

Fragile: Handle with care

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Spirit of Life

It used to be that “Fragile: Handle with Care” were instructions printed on packages to alert mail carriers that delicate contents could break. Fragile packages need to be treated with intention, caution, gentleness and ... well, care. The hope in labeling packages “fragile” is that the warning will cause those reading it to modify their behavior or approach towards it. They would, theoretically, take additional steps to avoid dropping the package. They might release their grip on it and handle it more gently. They may not choose that particular package to throw to their co-worker during an improvised game in a moment of boredom. You get the point.

These days, it seems to me we should print this warning atop everyone’s name tag at our holiday gatherings. I’m not kid-

ding — every person of every age needs a sticker that says, “Fragile: Handle with Care.” Even the most robust and resilient of people are feeling the weight of the world right now. It’s difficult to keep up with all the bad news — war, hate, greed, corruption, climate change. These miseries are, of course, on top of personal lives that contain their own dramas. So many people are justifiably overwhelmed, tired, afraid, out of good ideas and unsure what to do next. This may be an accurate description of you. It definitely describes at least one of the people you’ll spend time with during this holiday season.

I wonder if our holiday gatherings would change if everyone wore such a warning label. I wonder how our behavior might adjust if we recalled that the precious humans around us are breakable

in ways we do not know and cannot see through the packaging. Might we withhold that snark towards our least favorite aunt if we remembered that behind her boasting lies deep doubts about her own self-worth? Could we resist returning the jab from our cousin with sarcasm in kind if we recalled the fierce tenderness his clumsy strength sometimes obscures? Maybe, just maybe, we could stop ourselves from rolling our eyes when so-and-so tells that same old story if we remembered that story matters so much to them because it’s the last time they felt valued.

I’m not suggesting that everyone gets a pass for everything this holiday season. Harm done by the “hurting people who hurt people” still needs to be addressed and prevented, even or especially in our families. (Yes, we should address things

like misogyny, transphobia, antisemitism, Islamophobia and racism — they’re never OK.) However, I am suggesting that understanding and empathy could help us respond more helpfully and effectively when people behave badly. In fact, it’s precisely when compassion is paired with accountability that sustainable transformation can take place. This is not only a fitting goal for societal change; it must also be the means by which we get there.

In summary: This weekend is Christmas, next week New Year’s Eve. It’s rough out there. The world and all of us who live in it are fragile. It could be made better if we treated one another (family, stranger, enemy, friend alike) as we truly are — “Fragile: Handle with Care.”

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