

Holiday Season, 2004

Dear Friends,

First of all, let me apologize. I am indeed quite aware that we are well into 2005 by now. Perhaps I am jaded by modern society and that is the reason for my procrastination of the traditional "holiday letter." On the other hand, perhaps the holidays got away from me this year and my laziness is due to normal stress. I certainly hope that the second reason is the true one, in that the letter has gone out late every year recently, and if the first were true, that would be a lot of jade. I cannot help but notice that I have not received a whole lot of Christmas cards myself this year. I mean, some of you have sent me your cards just as you always have, but a lot of you have not. I choose to interpret this as meaning that holiday stress causes many people to delay the addressing of cards just as it does me. The other possible explanation is that many of you may think that if you stop sending me cards I will eventually get the hint and reciprocate this lack of holiday expression. If this is the case, you are sorely mistaken; the only way to remove yourself from the list is to move and not tell me.

Incidentally, should you find yourself missing your anticipated dose of Christmas cheer in a future year, you can always peruse the old letters. Yes, it's true. I finally decided to look into this thing called the "Internet" and use it for mass distribution. I have a "best of" list of my past Christmas letters available to the public at <http://euclid.nmu.edu/~apoe/christmas>. Actually, the "best of" list is the complete list of the letters since I do not really have such a large body of work to pick and choose among them. (The letter you are presently reading is the ninth in the series.)

Q: How many Polacks does it take to change a light bulb?

A: It doesn't matter how many, now does it? Aren't you offended by the question itself even without knowing the answer? We as a society have become very sensitive to ethnic stereotyping, and this is not a bad thing. In fact, the telling of Polack jokes is so frowned upon that I had to look up the spelling of the word "Polack;" I have never seen it in print. (Evidently, the spelling is *not* "pollack" or "pollock" as those words refer to a variety of fish.)

You see, even when we are associating with the intelligent educated persons in our circles of friends, it still is not acceptable to demean the intelligence of individuals of the Polish persuasion, even though we know that the insults are not factually based, that the Poles have contributed as much to the general state of human knowledge as any other group of people. (Remember Copernicus, the solar system guy? He was Polish!)

Now, here is what I fail to understand. Why is it that sensitive modern progressive citizens of the world such as we who would *never* demean an innocent member of an inoffensive class of people simply for humor's sake seem to have absolutely no problem ridiculing a *vital* part of the Christmas tradition, even though they do not mean it, even though they could not live without it.

I refer, of course, to the fruitcake.

Now, I can hear you saying, "Hey, I have nothing against fruitcakes. Some of my best friends are fruitcakes," but that is just a symptom of the problem. We have always heard the joke about the family who receives a fruitcake for Christmas and after a cursory examination realizes that it has received back the same fruitcake it had given to the sender the previous year. (In some versions, the fruitcake makes a circuit among a wide group of friends before returning to its point of origin.) This story is repeated each holiday season despite the immorality of the repetition. This story is wrong for three reasons:

a) You don't actually know anyone to whom that has happened, do you? This story is a flat lie; that should be reason enough to stop its spread.

b) It is offensive. A good litmus test for offensiveness is to replace the victim of a joke with the phrase "black person." Most offensive jokes sound like good clean fun until the butt of them is replaced with someone we do not wish to humiliate. Try it. Replace the word "fruitcake" with the phrase "black person" in the above joke or, for that matter, in *any* fruitcake joke. It's not funny now, is it?

c) It is patently ridiculous. We all know an unwrapped fruitcake frequently fails to make it to the refrigerator, much less into more wrapping paper a year later. We all know the sensation of unwrapping presents with sticky fingers.

Sometimes the admonition against the fruitcake makes reference to its high caloric value. PLEASE!!! "Oh, no, thank you, no fruitcake for me; I have to watch my figure during the holidays. I'll just have some more beef log and eggnog, please." The fact that fruitcake is high in calories proves that it is wonderfully delicious. All high caloric foods taste good; that's why they are high caloric. Your tongue savors the flavor, and your stomach refuses to let it go!

Sometimes the joke is a variant of "It's neither fruit nor cake." Like that proves anything. The English language is full of other words with the same property: "headcheese," "peanut," "teepee," etc. Figures of speech should *never* engender social policy. If our society believed otherwise, we would insist on sending soldiers and guns overseas whenever we heard the phrase "war on terror."

However, the biggest reason to put a stop to the fruitcake jokes is that they are perpetuated for no good reason. Ridiculing the fruitcake appears to be as large a part of the holiday season as the fruitcake itself. Peer pressure perpetuates the cycle. Someone at the office, maybe even the boss, says something like "I found a way to use all that fruitcake; they make excellent spackle," and you may be thinking "H'mmm. I ate a whole fruitcake just this morning," but you laugh and say, "That's a good one." Peer pressure is hard to resist, there is no doubt of that. But imagine the power of one voice. Imagine if just one person said, "Actually, I love fruitcake, and I don't find that joke funny at all."

Once fruitcake jokes are removed from the lexicon, what should be used to fill the void? I recommend jokes about those international coffee samplers. You know what I'm talking about. All those coffees with fancy sounding names from faraway nations, all of which taste like mud and none of which are actually consumed by sane people in those distant lands, but which you drink anyway because they make you feel cosmopolitan. Why not jokes about them?

Like any dedicated scholar, I would not dream of undertaking an essay like this without first completing exhaustive research on the subject. In the course of my studies, I came across an organization of people of like mind to me. You can visit The Society for the Protection and Preservation of Fruitcake at <http://mbgoodman.tripod.com/fruitcake.html> .

Enjoy the post-holiday season. It may no longer be Christmastime, but it is 3°F in Marquette (that's 19°C or 254 K, and that, along with the fact that NMU is still on winter break, makes it still feel like the holidays to me!

Andy P O E
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