



By Margaret Evans, Editor

For this week's issue, I considered recycling last year's Christmas column. Just didn't think I had a new one in me. I began perusing the old piece online - to make sure it still held up, wasn't too "2016" - and when I got to the end, I found an editor's note that read, "This column first appeared in *Lowcountry Weekly* in December of 2014."

Curses! Recycling a Christmas column is one thing, but recycling a *recycled* Christmas column is quite another. A bridge too far, even for me. So here I am.

Last year's piece - the one I also published in 2014 - was called "When The Holidays Hurt." And dang, it would have been just perfect! Apparently, sinking into morose melancholy has become an annual holiday tradition for me.

I wasn't always like this. In fact, for most of my life I was rather obnoxious in my Christmas enthusiasm. People found me annoyingly festive. I'm not sure when that began to change. It wasn't a sudden transition. My Grinchiness crept up on me.

I speculated in the aforementioned recycled column:

"Maybe it's just a middle age thing. Maybe it's because I no longer have a small child in the house, because the losses are adding up, because the world is full of sorrow. Maybe it happens to everybody eventually, and maybe (hopefully) it's not even permanent. I read recently that human happiness over a lifetime is shaped like a U. Perhaps I'm at the bottom

of the U curve, poised to rise back up the other side?

"All I know is that at some point over the past few seasons, the scales tipped and something inside me shifted. My long-held, cherished feelings of excitement, generosity and wonder were finally trumped — beat down — by the forces of commerce, commotion, excess and expectation. Somewhere along the line, the magic became . . . the motions."

I first penned those words in 2014, and I'm sorry to say they still ring true. Either I'm still at the bottom of that U curve — temporarily — or this is my new Christmas normal. Heck, it's not even new anymore. I'm guessing I've felt this way for the better part of a decade.

If I'm perfectly honest, I think I've brought this Scroogian cloud upon myself, in large part. If there's one thing I can put my finger on — one thing that's dramatically changed over the last ten years — it's been the intrusion of social media into my daily life. (A completely self-inflicted wound, I might add, so don't cry for me, Argentina.)

When you spend too much time in the virtual world, it can make life in the real world a bit . . . fraught. In short, I think social media has made me antisocial.

These days, when I'm out in the real world with real people — say, at a holiday party or what have you — I tend to be less comfortable and confident than I once was. It's like I'm always bracing myself, waiting for somebody to walk up and scream in my face. Maybe something like, "If you support Trump, unfriend me now!" or "Did you hear that disgusting comment made by that disgusting person over by the punch bowl? I'm so disgusted!" or "I can't believe you'd defend AI Franken! Hashtag MeToo!"

Or I'm afraid I'll bumble into a Facebook-style discussion thread unfolding in "real life." I might overhear a group of *these* people talking about *those* people in profane terms, just loud enough for *those* people to hear them. Or maybe I'll walk up to *those* people and find they're talking smack about *these* people. In either case, it'll be awkward and I'll just sidle back over to the wine table where the bartender will give me that "didn't I just pour you one?" look.

(Yes. Yes you did. And?)

See, I'm cranky just thinking about it. And not Christmasy. Not Christmasy at all. 'Tis the season, friends, and I just want to mix and mingle, drink some eggnog, kiss under the mistletoe - all those lovely things that once came so easy. I don't feel like defending my position or annihilating yours, making my case or destroying yours, "calling you out" or being "called out."

Speaking of which - this "call-out culture" we live in now is decidedly anti-festive. Social media has encouraged us all to appoint ourselves judges, and many of us can't let a day go by without rendering (often unkind) opinions on our fellow humans.

It all starts at the top, of course. Our president renders opinions via Twitter, then the media render their opinions on those opinions, then we minions in the social media realm spray our opinions at each other like bullets from so many bb guns, to little effect - it seems to me - beyond constant agitation and turmoil in the body politic.

Think of it as trickle-down denunciation, if you will. Much like trickle-down economics, nobody's been able to prove that it does much good.

"We seem to have entered a period of nonstop mutual denunciation," writes Crispin Sartwell in the *Wall Street Journal*. "This is particularly useful to the media, which can fill pages and airtime with nonevents that reporters and pundits invent and then cover. It is useful, too, in providing simple moral guidelines by which a person can establish superior virtue without having to do anything."

(That last line would apply, particularly, to us armchair critics on social media. But wait, there's more!)

"It's a potentially endless circle," writes Sartwell. "Every time someone in public life

slips up, out come squads of reporters, not to cover the event, but to ask every other findable famous person whether he or she will condemn it in exactly the prescribed terms within the permitted time frame - and then whether they condemn one another for failing the test . . . What the 'Denunciad' demands is a public performance of self-righteousness - a moral dramatization . . . It's a contest to see who condemns whom, first, hardest, and with the most clichés. Sincerity is precluded or irrelevant, though some sort of simulation of it is required. . . I ask in all seriousness: Is this making anything better? Is it making us better? Is it doing anything to address any substantive problem?

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I think the answer to that question is brazenly obvious, though I can't imagine we're about to stop now. Denouncing others is just too perversely satisfying. Too deliciously self-affirming. And social media makes it so darn easy. How can we possibly resist?

Perhaps only with the help of a higher power.

I want my Christmas spirit back, y'all. I miss it. So this season, I'm praying for help: Lead me not into Facebook threads, and deliver me from hashtags.

Margaret Evans is the editor of Lowcountry Weekly. (Read more of her [Rants & Raves here](#) or visit her blog at

www.memargaret.com

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