

Posted on: Friday, December 17, 2004

How to handle faux pas amid holiday festivities

By Nancy Churnin
Knight Ridder News Service

Think of it as the Whoops! factor.

Amid the excitement of the holidays, there will inevitably be icky-sticky-how-do-I-get-out-of-this? moments. Someone who wasn't on your list may give you a present. Or maybe your kids will say something to guests that will make you want to melt away like the Wicked Witch of the West.

But the good news is that you're not alone. In our increasingly mobile and diverse society, the only way to avoid missteps and misunderstandings is to book a cruise that lasts until January is safely under way.

For most of us, however, that option is neither feasible nor desirable. Yes, you will make mistakes, but you can learn from them and laugh a little in the process.

Here's professional advice on how to handle embarrassing moments, from Joy Weaver, president of Protocol Enterprises Inc. (www.protocolexpert.com) of Plano, Texas, and Harriette Cole, advice columnist and co-author of "Coming Together Celebrations for African American Families" (Hyperion Books for Children, \$22.99).



A Texas man remembers a Christmas dinner when a guest at his table laughed so hard that she accidentally spit a pine nut onto his plate.

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A GIFT FOR THE WRONG HOLIDAY

One year, Alexandra Chilton, 42, of Dallas gave a Christmas ornament to everyone in her supper club, including her good friend Dia Epstein, 43, also of Dallas. Chilton knew that Epstein is Jewish, but in the frenzy of trying to get everything done, she just wasn't thinking.

"I was so embarrassed, I didn't say anything," Chilton says. "I figured it was over and done with, but I couldn't forget it. I felt so stupid, especially with someone who is such a good friend. I just brought it up recently after 14 years. She laughed and said she didn't even remember it until I brought it up."

Epstein says she opened the gift and said, "This is very pretty."

"Obviously it wasn't something I was going to use, but that wasn't the point," Epstein says. "I don't view things in terms of how it will affect me, but what was her intent? Her intent was kind and nice. She just didn't know. I was never offended."

Cole's advice:

Before you get caught up in shopping for the holidays, spend time thinking about how you can honor each person on your list. Steer away from group gifts where everyone receives the same item unless it's edible, because people have different tastes and interests. If you make a mistake, speak up right away. What's most important when giving a gift is that you offer it with love.

Weaver adds:

Epstein understands the No. 1 rule of etiquette: being gracious. She was not offended by the gift and knew that it was given from the heart.

WHO GAVE ME THIS, ANYWAY?

Sharon E. Johnston, 55, of Irving, Texas, still has the lovely crystal birds that someone gave her 10 years ago at a holiday party she hosted at her house. She still feels bad that she didn't thank the giver, but there was no card attached.

"Every time I look at the crystal piece, I remember that they have never been thanked and must think I'm extremely thoughtless," she says.

Weaver's advice:

This is one of the most common mistakes people make when attending parties — forgetting to attach a gift card to the host or hostess gift. In this case, the responsibility lies with Johnston's anonymous gift giver.

Johnston can't call guests she suspects might have given her the crystal piece, because if it was not from them, her call could suggest that she was expecting a gift. I advise my clients to fill out gift cards before they wrap gifts and to securely attach the cards or put them inside gift boxes.

Cole adds:

We must all stop allowing guilt to paralyze us. Rather than look at the gift each year and remember that she didn't reciprocate with a thank-you, Johnston can simply enjoy the gift and be grateful that someone thought so fondly of her to bring it.

WHO SPIT IN MY PLATE?

Guy Davis, 44, of Plano, Texas, didn't know what to do when a guest at his table laughed so hard that she accidentally spit a pine nut onto his plate. His hosts, who didn't notice, asked him why he wasn't eating, but he didn't want to embarrass the woman.

"I ate my bread roll, ate some salad, drank a lot of water, but avoided the pine-nut-contaminated dinner plate," he says. "I told everyone, 'Ooh, I'm really not that hungry,' even though I was starving, because I didn't want to embarrass her. There was no graceful way out of it."

Cole's advice:

Wouldn't it have been great if the woman who inadvertently spit the pine nut into the gentleman's plate had used humor to address the situation? She could easily have said, "Oh, my gracious. I'm so sorry. I seem to have deposited a bit of my dinner on your plate. May I help you get another?" Then, both people would have enjoyed a lovely meal.

Weaver's advice:

Davis handled it like a true gentleman. He was thinking of others first. This situation could have been avoided if the owner of the pine nut would have followed a basic rule of etiquette and covered her mouth when laughing. It would have been a disaster to call attention to the laughter or the hostess. This would have caused embarrassment for everyone. We must be able to navigate any situation with the goal of making people comfortable.

