

CAROLYN HAX

Adapted from a recent online discussion.

Dear Carolyn:

During the last school year, I helped my neighbor out by occasionally taking care of her child in the morning so her husband could go to early meetings for work. As the year progressed, this went from occasional to daily and from 10 minutes before the bus to a 6:15 a.m. drop-off.

For a variety of reasons, this will not work for my family next year. I have told her we would not be able to watch her kid in the morning. My neighbor is extremely irritated and has asked me again to do her this favor. I want to say no, but I do not want to have to deal with her hostility. Should I give in to keep the peace or be strong and deal with the repercussions?

Good Neighbor vs. Pushover?

Oh my goodness. I'm going with "pushover." Her totally inappropriate hostility is a reason to hold firm to your "no," not a reason to reconsider it.

Had she expressed gratitude or explained her urgency, then that might be cause to reconsider — but even then, if you just don't want to do someone a favor, then that's reason enough to say no.

The one exception would be if you were worried about the child and wanted to offer even this small shelter from a stormy parent. But, even then, if your circumstances don't allow it, "no" is yours to say.

Dear Carolyn:

My father-in-law died suddenly last week. What steps should I be taking to make sure my wife is okay?

Va.

Listening. That's your gateway to everything useful.

If you can be thoughtful in weighing what you hear against what you already know about her, that will be even better.

You probably know, for example, how she processes difficult things — talking, shutting down, denying, crying, immersing in mindless chores, there are so many possibilities — so now you can keep an eye on how she's processing this loss based on what you know. Then you can provide a timely assist where needed, as well as note any anomalies or signs of trouble.

You can also, on a more practical level, be the one who makes small burdens disappear — laundry, dinner, calls to X or Y. It's especially nice when they're dispatched without fanfare.

Really, people in the depths just want to feel understood — that's the one way to help someone not feel alone, when feeling alone is the prevailing sense with a serious loss. You're halfway there just by caring enough to want to get it right.

Hi, Carolyn:

My fiancé and I invited one of his colleagues to our wedding. He recently called my fiancé and said, "We [he and his wife] are only going to go to the reception; you know how church ceremonies can be long." My fiancé said nothing in reply.

Do I just let this go, or should my fiancé or I say something to this guy to express our disappointment and surprise? I've never heard of anyone RSVP-ing just for the reception!

Anonymous

You know what, there are just too many things in life that are worth our attention to give attention to something like this. Just put a mark in the "doink" column and enjoy your wedding.

Read the whole transcript or join the discussion live at noon Fridays on www.washingtonpost.com/discussions.

Write to Tell Me About It, Style, 1150 15th St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20071, or tellme@washpost.com.

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BY NICK GALIFIANAKIS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

The Style Invitational »

REPORT FROM WEEK 829

In which we asked for limericks featuring words that begin with di-, in a nod to the ongoing efforts at Oedilf.com to assemble a whole dictionary's worth of five-line doggerel. And for hundreds of the almost 900 entries we received, the emphasis was on "dog," with people submitting such "rhymes" as "differential calculus / ridiculous," "diabolic / Catholic" and "middle / pickle." But as always, they were blown out of the water by the work of some inspired limericians, most of them veteran Invitational Losers but also some once-a-year visitors as well as a few First Offenders. Note the numerous cross-the-pond Losers this week; hence rhymes like "ignore / law."



She's a girl of outstanding dimensions
(Two of which were her surgeon's inventions).
She's got 36D-22-33 . . .
And a PhD nobody mentions. (Andrew Burnet, Edinburgh, Scotland, a First Offender)

2 the winner of the bacon- and cupcake-flavor dental floss, plus the bacon mints:
A dimwitted local Fort Worth
Is a formerly vocal flat-Earther.
This yokel was due
To latch onto a new
Source of lunacy: Now he's a birther.
(Chris Doyle, Ponder, Tex.)

3 The new diet I'm on is a winner:
It's just sauerkraut, breakfast
through dinner.
The gas from both ends
Repels all of my friends,
So from farther away, I seem thinner!
(Brendan Beary, Great Mills, Md.)

