

## Do you write to any dears?

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**commentary**

I am seeing signs in my mail these days of a need for a new, safer way to greet strangers when you write to them. Many strangers - especially male strangers - are reluctant to call me "dear."

You, too, have probably noticed that you have fewer letters calling you "dear," though you readers dearly deserve to be called something like that.

In former years, the letters I received from both male and female strangers were invariably "Dear Bill" or "Dear Mr. Hall." And the same was true of practically everyone's mail.

True, a few cheeky readers would begin their letters "Dear Sir, you cur!" or "Dear Fathead" or "Dear Commie Scum." But those were rare, even in an angry world.

Today's letters, insulting or friendly, are more likely to begin with just plain "Bill," with a dearless "Mr. Hall" or frequently with "Hi, Bill." Even close friends are a little twitchy about calling me "dear."

What's going on here? Have we all become less dear?

I think it probably has something to do with the Great Coming Out Party among all our gay friends and relatives in recent years. Suddenly, they're everywhere. Thus people write to other people these days with greater awareness that practically anyone you run across might be playing for another team, romantically speaking.

So, in our determination to avoid any suggestion of same-sex affection, we easily embarrassed straight people avoid that word "dear" just to be on the safe side.

It's like the word "gay" itself. When people my age were young, "gay" meant almost exclusively "jolly" or "merry." And our big American Heritage Dictionary (less than 30 years old) still gives cheerfulness as the No. 1 meaning.

But when it comes to common usage, cheerful isn't really the prime meaning of "gay" any longer. In fact, that word has mostly come to mean homosexual in recent years, so much so that hardly anyone uses it today to call someone else jolly or merry.

Thus most of us who remember the original favorite meaning of the word are not about to use it on a happy stranger. Most of us would no longer say, "I like you, Arthur; you're so gay." A thing like that can be misleading, even threatening to somebody who is a little uneasy about being mistaken for having a passionate preference that is not truly his own.

Similarly, with so many of us so touchy about such matters, we try to avoid awkward misunderstandings in the use of the word "dear." Many people today don't realize that "dear," like many words, has more than one meaning.

American Heritage supports that conclusion. "Dear," the dictionary says, certainly can mean "beloved" or "precious." And I would be uncomfortable having either a strange woman or a man begin a letter to me with "Precious Bill."

However, "dear" also has a non-affectionate formal meaning that is totally respectful of a person you have never met or with whom you have no close friendship. In that usage, "dear" means "highly esteemed or highly regarded." It's the "dear" of "Dear Sir" and "Dear Madam." And it doesn't normally mean you have the hots for another person.

But in recent years, people have confused the affectionate "dear" and the formal, respectful "dear." For that reason, in the age of open gayness, if one man, for instance, calls another man he doesn't know "dear," that second man may quickly come to resemble a deer in the headlights.

We heteros probably should all grow up and stop worrying about how gay we may look to ill-informed people who don't know the formal use of "dear" from the intimate use of that word. But after all, human nature tends to make us twitchy in such matters. Meanwhile, we twitchy ones need some safe new ways to greet people in an old-fashioned, sexually neutral manner without appearing to be wanting to date them.

We need to start addressing our letters and e-mails in more blandly formal ways. Something like:

"Greetings and Solicitations, Noble Sir ."

"Dear Blatantly Straight Mr. Dowdy."

"Howdy Mr. President."

"To Whom It May Concern (but any personal preferences you may have certainly don't concern me.)"

"Greetings, Earthling."

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