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Home-organized for the Holidays

By Susan Ayala Bland

PUMPKINS AND HAY (as long as it's not in a manger), snowflakes and frosty windowpanes. These days it seems nature and weather conditions are among the last few safe subject matters left when it comes to the holidays.

Not only are we excruciatingly safe about how we greet each other, but we're also seeing the homogenization of the holidays we celebrate during the last few months of the year – and they're all getting blurred together.

What seems like only hours after the pencil boxes and rulers of “Back to School” promotions are whisked away, there's a rush of Halloween costumes, fall foliage and Christmas candles popping up on store shelves.

The political correctness of not offending neighbors, friends and schoolmates is most evident in the greeting card section. Cards are laced with words like “happy harvest,” “chilly weather” and “winter wonderland”-all meant to be the means of sending salutations of – well, what, exactly?

There's some backlash brewing when it comes to the whole “Happy Holidays” scene. Sam's Club, a Wal-Mart subsidiary, came under fire a couple of months ago when their August/September issue of *Source* magazine prominently displayed Christmas items with no mention whatsoever of the word “Christmas.”

Last December, the frequent use of “Happy Holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas” met with disapproval by most polled by CNN/USA Today/Gallup. In the poll, which surveyed 1,003 adult Americans by phone, 69 percent said they prefer “Merry Christmas” over “Happy Holidays,” which garnered 29 percent.

Since when does celebrating a bountiful harvest have anything to do with donning a Batman costume and trick-or-treating?

(Those who prefer “bah humbug” were not included in the survey, which has a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points).

In our efforts to be overly cautious, we often skirt around the issues of holidays – be it Halloween, Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Christmas or Kwanzaa – and such tiptoeing can end up even further confusing the issue. For instance, there's nothing wrong with having a Fall Festival. But since when does celebrating a

bountiful harvest have anything to do with donning a Batman costume and trick-or-treating?

Kudos to a local congregation that called their event what it was – a Halloween Festival. The name probably struck a nerve with some of their membership. However, these folks know who they are and what they believe, and surely nobody expected to attend the event and find anything other than uplifting family fun.

Instead of getting so hung up on what we call them, or pretending they don't exist altogether, why can't we actually make the holidays a teaching opportunity instead of an amalgam of scarecrows, snowflakes and generic parties?

Of course, when it comes to school and broaching the subject of holidays, we'd have to use some old-fashioned common sense. Students shouldn't be made to feel left out, singled out or affronted for their beliefs. But at what point do we give this sensitivity such a priority that celebrating our differences is sacrificed?

Still, even the most well-intentioned utterance of “Merry Christmas” can land a teacher in hot water quicker than a principal-approved field trip to an art museum. Heaven forbid someone should wear anything but a snowman on his or her sweater or dare to pass out candy



canes.

Public opinion runs the gamut when it comes to allowing Christmas and other religious or cultural holidays into the classroom. Last year, Plano Independent School District was raked over the coals on the Fox News show *The O'Reilly Factor* because they banned red and green plates and napkins from being brought to school "winter parties." A restraining order soon followed, lifting the ban temporarily, and the legal battle remains as yet, unresolved.

At the other end of the spectrum, newswire stories report Fairlawn Elementary in Fort Pierce, Florida, is standing its ground by keeping a Christmas tree in its front foyer with red, white and blue balls celebrating both the holiday and the school's mascot, the Patriots. "We also put out a menorah and we put out Kwanzaa candles," says Principal Patricia Heffelfinger. "I think we are helping bring about a greater awareness."

According to ABC News, down under in Australia the state of Victoria has its government sending out letters to schools reminding them not to ban Christmas from the classroom – they're even encouraging Christmas carols and nativity scenes.

The move comes after some schools and kindergartens banned the traditions last

year, for fear of offending non-Christian children. But Education Minister Lynne Kosky says Christianity and its traditions should be included in school curriculum.

"Christianity is the main religion in Australia and Victoria so it's obviously important we celebrate part of that festivity, this is important for our students, for children, it's important for parents," she says. "And we want schools to be able to celebrate Christmas alongside a range of other religious occasions."