4 An eclysiast twists at the hip,
Reaches down for a
hands-to-feet grip,
Then remains in that pose
While disrobing, which shows
The high art of the Möbius strip.
(Chris Doyle)

NOW DIRECT YOUR ATTENTIONS TO HON' RABLE MENTIONS

When one person's word is the law,
That's dictatorship. Do not ignore
Or contest the decrees
Addressed to you, please:
Just say "Yes, dear," and not a word more. (Hugh Thirlway, The Hague)

Mixing cyanide, lye and dioxin,
You can make the world's second-worst toxin.
(If you're looking to go
For the ultimate, throw
My three teenagers' sneakers and socks in.) (Brendan Beary)

You're sloshed, Al! his lady admonished.
"Yer right, luv," he slurred. "I'm astonished!
I'd try to refute
That I'm drunk as a coot,
But that would be bein' dishonesht." (Mae Scanlan, Washington)

Though she cheated on me, I can't blame her,
Since she'd warned me no marriage could tame her:
Repeating, "I do,"
She'd then whispered, "Not true."
(Maybe next time I'll heed the disclaimer.) (Jim Pettit, Naples, Fla., a First Offender)

Mr. Waters? A call on the line,
With a gender I just can't define.
Someone born long ago
To an actor you know —
It's Chianti, the fruit of Divine. (Mike Turniansky, Pikesville, Md.)

In and out of the bathroom all night.
Diarrhea: My stomach's not right.
All I ate was a Frito,
And then a Dorito:

Two chips that had passed in the night. (Scott Campisi, Wake Village, Tex.)

"I just love Mister Springsteen," she flirted.
"Ma'am, your ticket is fake!" the guard blurted.
"But I'm in the front row!"
"Ma'am, you still have to go."
So she left, feeling quite disconcerted.
(Craig Dykstra, Centerville)

Archimedes excitedly raced
Through the town when the water displaced
Made him bellow, "Eureka!"
That Syracuse streaka
Showed off a lot more than poor taste. (Brendan Beary)

The promoters had sweetened the pot,
So the blues singers all made a lot,
Excepting young Bo,
Who would open the show.
No, they didn't pay Diddley squat. (Chris Doyle)

I've fitted my lamps with a dimmer
That reduces their light to a glimmer,
To protect my weak sight;
The result is, tonight,
That I can't see to finish this limer . . . (Hugh Thirlway)

And Last, an Anti-Invitational:
Though disdain for the
Rules is taboo, the Empress
Might print a haiku. (Chris Doyle)

See more Honorable Mentions (especially of the classic not-quite-for-Aunt Mildred variety) at washingtonpost.com/styleinvitational.

Next Week: Mess With Our Heads, or Black and White and Misread All Over



BY BOB STAAKE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Week 833: Our Greatest Hit

Platyplus: A mammal with webbed feet, a duck bill and opposable thumbs. (Russell Beland, Springfield, 2003)

Doltergeist: A spirit that decides to haunt someplace stupid, such as your septic tank. (David Genser, Arlington, 1998)

It's the only contest for which the Empress receives unsolicited entries, year round, year after year, from people who've gotten the idea that this is all we do here in Invitetown. Let's hope they stumble on this year's version: **Start with a real word or multi-word term or name that begins with M, N, O or P; add one letter, subtract one letter, replace one letter or transpose two adjacent letters; and define the new word, as in the examples above.** Note that it's the original word, not the result, that must start with one of those letters.

Winner gets the Inker, the official Style Invitational trophy. Second place gets the Style Invitational International Delight Gourmet Gift Pak, which consists of a can of haggis (primary ingredients: lamb lungs and oatmeal), sent from Scotland by traveling Loser Drew Bennett of the Ozarks, who couldn't find any squirrel on the shelves in Edinburgh; and a can of the tasty fungus that Mexicans call huitlacoche and the less-marketing-inclined have termed corn smut, donated by occasional Loser Mike Czuhajewski.

Other runners-up win their choice of a coveted Style Invitational Loser T-shirt or yearned-for Loser Mug. Honorable Mentions get one of the lusted-after Style Invitational Magnets. One prize per entrant per week. Send your entries by e-mail to losers@washpost.com or by fax to 202-334-4312. Deadline is Monday, Sept. 14. Put "Week 833" in the subject line of your e-mail, or it risks being ignored as spam. Include your name, postal address and phone number with your entry. Contests are judged on the basis of humor and originality. All entries become the property of The Washington Post. Entries may be edited for taste or content. Results will be published Oct. 3. No purchase required for prizes. Employees of The Washington Post, and their immediate relatives, are not eligible for prizes. Pseudonymous entries will be disqualified. The revised title for next week's results is by Beverley Sharp; this week's Honorable Mentions name is by Kevin Dopart.

ON WASHINGTONPOST.COM

Have a question for the Empress or want to talk to some real Losers? Join the Style Conversational discussion at washingtonpost.com/styleconversational.

