

What to write about as the New Year rushes forward? So many topics I'd love to discuss; so many reasons not to. As you may remember, I've made a resolution to be more temperate in this column. Less offensive. Less controversial.



Less embarrassing to my friends and family. In short, I'm resolved to be more.... *appropriate*. This seems to be what people want of me, and I'm a pleaser, first and foremost.

Gee, I just read over that last paragraph, and it's uncanny how much "appropriate" can sound like "bitter."

Baby steps, I guess.

In the interest of practice making perfect, let's run through some topics of the day, shall we? Let's put my new restraint to the test, just as an exercise. It might be fun!

Mothers of young girls... let's talk about the Jamie Lynn Spears incident. Even if you're a much better mom than I, and have never let your six-year-old watch Nickelodeon's silly show *Zoey 101*,

chances are your daughter knows from Britney's little sister, Jamie Lynn – she of the honey highlights, tiny skirts, and tinier tee-shirts. While Zoey is set at a boarding school and features a bunch of teenagers, with its cornpone jokes and goofy goings-on, it's clearly aimed at a younger audience. I never felt exactly

virtuous

for letting Amelia watch the occasional episode, but only because I want her to develop good taste, not because I worried it might be too sophisticated.

But now, 16-year-old "Zoey" is pregnant. Not on the show, but in real life. When my husband and I heard the news – which one could hardly miss if one watches TV and/or reads the paper – the thought of explaining it to Amelia made us both queasy. So when the story was unexpectedly rehashed on a newscast we were watching after supper, Jeff and I immediately began chatting in loud, cheerful tones about some random topic, hoping that Amelia, happily communing with a coloring book, wouldn't hear the TV. But right in the middle of our frantic talk-fest, she looked up, and in a very calm, almost mature voice, said, "I know what's going on, you guys. Zoey's having a baby."

"What? How do you know about that?" I asked her, stunned.

"I heard it at church," was her casual reply.

Apparently, a couple of nine-year-olds had been discussing the decidedly un-virgin birth before the Christmas Pageant at First Presbyterian the night before. (There really are no safe havens!)

Determined to make the best of the situation, I decided to use it as a "teaching moment." Taking a deep breath, I delicately asked Amelia how she felt about Jamie Lynn's impending

motherhood.

Her reply: "It's weird! I'm never watching that show again." A deeply satisfying response, I thought. Teaching moment, successful.

Like most girls her age, my daughter is fascinated with the dangerous glamour of the teenage world and wants to grow up way faster than she should. (She tried to weasel out of wearing her green velvet Christmas dress this year, telling me it wasn't "hip and stylish" enough. The heartache!) But in many ways, she's still very much a little girl, and seems almost relieved when I force her to act like one. As an antidote to all the Zoeys, the Hannah Montanas, the Zacks and Codys and Drakes and Joshes, I recently put Amelia through a rousing weekend of innocent, old-fashioned entertainment – starting with *The Sound of Music* on ABC, followed by a wonderful new version of

Jane

Eyre

on PBS, and culminating with the sweet, World War II era movie

The Water Horse

, currently showing at our local theater. I wasn't sure this would work. I was afraid my cool-crazy daughter might not be easily engaged by the kindly, guitar-playing nun Maria or the earnest, plain Jane. I figured she

might

be attracted to

The Water Horse,

since it featured a cute, computer-animated creature, but wondered if she'd be bored by its quiet pace and idyllic setting of 1940s Scotland.

My worries proved unfounded. My daughter was captivated by all three servings of wholesome entertainment, and today, home sick on the sofa, she actually chose to watch *Mary Poppins*

instead of

High School Musical II.

Kids still like the good stuff. You just have to seek it out and put it in front of them.

New topic, slightly more risky: For months now, I've been told by those who love me – and those who don't – that "nobody *cares!*" about somebody else's religion. (Translation: Please keep your embarrassing little faith thing to yourself, dear.) Though for me, that statement is patently untrue (in fact, I've spent the past year devouring books about other people's religion with rapt absorption), I finally concluded I'm in a small minority. Most people don't care much about 'somebody else's religion', and I should write accordingly. (This

is

a business, after all.)

Boy, was my timing off. Ironically, just as I resolved to *stop* writing so much about religion, everybody else *started* doing it. In case you hadn't noticed, it's one hot topic these days, and I'm talkin' mainstream media, baby!

Of course, religion's all the rage right now for one reason, and one reason only – the unprecedented role it's been playing in the presidential primaries. Apparently, "nobody *cares!*" about somebody else's religion... unless that somebody is running for president of the United States in 2008. From Mitt Romney's "Mormon Problem," to Barack Obama's trumped up Muslim connection, to Mike Huckabee's "subliminal cross" commercial, everybody's talking about faith, and I'll be darned if I'm not gonna get in on the fun!

Actually, you might be surprised to learn that I am one of those who believe religion and

politics shouldn't mix. Not officially. I might be drawn to a candidate because he's a man of faith, because that says something to me about his character, but I would never vote for him solely for that reason. I've had a tendency, in the past, to confuse politics and culture, but I've begun to understand that they are two separate animals... that politics doesn't have that much influence on culture, nor should it. Cultures evolve organically, from the hearts and minds of the people. Cultural norms really can't be mandated by politicians, nor should they be. But that doesn't stop some people from wishing they *could* be.

The media elite have been absolutely bumfuzzled by the rise of Mike Huckabee. They can't quite decide whether he's a dumb country bumpkin or a crafty, Machiavellian "huckster," but either way, they just don't get his appeal. I, for one, could have told them they were underestimating Huck months ago, and not just because he's the most gifted communicator to come out of Hope, Arkansas since.... well, you know.

No, I believe that Mike Huckabee has caught fire because a sizable number of Americans are genuinely worried about what they see as a disintegrating culture - a culture into which materialism, hedonism, nihilism, and a bunch of other bad isms, have seeped so stealthily, and in such attractive disguises, that most of us hardly notice. (I didn't, until a particularly vile episode of *Nip/Tuck* shook me out of my comfortable numbness. It suddenly hit me that there was a time, not long ago, when you'd have had to slink into the back room of your local video store - wearing dark glasses and a fake mustache - to get your hands on something as crass and degrading as this popular, critically acclaimed TV show.)

I understand why this warm, even witty, Preacher Man (the first "ironic Evangelical" according to David Brooks of the *NY Times*), who cares about more Main Street than Wall Street, might seem like an oasis in the desert to many. But I'm afraid the Huckabee phenomenon is more like a *mirage* than an oasis. Not because he's not the real deal - I haven't quite made up my mind about Huck, yet - but because a president doesn't have, and shouldn't have, the power to "fix" a culture. A president is a chief executive, not a national pastor and *certainly* not a miracle worker. He must serve his constituents by leading the majority where it wants to go. He cannot, and should not, impose his values on the citizenry, but must govern according to *their*

values. Cultures change when hearts and minds change, not cabinet members. (Supreme court judges? Well, that's another column.)

We, the people, must fix the culture; but only if we can agree on what's wrong with it, which doesn't seem likely at this moment in history.

For my part, I think I'll just keep plying my child with Julie Andrews musicals.