

“A sententious absence of a sense of humor. “

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“Along Comes Mary”

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Yesterday, 329 years ago, my ancestor was hanged in Salem, Massachusetts. Salem nowadays is a curious tourist trap shilling crystals, wax museums, potions. You can photograph Elizabeth Montgomery’s statue (aka Samantha), star of the sit-com, “Bewitched.” You can also visit the park where the victims’ names are marked on benches. Mary Estey was the 18th to be executed for witchcraft.

No Pyewacket cat familiar for Mary. No eye of newt or toe of frog for her. No fire burn and cauldron bubble. No wiccan covens of weird sisters taking themselves way too seriously. Nope. Instead there were juvenile witnesses fabricating accusations. There were men in authority bent on vendetta. Salem was a cauldron of fanaticism and ignorance, fears and lies. We know too well how unchecked lies and liars invariably prove lethal. There also was grim severity. Do you want to know the first symptom of a community in decline? A sententious absence of a sense of humor. Not mocking humor, not degrading humor, which aren’t funny at all. But humor based in good will and self-deprecation. Do you have to be nice to jerks? Alright, you do. Do you have to tolerate them? No. Who stepped up for Mary?

Do you remember the Happy Iranians? They were mischievous Iranians arrested in Tehran for the crime of being happy. Three men and three women filmed themselves dancing to Pharrell Williams’ song and posted it on social media. It was promptly censored. Do you remember the song, “Wake Up Little Susie?” This Everly Brother’s song was banned for scandalous lyrics. So too “Puff the Magic Dragon.”

We’ll always be saddled with puritanical guardians of society keen on being offended, persons whom journalist George Ade remarked as having “accumulated a sense of virtue that weighed over 200 lbs.” You’ll find illiberal them on the right. You’ll find illiberal them on the left. They’ll threaten school boards for endorsing face masks. They’ll shout down speakers at Universities who voice uncomfortable opinions. The atmosphere turns more toxic because salivating extremes taunt and bear-bait those whom they judge their enemy. It’s beyond reasonable disagreement. The point isn’t about listening but about scoring punches and punishing the other. Outrage is easy. Welcome to our madness.

What helps us resolve the curse of illiberal, censorious conflict? There is no secret spell, no magic wand, no witchcraft. There only are deliberate and rational steps, beginning with the hope that those in conflict are neither mentally ill nor Kool-aid believers, that they want to resolve the conflict for the greater good rather than stoke it for selfish ambitions. Next, focus on issues, not principles. Avoid generalizations. Check personal attacks. Clear away the cobwebs of distortion. Agree on facts. Find areas of practical agreement and build from there. If this had been done in 1692, Mary Estey might have enjoyed her grandchildren rather than confronting zealots falsely hanging her.

Some seminary classmates found their zealous and cherished religious convictions challenged by professors and other students. They became better pastors for being pushed and questioned, despite one obnoxious student charging an Old Testament professor with heresy. Free expression should be neither safe nor weaponized. My daddy’s advice: If you don’t wish to be offended, don’t take offense.”

In the musical, "1776," several members of the Continental Congress worry that portions of the Declaration of Independence might offend British leaders. John Adams blurts: "This is a revolution, dammit! We're going to have to offend SOMEbody!" Earlier in the movie they are voting on whether or not they should debate the topic of independence. Let's applaud Stephen Hopkin's reply: "Well, in all my years I ain't never heard, seen nor smelled an issue that was so dangerous it couldn't be talked about. Hell yeah! I'm for debating anything. Rhode Island says yea!"

I'm anticipating reading a new book by Anne Applebaum, titled, "The New Puritans. Basically, she argues how our society simply has replaced the pillories and stocks, the public whippings and Scarlet Letters, with hasty public social media shaming, false slander, and condescending contempt.

Ring the bell. Close the book. Blow out the candle. Mary Estey's final words, written in her final petition, were both warning and prayer: "I petition to your honours not for my own life for I know I must die and my appointed time is set but the Lord he knows it is that if it be possible no more innocent blood may be shed which undoubtedly cannot be avoid in the way and course you go in."