

Bridges Over Troubled Water

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It never felt much like Christmas to me this year.

For starters, it was too dadgum hot – all December, really, but especially Christmas Day. Even up in North Alabama, land of my birth – where it's usually 10-15 degrees chillier than it is here in Beaufort – it was pushing 80 on December 25th, as we drove from my parent's house to my sister's for the big family shindig. I know lots of folks found this yuletide climate "merry and bright," but in our Family of Many Females, it just meant nobody got to wear their new boots or sweaters.

But this was a small thing – not officially tragic. Much worse than the hot holiday weather was all the pre-Christmas heat generated by the presidential election. And we Americans continued to bicker, snicker, belittle and besmirch each other right on through Epiphany, so the country now seems even more divided than ever. Feels like the Grinch really *did* steal Christmas.

By the way, I'm about ready to give up my Quixotic quest to build bridges between our two ruling, dueling political tribes. Yes, my dream of a Purple Alliance is finally fading. A friend woke me up to reality during a wine-enhanced chat at a holiday party, when he gently-but-firmly informed me: "Some people don't *want* to come to the middle, Margaret."

A simple, obvious truth. But suddenly, a light bulb clicked on, bright as Rudolf's nose, and I realized how tiresome I must be to those people – and no doubt many of you – with all my chipper talk of "mutual understanding" and "common ground." It's like I've been trying to make a hardcore Carolina fan say something nice about Clemson... or vice versa. It's easy for me to do, because, hey – to me, it's "just football." But for true fans, forget about it. Same goes for true-believing partisans. They can no more imagine "coming to the middle" than I can imagine becoming a diehard party member. Clearly, politics is more important than football – actually, in the South that isn't so clear – but I have dwindling faith in either political party and put far more stock in other forces (culture, for instance), so for me, it really is "just politics," in a way. Not so, the devoted partisan.

Different strokes for different folks, and so be it. Perhaps 2017 is my year to accept the situation and move on . . . or at least back off a little. Especially since I've been immersing myself in social psychology, and am more convinced than ever that our political orientations – left, right and center – are, in no small part, innate. Of nurture *and* nature born. As in... not likely

to change. My hope is that we'll all come to understand this one day, and that cross-partisan animosity will become just as unacceptable to decent Americans as any other form of bigotry. ("Hey, I was born this way! Don't be a hater!") But we are not there yet. Far from it.

So maybe the thing, in 2017, is to focus on more agreeable subjects – in other words, subjects more people can agree on. Recently, as the old year petered out and the new year emerged, I noticed there were plenty of things about which folks from both political parties – and no party at all – seemed to find agreement. Below is a short list, just to get you started thinking in these terms. A cursory perusal of Facebook revealed that . . .

▯ **Everybody hated 2016.** From natural disasters to terrorist attacks to celebrity deaths to election mayhem, 2016 is going down in the books as one very unpopular year.

▯ **Everybody loved Carrie Fisher,** may she rest in peace. And everybody loves 'Star Wars.' Even those of us who never made it through a 'Star Wars' film without napping feel a certain warmth and affection for the franchise – it's one of the few "common values" we have left in this country – and some of us cultivate a devotion that borders on religious. (As for me, I finally found a 'Star Wars' movie I could love in 'Rogue One.' It was a very special day for me. A rite of passage. I didn't nod off once!)

▯ **Everybody agrees that Netflix is a million times better than Network TV.** Recently, my Facebook friends of various political persuasions have been bonding over the Netflix series 'The Crown.' When I posted about it, I feared the topic might spark political division – all that talk of monarchy and democracy and socialism – but only one minor squabble broke out: A friend disagreed with the general consensus that John Lithgow is brilliant as Winston Churchill. This friend was measured in his dissent and the discussion was actually quite cordial. (But, of course, he's wrong. Lithgow is brilliant.)

▯ **Everybody agrees that leaving one's tree up past the 12th Day of Christmas is... well, bad form.** There are those who believe taking it down *before* the 12th Day is bad form, too, while others are sticklers for a New Year's Day deadline. But one's position on this issue tends to depend upon which "type" of Christian one is, and nobody expects Christians to agree on much of anything anymore.

▯ **With the exception of a few outliers (aka "freaks"), people of all religious and political persuasions still agree that fruitcake is disgusting.** Truly, if there are still any bridges to be built here in post-truth, post-reason, post-compassion, post-consensus America, those bridges are likely to be made of discarded fruitcake.