



The other day, someone at a luncheon I attended said she feels like she's known me for years because she reads this page. "Margaret pours her heart out in her column," she told another woman at our table. "She can't help herself."

She's right. For better or worse, I have always poured my heart out in this column. Ask my husband, and he'll tell you I have a tendency to "over share." He probably has a point, and he definitely has my sympathies. But as my lunch companion so aptly put it, I can't help myself.

As the year draws to a close, I've been reflecting on this habit of mine, which has always been driven, I think, by a need to connect with people, or "bond," as they say. I do it in real life, too, not just on paper. When something angers or saddens me, makes me laugh or moves me to tears, I immediately start looking around for someone to share it with. (Think movies, books, news stories, heck, even commercials.) To be honest, I'm always secretly hoping that someone will say "Me too!" and we'll join hands, share a moment of deep human empathy, and emerge kindred spirits for life.

Of course, it doesn't always happen that way.

This has been an intense year for me, both personally and professionally. (Warning: Here comes the heart pouring out again. Stand back!) In the category of "personal" was the return of my Christian faith, which had been on a rather lengthy hiatus. It was, and continues to be, a joyful, illuminating experience – so much so that I, "over-sharer" that I am, just *couldn't help myself*. I had to

write about it! Just
had

to make that connection. Surely there were others like me out there – other snide, jaded skeptics who'd been unexpectedly (miraculously) overwhelmed by grace? And those who hadn't been would still find my story interesting, wouldn't they? And maybe even encouraging? Oh, I knew there were plenty of folks who would think me deeply uncool, and possibly even wacko, but that was okay. Cool seemed highly overrated to me, suddenly, and sanity... well, I was never really known for that, anyway.

At this point, you'd have seen a bad moon rising over all this, right? Well, I didn't. I just plunged right in and started writing about my newfound religiosity. *In an alternative newsweekly*. And to make matters even more dicey, I threw some politics in there, too. I'd become gradually more conservative since the birth of my daughter – nothing radical, just a natural gliding back toward my traditionalist roots. Though still an Independent, I was now a moderate who leaned a bit right instead of a moderate who leaned a bit left. I'd felt that way for quite some time. The only difference was that now I was writing about it.

You know that warning about religion and politics? That you should never discuss them in polite company? Well, I knew the rule, but somehow, I didn't think it applied to me. In my naïve enthusiasm (or maybe it was just hubris?), I imagined I'd be the one writer – the first ever! – to bring these touchy topics before my readers, a group who, for the most part, had always been the epitome of "polite company," without reproach or reverberation.

Wow. Was I deluded. As it turns out, when you write about religion and/or politics in the first person, as is my style, you are always going to offend someone – usually several someones – and you're going to offend them on a rather profound level. These are people's core values, their most cherished beliefs (or non-beliefs), you're either endorsing... or not. In your ecstatic

frenzy of new understanding and insight, in your genuine excitement to spread it around, you tend to forget there are plenty of people out there who disagree with you, and who are quite fond of their *own* understanding and insight, thank you.

That hand-holding, kindred spirits thing? Um... not gonna happen.

Ironically, I am not a contentious person by nature. I genuinely like people - *most* people – and as I've said, I

love

human connection. I write this column because I truly enjoy making people think about things in new ways, making people laugh, even making people cry. What I do

not

enjoy is making people angry. And I really don't enjoy hurting people. It's been very difficult for me to face the fact that, in writing about these sensitive subjects, I

have

hurt people – not just strangers, but people I know and care about. The divisions in our society sadden and worry me, and I don't want to be one who contributes to those divisions. And I certainly don't want to contribute to any more divisions in my personal life!

So, as I look forward to a new year, I will be looking for new approaches to my writing. I don't plan to stop taking on dangerous topics like religion and politics; I find them fascinating and so important, especially now. But I *will* try to remember that God Talk makes people squirm, and I'll definitely try to be more respectful of those who don't share my views on one subject or another. In an age when so many just go through life's motions, anyone who actually thinks about the issue of faith (whether that means embracing it or rejecting it), anyone who truly cares about politics (from whichever side of the aisle), anyone who does these things is engaged in the important work of defining what it means to live *well*. That person has my respect and gratitude. We may not link arms and sing Kumbaya beneath a starry sky, but I honor that person.

For me, this holiday season has been full of poignant reminders that life is too short, and far too precious, to waste it arguing. I have a good friend who's been helping her mother let go after a long battle with cancer; another friend's recuperating from a serious car accident that almost took his life. My own wreck, just before Thanksgiving, was a frightening reminder that everything "solid" can shatter in an instant. And just last Sunday, I watched in horror as a little girl's laughter turned to shock and fear when she fell under a trailer during the Christmas parade downtown. Fortunately, the people in the crowd rallied around her and the truck pulling the trailer rushed her to the hospital. I hear she's just fine.

We are those people in the crowd, y'all. At some point, each and every one of us will fall under that trailer. Hokey metaphors aside, we need each other. Behind all the arguments, all the snarky jibes, all the liberal/conservative bickering, all the political noise that never seems to cease... we are just people, trying to figure out how to live well, and we need each other.

So we must learn to love each other.

This Christmas, that's all I know for sure, but it's a lot, I think. It's the same lesson Ebenezer Scrooge had to learn, and the Grinch, and the early disciples of Jesus, and just look how it transformed them all! Look how it transforms *us* when we let it.

In 1885, the poet Christina Rossetti wrote that "love came down at Christmas." May it ever be so.