A Chasm Where Middle Ground Used to Be

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come more philosophically homogeneous — there are no liberal Republicans to speak of, for example. Party leaders are more prone to crack down on anyone showing signs of apostasy. Buck the party caucus and you'll lose a plum committee assignment or party help with fundraising.

The media are complicit. Cable TV news channels require guests to meet certain standards of stridency. Anyone wishing to express a moderate opinion will be upbraided and mocked. In the publishing world, rants and screeds disguised as books shoot to the top of the best-seller lists. In the era of Keith Olbermann vs. Bill O'Reilly, and Michael Moore vs. Ann Coulter, all the institutional energy is on the extremes.

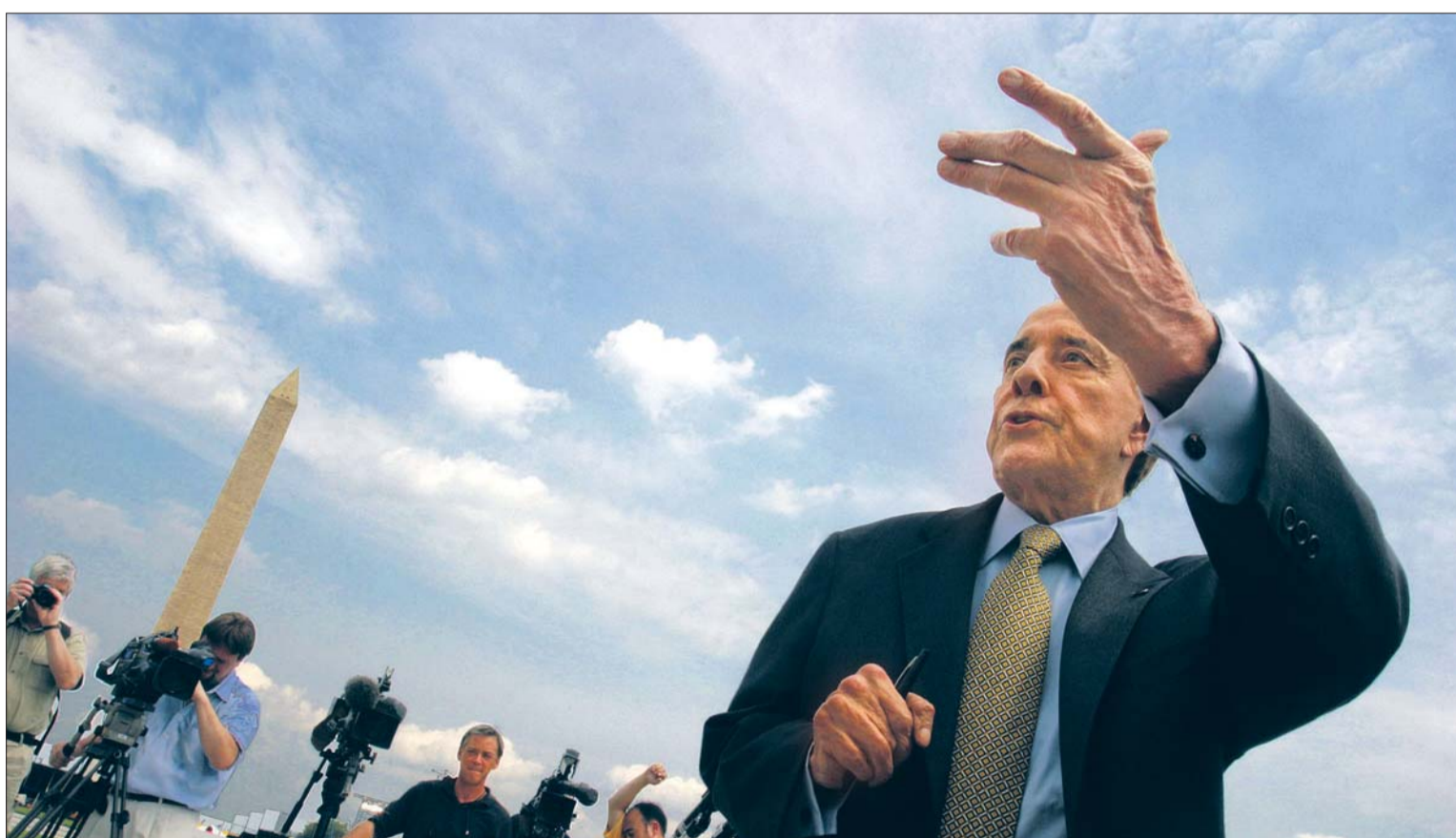
"Being sober and reasoned in the national interest is often less entertaining than being hyperbolic and accosting the other side," says Jason Grumet, a Democrat who directs the Bipartisan Policy Center, a Washington think tank that is parked in the lonely middle of the spectrum.