A PRESENT, AND NOTHING TO GIVE IN RETURN

Gina Curtis, 42, recalls that, during her first winter in her new Plano home, her neighbors rang the doorbell two days before Christmas, all dressed up, with elaborate gifts for each member of her family. "They all stepped into our house and waited while we opened our gifts. We would never have thought of buying presents for them because we barely knew them. Also, we knew they didn't celebrate Christmas. They were Muslims.

"I felt too uncomfortable to go out and buy presents for them after the fact, so I just put together a basket of hot chocolate and baked goodies and took it over to them a few days later."

Weaver's advice:

In all situations like this, we should accept the gift and be grateful, and do not apologize for not having a gift in return. We tend to make an uncomfortable situation much worse by going overboard apologizing or making excuses for not having a gift.

Curtis responded properly and thoughtfully by giving baked goods that did not try to equal her neighbors' generous gifts, reinforcing the point that it is the thought that matters. Another recovery plan when you've been surprised is to express your appreciation in a thank-you note.

Cole adds:

The point of holiday giving is not tit for tat. Because you may find yourself in a similar situation, make or purchase extra gift packages to place in a basket near your tree. Then, when you need a gift, you have something for everyone.

DID MY CHILD REALLY SAY THAT?

Dia Epstein's 3-year-old was upset when a visitor offered him a gift in red and green paper. He pushed it away, saying, "Doesn't she know we're Jewish?"

"I saw that sweet person's face drop," the Dallas mother of four recalls. "I felt badly. I still feel badly.

"I told the gift giver my child didn't understand. I pulled my child aside and said the gift was given out of thoughtfulness and affection. I told him I wouldn't want him to celebrate someone else's holiday, but there's a time just to say thank you and be polite. He went back and said thank you and took the gift."

Cole's advice:

This is very tricky, especially given the global nature of the holiday. Yes, the gift giver could have been more sensitive to the child's religious background and selected a generic wrapping paper.

If the giver knew the child's religion, she could have talked to his mother in advance to express her interest in giving something to the child while asking for direction as to how to proceed. As far as Christmas gifts go, I recommend that parents find ways to teach their children to accept holiday gifts even if they do not follow the religion, because most Christmas gifts are offered with a broader context in mind.

Weaver adds:

Learn about other cultures before you give gifts. It is better to educate yourself in advance than to have to suffer an awkward situation later.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS MENU?

Robin Corbin, 41, of Plano remembers how embarrassing it was at an office holiday party when party organizers noticed that employees from the company's base in India weren't eating. The dinner featured meatballs, turkey and beef.

The planners had not realized that these employees were vegetarian.

The planners tried to get the hotel to bring in vegetarian dishes, but with no luck, Corbin recalls. The guests never said a word about it.

Weaver's advice:

When planning the menu at a large corporate party, have a variety of foods, such as beef, seafood, chicken, a hot vegetable dish and a cold vegetable dish.

In this case, notes of apology would have been appropriate. I always tell my clients that "I'm sorry" covers a multitude of sins.

Cole adds:

A good party planner investigates who will be coming to the party, including people with special diets or other needs. Given that employees were visiting from another country, special care should have been taken to make them feel welcome.

When the menu glitch was noticed and it became clear that the hotel could not accommodate them, the party planners should have gone an alternate route. Chances are a nearby restaurant would have been able to whip up something.

SOMEBODY SAID SOMETHING STUPID

Melody "Afi" Bell, 46, of South Oak Cliff, Texas, has been celebrating Kwanzaa for 18 years and has put up with all sorts of remarks from people who call it a pagan holiday or confuse it with Hanukkah because the kinara reminds them of a menorah. One remark that still bothers her came from a fellow teacher, also an African-American. He referred to Kwanzaa as "the black Christmas."

"I saw it as a chance to teach," Bell says. "I said, 'No, no, it's nonreligious. Everyone can celebrate it because the principles are so important. Every year you get together and remember your ancestors and remember your past and celebrate.'"

"The other teacher said nothing and walked away."

Cole's advice:

Kwanzaa is an African-American cultural celebration that many people, African-American and otherwise, don't fully understand. Bell took the right approach — to educate her co-worker about the holiday rather than become hostile because of his ignorance. That she has never forgotten, however, points to how easily we can get our feelings hurt.

In the future, if you don't understand something about Kwanzaa or another cultural or religious celebration, ask questions. For those who celebrate Kwanzaa, acknowledge the similarities in customs — from Thanksgiving (Kwanzaa means "first fruits" in Kiswahili) to Hanukkah (the kinara is similar to the menorah, and that's great).

By showing others how your traditions complement one another, you create a space for everyone to connect.

Weaver adds:

This is a classic example of "not being informed." This man was so far off the mark that even Bell's quick Kwanzaa lesson left his head spinning.

An incident like this can happen to anyone, but when we've made a mistake, it is best to practice being thoughtful, apologize if necessary and ask sincere questions to show that we don't want to make the same mistake again.