

What is it, lately, with the word “hate”?



Suddenly, this deadly serious and seldom-used term – one that was tantamount to a cuss word, and every bit as forbidden, when I was a child – is being flung about indiscriminately, by all manner of folk in all sorts of unlikely contexts. In my view – and I think reality bears me out – this is not a good thing. Much like “love,” “hate” is a word with powerful juju, and you don’t just trot it out on a whim. Not without consequences.

Though it’s been simmering in the back of my mind for a while now, I began pondering this “hate” phenomenon in earnest a few weeks ago, when my friend and fellow *Lowcountry* columnist, Laura Von Harten, got herself into a wee bit of trouble over some remarks she made about the Catholic church at a County Council meeting. (Laura, honey, sorry to dredge it up again, but you know how it is; anything for the thesis, right? I promise I’ll be gentle.) The gist of Laura’s remarks was a criticism of Catholic policies on birth control, abortion, and female clergy. She pronounced the policies an “affront to my dignity and all of womankind,” leaving her fellow councilmen (and yes, they’re all men) a bit flummoxed. It happened during a discussion about whether to allow St. Gregory the Great in Bluffton a new zoning status, thus facilitating its expansion. Laura said, “I don’t want to support anything that will perpetuate [the church’s policies]...

I just have to vote for love and not hate.”

Okay, clearly a Beaufort County Council zoning meeting was no place to pick a fight with the Vatican. Separation of church and state and all that... But anybody can make a mistake, and Councilwoman Von Harten quickly recognized hers and attempted to rectify the situation; she issued a public apology and pledged to abstain from any vote regarding St. Gregory’s zoning status.

But boy, folks didn’t let her off easy. Letters came pouring in to the *Beaufort Gazette*, and most of them were angry... some were even vitriolic. Not content to limit their scolding to her lapse in political judgment, people made it personal, accusing Laura not just of “prejudice” and “bigotry,” but – you guessed it – “hate.”

Now, if Laura von Harten truly were a prejudiced, bigoted, hateful person, none of this would be particularly noteworthy. But since she’s one of the kindest, most broad-minded people you’re likely to meet, the depth and breadth of this public outcry seemed a bit... over the top. But that’s the H Word for ya. Unleash it if you must, but understand how hurtful and crazy-making it is... and then don your armor, because that word is a like a boomerang.

Here’s the thing: Pope Benedict is no more a “hater” than Laura Von Harten. You may disagree with some of the positions he upholds, you may think the Catholic church is misguided on any number of issues, but the fact remains that nothing the church teaches is, in any way, motivated by *hatred*. You may find the church’s teachings outdated; many do. But those teachings are based in natural law, and, for others, they seem more organic, authentic, and conducive to the good life than anything our modern culture has to offer. In other words, one person’s “timeworn” is another person’s “timeless.” We’re all free, if we wish, to tell the Pope to take his worldview and shove it, but why bring “hate” into the mix? As Laura Von Harten found out, such hyperbole only breeds more hyperbole. More succinctly, “hate” begets “hate.”

I spent the week of Thanksgiving in California with my husband’s family. Nowhere does the word “hate” (and its *au courant* cousin “hater”) get as strenuous a workout as on the left coast, where it currently enjoys regular employment in the debate over same-sex marriage. Actually,

“debate” is not quite the right word. The California media – mainstream, alternative, bloggers, etc – is engaged in a one-sided conversation on this issue. As they are all in perfect agreement, there’s not much to debate, so they spend most of their column space congratulating themselves and each other on their enlightened righteousness while disparaging all the “haters” out there in the provinces who voted for Proposition 8, upholding marriage as an institution between a man and a woman.

The well-meaning editors over at the *Sacramento News & Review* even took it upon themselves – as a public service, I guess – to publish a “H8 List” (Isn’t that a cute spelling? Kinda takes the sting out, huh?), featuring the names of individuals and businesses that had contributed to the “Yes on Prop 8” campaign. The list was full of horrible, despicable, h8ful types: teachers, pastors, dentists, doctors, merchants, etc. The

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clearly intended to humiliate these people and hurt their businesses. Of course, those on the list are haters, so they deserve to be hurt and humiliated. Thus sayeth the

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... so it must be true.

Sorry. This word makes me cranky. Even a little... hateful. Which is kinda my whole point.

Listen: There are, most certainly, plenty of people who oppose same sex marriage based on nothing more than plain, old-fashioned prejudice. Maybe some of those people are even “hateful,” though I don’t necessarily equate prejudice with hate. (Ignorance and fear, maybe, but not hate.) But there are also many serious, decent, thoughtful people who have pondered this issue carefully and come out on the same side as those so-called “haters.” Even our widely-hailed President-elect – surely no bigot nor hater, he – has said he believes “marriage is between a man and a woman.”

But I’m not interested in rallying you against gay marriage. (To be honest, I find arguments from the *pro* side pretty persuasive, albeit for somewhat atypical, conservative reasons...) No, I’m merely interested in imploring the world – or at least the few stragglers reading this column – to stop using the H Word so cavalierly. Stop calling people “haters” just because you disagree with them. Not only does it offend my sense of proper usage (the curse of the English major) and my sense of fairness (the curse of the Libra), but it offends my sense of humanity. You’ll know *real* hate when you see it, and it won’t look like Pope Benedict... or Laura Von Harten... or some poor school teacher who donated \$50 to the cause of protecting traditional marriage.

Then again, maybe it will. Let’s be honest, we’re all haters from time to time. And no more so, I think, than when we look a person in the eye – a fellow human being with good intentions and a moral compass and a carefully-considered position that just happens to differ from ours – and call him a “hater.” When we deny our ideological opponent the benefit of the doubt, we withhold the same grace we hope to have extended to ourselves. We disconnect, disengage, and effectively shut down the conversation... along with any possibility of real understanding or consensus.

I hate when that happens.