

Offense is in the eye of the offended

Kathy Hedberg/Lewiston Tribune

When it comes to differences of opinions between cultures about whether a remark or image is insulting, I say the culture whose image is in question gets the bye.

Let's take, for instance, this debate about whether American Indian mascots are offensive to American Indians. American Indians say they are. Many of the rest of us say we don't get it, but, hey, we're not American Indians, so whose word are you going to take?

I never understood this dynamic until my son married a woman from Cambodia. My daughter-in-law, Kirilynn, survived the Cambodian civil war (just barely); her family escaped and lived in a concentration camp in Thailand for two years before finally immigrating to the U.S.

They endured hostility and prejudice from some of their neighbors in America, she said, and so when she started dating an Idaho boy her family was horrified. Idaho, after all, is a haven for racists, or so people from other states tell us. I don't think that's true and I'm a native Idahoan, but there are lots of people out there who don't want to take my word for it.

Anyway, back to my story: Lynn, who is now the mother of my beautiful grandson, Tiger, has visited Idaho several times with my son but tells me she still feels a little uncomfortable here. She feels that people are staring at her and, especially, at Tiger, who is one of the few mixed-race children at the starting line of the Grangeville Border Days street races.

I've listened to her and I try to be understanding, but I don't quite see it her way. There are plenty of other mixed-race or minority-race people in town - especially during Border Days - and I have never felt that anyone has stared at Tiger rudely.

But I don't have the same perspective as Lynn. In my entire life, there have been only a handful of times when I was not among the majority race. If there's disparagement or worse going on toward people of a different culture, I'm not likely to pick up on that immediately.

So I say, give the person who feels the insult the benefit of the doubt.

We all have different perspectives and backgrounds, and there are just some things we'll never fully understand about each other. We have to be respectful of that and give the other guy a break if we want to get along.

It's like this friend of mine who recently made a remark about my upcoming 60th birthday that I didn't appreciate. I thought he was being snide; he didn't see it that way.

Fortunately he made amends. I gave him my spiel about contrasting viewpoints and reminded him of a truism by Dave Barry regarding commenting on a woman's weight:

Never, ever, under any circumstances, Barry said, unless you see the baby actually coming out of the woman's body at that very moment, ask her if she's pregnant.

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