



It's always a pleasure to receive a note from a reader. (Well, almost always.) The email I received last week was no exception; the reader was quite engaging, even as she took me to task for what she called a "blatant untruth" in my last column.

The statement in question: *"No matter who we are, where we come from, or what we believe, we all hold Christmas sacred."*

My reader quoted my words back to me, then asked, "And who, exactly, are 'we'? Many of us, including myself, do not consider Christmas to be sacred since we do not believe that Jesus Christ is the son of, or in any way related to, God. Some of us are not Christian (meaning Protestant or Catholic of any denomination) and some of us are Atheist."

This reader was absolutely right. My statement was a blatant untruth. If you'll remember, I wrote my last column while sick with a fever and headache, and in my delirium, I messed up. I shouldn't have used the word "sacred," but something more like "special" or "dear." And I probably should have used a phrase like "the holidays" or "the season" instead of "Christmas." I meant no harm – in fact, just the opposite, I meant to enlighten and inspire – but thanks to some sloppy, imprecise language, I offended – or at least annoyed – instead.

It's so easy to do that today, isn't it? In this ever-more-diverse country of ours, the landmines

are everywhere. As my astute reader reminded me, “there is no one, collective *we*” when you’re talking about politics or religion or culture or society or... well, anything, really. Maybe there never was; maybe the “*we*” was always a youthful illusion on my part. All I know is that these days, more than ever in my memory, the United States of America feels more like the Fragmented States of America.

That’s okay, I think. But whether it’s okay or not... it just *is*. We all have to accept it and learn to live with it. I have long suspected the “Diversity Is Our Strength” motto was a bit too optimistic – I haven’t seen much evidence – but whether it’s our strength or just our big ol’ headache (or both?) diversity is our reality.

So how to proceed? A new year is upon us, and it seems as good a time as any to sharpen our navigational skills as we sail deeper into these uncharted waters of expanding diversity. And just to be clear: When I say “diversity,” I’m not talking about our multiple shades of skin. Racial differences are superficial – literally only skin deep – and I think we’re making great strides toward rendering those differences irrelevant. I only see us getting better in that department. No, I’m talking about deep, profound differences – beliefs, values, worldviews . . . the very foundations on which we build our lives and give them meaning. In that department, we’re diversifying rapidly – and in some cases, rabidly – as hordes of us seek new paths of enlightenment, eager to cast off the shackles of custom, while others dig in our tradition-loving heels, and still others laugh at the whole enterprise of faith-seeking, finding it childish and irrelevant. (Did you recognize yourself anywhere in there? I know I left out some categories, but that sentence was becoming a run-on of Henry Jamesian proportions . . .)

None of this is inherently bad. But it’s hard to deny that it makes for some tricky social interaction. Many of us grew up in a time and place where “Merry Christmas” was just an innocuous expression of good will – something akin to “Happy Birthday” or “Bon Voyage” – and outside of church, nobody thought too hard about its religious connotations. Today, as the culture wars rage on, the expression is fraught with baggage, and one must use it with caution. As a Christian, I’m sometimes struck with the urge to throw it out there in mixed company, and let the chips fall where they may. But in my more, um, Christ-like moments, I recognize that urge for what it is: pride. (Or, at best, mischief.) Far better, I think, to couch my tidings of comfort and joy in terms that will best convey those sentiments to the recipient. If “Happy Holidays” is what’s called for, then “Happy Holidays” it shall be. No skin off my back. Besides, there are plenty of people I can still safely “Merry Christmas” with . . .

What I’m trying to say, good Christian brethren, is this: Don’t pick fights to “prove” your faith. Frankly, that’s never been a good strategy . . . but at Christmas, it’s insanity. Not only does it

defile the spirit of the season, but it defies the spirit of our Lord. Jesus couldn't care less how you phrase your season's greetings, as long as you offer them up with love and sincerity. And back them up with actions.

On the flip side of that admonition, here's one for the non-believing (or differently-believing) among us: If someone *does* wish you a Merry Christmas, please consider the strong possibility that the words – albeit careless – are offered with genuine affection and good will, and not as some cocky shot across the bow. Try to receive them in the spirit with which they're given.

In short, we've all got to learn to treat each other more gently. If we are to survive in this age of diversity, we must always be reciting in our heads the dry cleaners' mantra: Handle with Care.

And I'm getting better at it. I really am. Take, for example, the aforementioned email from a reader. Here's what happened when I wrote her back: I acknowledged that she was correct – that I had written a “blatant untruth” when I said “we all hold Christmas sacred.” I explained to her what I'd really *meant* – that I had used the term “Christmas” as a stand-in for “the holidays” in the same way I often use “Jello” when what I really mean is the more generic “gelatin” – and that by “sacred,” I'd really meant something more like “dear.” I owned up to my imprecision and lack of clarity. Last of all, I apologized for having hurt her feelings. None of this was particularly easy for me, since my natural response when criticized, even a tiny bit, is to bristle like an angry cat, then start justifying myself to high heaven.

But I was in the wrong – I really was – so I just sucked it up and said so. And you know what? It felt good.

And guess what happened next? My reader admitted that her feelings weren't really hurt . . . that she simply had an issue with the word “sacred.” Said she thoroughly enjoys the Christmas season, loves exchanging cards, and even put up trees in her younger days. She then told me she thinks I do a fine job with *Lowcountry Weekly*, and we discovered that we both dislike the writings of Ayn Rand. All in all, a fruitful exchange. Turns out we aren't so different, despite having different “foundations.”

See. We can do this, y'all. We have to. And all it takes is a little extra thought. (And thoughtfulness.) Think before you give offense; but think before you *take* offense, too. And

always be willing to apologize when you jump the gun on either.

You don't have to compromise your values to live in harmony with those who don't share your tradition. In fact, when "Love one another" is your core value – as it is with my tradition, and most others I know – you *can't* compromise.

I'll take us out with the words of the great Victor Hugo, in giddy anticipation of the new *Les Misérables* movie opening Christmas day:

"Love one another dearly always. There is scarcely anything else in the world but that: to love one another."

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