ambivalence would come across as enlightenment, some form of higher intelligence; but, to be honest, it was more a function of being uninformed and not particularly interested. Once I *did* develop an interest – right around the same time it dawned on me that I'd need to teach my daughter more than just how to tie her shoes, that I'd need to impart some actual *values*

– I set about some serious reading and thinking and soon found myself drifting reluctantly, but inexorably, toward what we in America call “The Right.” The more I read – history, philosophy, theology, current affairs – the harder it was to deny. I had all the symptoms. I was a, gulp, conservative.

Trust me when I say this was not the outcome I'd hoped for.

Most of my friends are liberals. My husband's a liberal. All my favorite professors... my favorite artists... actors... musicians. Everyone. I did not look forward to coming out. I've been doing so, slowly but surely, for a couple of years now, and it hasn't been easy. Aside from my mom and dad, nobody's particularly happy for me. My dear friend K still can't bear to hear me speak the C word. Like a loving parent who's hoping it's just a phase, she says, “You're just *considering* it, honey. You don't have to commit.”

At this juncture, it might be wise to tell you what I mean by the term “conservative,” to clear up any possible confusion. Modern conservatism, as it's understood by most thinking people who adhere to it, is a movement that seeks to uphold (or “conserve”) classical liberalism. This may sound paradoxical, but it makes perfect sense once you understand that classical liberalism – once the dominant socio-economic philosophy in America, with its belief in individual freedom, property rights, personal responsibility, free markets, and small government – bares little resemblance to – and in fact, is almost the opposite of – liberalism as we know it today. The modern conservative movement is a big tree with many disparate branches (neocons, theo-cons, paleocons, crunchy cons, South Park cons, etc.) but most of us agree with

Russell Kirk, who wrote:

“The past is a great storehouse of wisdom...The conservative believes that we need to guide ourselves by the moral traditions, the social experience, and the whole complex body of knowledge bequeathed to us by our ancestors. The conservative appeals beyond the rash opinion of the hour to what Chesterton called ‘the democracy of the dead’ – that is, the considered opinions of the wise men and women who died before our time, the experience of the race. The conservative, in short, knows he was not born yesterday.”

Obviously, there’s more to it, but that’s the essence of what it means to be an American conservative today. Granted, certain factions of our clan (including our present administration) have peppered that essence with various unsavory spices in a pot stirred vigilantly by the ever-mischievous mainstream media, which may help explain the ire I’ve raised by declaring myself a ModCon. (Catchy, huh?)

But that anger pales in comparison to the wrath I’ve brought down on my head for discussing my recent embrace of Christianity. One particularly incensed reader wrote how “disappointed” he was in me, how “bewildered” by my apparent need to “proselytize.” I wasn’t actually aware I *had*

a need to proselytize, but I’m willing to entertain the notion. Ask anyone who’s ever had a conversion experience, and he’ll likely cop to the impulse. But let’s ignore that for a moment, that natural inclination we all have to share happy, life-changing discoveries with our fellow humans. And let’s forget, for now, that we Christians are actually

*instructed*

to share the Good News. Let’s put all that aside, remembering only this: I’m a columnist. A commentator. I put my opinion out there every time I lay hands to keyboard. And, yes, I always hope to win you to my side. When I told you I liked

*American Idol*,

I secretly hoped to make you watch. When I wrote about the Harry Potter books, I wanted you to read them and love them as I do. When I championed school uniforms, it was my intention to sway you to my cause. I’m always trying to persuade you. Always proselytizing. It’s what I do. Why would I stop now? Why must I pussyfoot around this topic of Religion? I find that bewildering.

Incidentally, the disappointed reader in question shared with me that he was currently reading *God is Not Great* by Christopher Hitchens, and finding it very enlightening. He also confessed that, while he adheres to Christian principals, he hasn’t believed in God for some 30 years. I haven’t read Hitchens’ latest, but from what I gather, it’s a comprehensive attempt to persuade his readers that man created God, not vice versa, and that religion has been mostly bad for civilization. I’m sure the book is very interesting, well-researched and stylishly written – Hitchens’ stuff always is – and I may get around to reading it, yet. (Though as someone who did her graduate work in literary theory in the late 80s, I’ve read enough atheist philosophy to keep me out of heaven for several eternities.) My point is this: My disappointed reader, who told me I should keep my religious beliefs to myself, doesn’t seem to require that same restraint of the atheist, Hitchens. I guess he doesn’t mind being proselytized, as long as the proselytizer shares his worldview.

Another reader wrote to tell me, in a note that *almost* seemed well-meaning, that though she had been a fan of my work for years, my newfound religion was affecting my writing in a negative way. She said that my last column (my “ad nauseum dissertation” as she called it) had literally made her “gag” and that she wouldn’t be reading me anymore until my pendulum swung

back to a more moderate position. While licking my wounds, I reminded myself that this reader was a passionate liberal and opposed to organized religion. Much like Disappointed Reader's, I told myself to take Gaggling Reader's criticism with a grain of salt. After all, I hadn't been preaching to her choir lately. (Ew, "preaching" sounds so much like "proselytizing." I really should work on that!)

Besides, I knew where she was coming from. I'd recently been working my way through "Plan B," a book by one of my favorite writers, Anne Lamott, a great liberal, great Christian, and really great essayist. I've loved her work for years, but now, as I read her, I can't help cringing when lines like "So much had been stolen from us by Bush, during his reign" just pop up, randomly, in the midst of a funny, poignant musing about birthdays. Why must she muck up her wonderful humanity and humor with these ungainly, gratuitous political jibes? I wonder. And why didn't they bother me before?

We all latch on to writers who speak to something fundamental in us. When one of our favorites ceases to speak our "language," when he or she changes tribes, it feels like a betrayal by an old friend. In the case of Anne Lamott and me, it's the reader who changed, not the writer. She's still as dreadlocked and Birkenstocked as ever, and it doesn't exactly work for me anymore. Fortunately, those qualities I mentioned above – humanity and humor – were always my reasons for reading Lamott, not her politics, and those qualities are still very much in evidence, so I will continue to read her with pleasure. Gaggling Reader implied that mine, on the other hand, might be slipping, and I must take that criticism to heart. As a writer, I can't afford to trade in my humor and humanity for a political point of view; I hope that I haven't.

It's the religion thing that has me most baffled, though. I knew religion made some people uncomfortable, but I didn't know it made them so *mad*. To evoke such anger, I can only assume I've come across as someone who's traded in not only her humor and humanity, but her humility – some sort of obnoxious, holier-than-thou moralist. If I have, I apologize. Humbly. The world could actually use a few more moralists, I think, but I am woefully unqualified to be one of them.

And thus endeth another ad nauseum dissertation.