There might be moderates out there, but they don't march. They don't go to town-hall meetings to berate a member of Congress. The people who do go seem to have a tendency to worry about such non-existent things as "death panels." At least, that's how it looks on TV.

"You gotta rebuild the dormant center," says Lee Hamilton, the former Democratic congressman who was known as a centrist during his decades in the House. When he first showed up in Washington it was a much more collegial and calm environment. "The biggest change in politics from when I came into the Congress in 1965 and today is the intensity of politics. You have a lot of difficult issues out there, you have interest groups out there. They're more sophisticated. They have better means of communication. They're better-financed."

Says Democrat Richard Gephardt, the former House leader: "It's always easier to defeat something than pass something." He adds, "The only way to change any of this is for the public to demand public servants who want to solve problems and want to act in a bipartisan way."

There is, in fact, a bipartisan health-care proposal. It's being pushed by Democratic Sen. Ron Wyden of Oregon and Republican



BY BILL O'LEARY — THE WASHINGTON POST

"You gotta do some horse tradin'," says former Senate majority leader Bob Dole, who knew how to work both sides of the aisle to get legislation passed.

Sen. Robert Bennett of Utah. But although the Healthy Americans Act, as it is called, has support from 15 senators, it doesn't include the "public option" for health insurance favored by Democrats and has been in the margins of the debate. When Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham (S.C.) said he'd support Wyden's effort, Graham heard howls from his right flank. Wyden said he was then criticized by people on the left for wanting to do something a Republican senator had endorsed.

"The country's disillusionment with politics feeds on itself," Wyden says. "When people are disillusioned with how Congress is tackling big issues, that's a huge boost for the far left and the far right."

In his book "The Second Civil War: How Extreme Partisanship Has Paralyzed Washington and Polarized America," political journalist Ron Brownstein blames much of the polarization in the past 15 years on the internal dynamics of the Republican Party. Former House leader Tom DeLay, for example, argued that there was too much bipartisanship. But Brownstein finds many other sources of hyperpartisanship: "The political system now re-

"The political system now . . . is built on exposing and inflaming the differences that separate Americans."

Ron Brownstein
"The Second Civil War" author

wards ideology over pragmatism. It is designed to sharpen disagreements rather than construct consensus. It is built on exposing and inflaming the differences that separate Americans rather than the shared priorities and values that unite them," he writes.

Still, even a critic such as Brownstein concedes that the decline in bipartisanship also reflects the increased vibrancy of American grass-roots politics. The Internet has made organizing easier. More people have more access to infor-

mation about the inner workings of Washington. Blogs give many more people a platform for punditry, dissent, protest.

Although some elder statesmen may mourn the decline of the handshake deal and clubby civility, bipartisan votes in recent years have often backfired. Many Democrats regret voting to give President George W. Bush authorization to go to war with Iraq, and although the late senator Edward M. Kennedy received plaudits in recent days for working across the aisle, he came to regret his support for Bush's No Child Left Behind initiative.

On the left, ideologues are hardly in mourning over the problems of the center. The argument goes that the Democrats have large majorities in both chambers, plus possession of the White House — so what's the need for cutting a deal with Republicans? The left has been furious with Obama for hedging his bets and appearing so pliable.

Lynn Woolsey, a California congresswoman who is a leader of the progressive Democrats, says her camp has already made a concession by not insisting that reform be built around a "single-payer" gov-

ernment-run system.

"We have compromised already. Without a single-payer on the table. It isn't even in the discussion," Woolsey said. "President Obama was strongly elected for change in this country. People are expecting and counting on him for that. Part of his platform was health-care reform, not health-care tweaking."

You call it bipartisanship, someone else calls it selling out. Dole, for one, would like to see something more affirmative out of his Republican friends: "This is the most important legislation most of them will ever work on. To just put a 'No' sign on your desk — don't call me, I'll call you — I don't think is appropriate."

The retired senator does hold out hope that health-care reform may yet pass. The complexity of the legislation is actually a boon, by his reckoning. All those provisions give a dealmaker a lot of options.

"There's more to play with. You can swap a few things, drop a few things, modify a few things," Dole says. "You gotta do some horse tradin', and some horses are bigger than others. And this is a big horse."