Okay, so right now we don't celebrate Christmas at school out of respect to children who may have different beliefs. What about birthdays? Children who are Jehovah's Witnesses don't believe in celebrating birthdays. Yet the cupcakes keep coming. What about the hearts, candy and fundraising flower sales on St. Valentine's Day? It's nearly impossible to cover all the bases without obliterating any kind of celebration at all.

Diversity enriches an educational environment and helps to prepare our children for life in a big, wide world. The lesson of "different" not being a bad thing is already offered on a daily basis by the variety of students of ethnic, cultural and special-need differences in our classrooms – and our school district should be commended for their eagerness to embrace these differences.

Being exposed to different perspectives is an extension of such an education. No need for special parties, just the chance to learn about others' beliefs, traditions and cultures instead of pretending these holidays don't exist. Are there any atheistic holidays we can throw into the mix as well? I'm all for equal time. The experience helps shape children into more tolerant and accepting human beings.

Do I really believe any of this is going to happen? I can't help but hope for it. Sure, there's hope. (And yes, Virginia, there really is a Santa Claus).

Maybe it would help if we could all take a cue from my neighbor, who is from Iran. When calling to enroll his three-year-old son in a local church's preschool program, because of his accent he was stopped mid-sentence and asked: "You know this is a Christian program, right?"

Instead of being offended by being lumped into a stereotype (would someone with a Hispanic accent be asked the same question?) his thoughts were, "If you want to teach my child about Christianity – that's great! Why would I not want him to learn something like that?"

That kind of thinking would go a long way toward peace on earth this holiday season.

Susan Ayala Bland is a freelance writer living in Frisco.

Some Holidays of the Season

RAMADAN – The ninth month of the Islamic (lunar) calendar year (this year it fell on September 23 through October 22). It is considered the most venerated, blessed and holiest month. Prayers, fasting, self-accountability and charity have special association with Ramadan. The religious observances of Ramadan occur throughout the entire calendar month.

HALLOWEEN – Celebrated on the night of October 31, most notably by children dressing in costumes and going door-to-door collecting sweets. Is most common in Canada, the United States, Puerto Rico, Ireland, the United Kingdom, and with increasing popularity in Australia and New Zealand.

THANKSGIVING – An annual, one-day holiday observed in Canada and the United States to give thanks. Following a nineteenth century tradition, most Americans believe that the first American

Thanksgiving was a feast that took place on an unremembered date, sometime in the autumn of 1621, at Plymouth Plantation, Massachusetts. In 1620, a group led by separatists from the Church of England, who was heading for Virginia, instead landed at modern-day Plymouth, Massachusetts, for uncertain reasons. In the autumn of 1621, they celebrated a three-day harvest feast with the native Wampanoag people, without whom they would not have survived the winter of 1620.

HANUKKAH – A Jewish festival that begins on Kislev 25 (December 15 this year, according to the Gregorian calendar) and is celebrated for eight days. Hanukkah reaffirms the ideals of Judaism and commemorates in particular the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem by the lighting of candles on each day of the festival. Although not mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures, Hanukkah came to be widely celebrated and remains one of the most popular Jewish religious observances.

CHRISTMAS – A Christian festival celebrated on December 24th (Christmas Eve) and 25th (Christmas Day) marking the birth of Jesus. The English term Christmas (“mass on Christ’s day”) is of fairly recent origin. The earlier term Yule may have derived from the Germanic jol or the Anglo-Saxon geol, which referred to the feast of the winter solstice. Since the early 20th century, Christmas has also been a secular family holiday devoid of Christian elements, and marked by an increasingly elaborate exchange of gifts. In this Christmas celebration, a mythical figure, Santa Claus, plays the pivotal role.

KWANZAA – An adaptation of an African harvest festival, celebrated from December 26 to January 1. It was created in 1966 by Maulana Karenga, a professor of black studies at California State University in Long Beach, who added an additional “a” to the end of the name to distinguish it from the African festival. It was conceived as a nonpolitical and nonreligious holiday for the affirmation of African family and social values. The holiday is not considered to be a substitute for Christmas.



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