

Please Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood

By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – September 9, 2012

I'm just a soul whose intentions are good. Oh Lord, please don't let me be misunderstood.

I'm not sure when it started, but I've caught myself singing that 1965 hit by The Animals often while sending my weekly column to the newspaper.

Unless you've tried it, you don't know how hard it is to deliver a meaningful message in 750 words or less and not leave things open to gross misinterpretation. Unlike a conversation, there's no chance to explain. Your words are just out there.

Don't get me wrong; I don't mind when people disagree with me. It's a measure of whether I'm doing my job. If no one holds a different view, then I haven't said anything worth saying. I'm wasting newsprint, ink, and people's time.

Misunderstanding can arise from differences in how the writer and reader interpret a particular word or phrase. Other times, it's a matter of emphasis, where a reader hangs on one point, while the columnist was trying to share perspective on something else that ends up lost for that reader. The greatest disconnects, though, are when we filter words through assumptions and preconceptions about the writer and his/her motives. Such misunderstanding is most frustrating, because it leads to personal attacks and debates often unrelated to anything the columnist has written. These situations are seldom productive.

I want to share a story from a little over a year ago. Most of you probably remember and/or know Nat Harwell. In my view, this particular story speaks highly of Nat, so I hope he won't mind me sharing.

As a columnist for this newspaper long before I started contributing weekly, Nat's views were quite different from mine. And, though I scanned his work from time to time, I didn't routinely read him.

One particular Sunday, his column caught my eye. His words made me furious. Commenting on the ongoing "rails to trails" situation, Nat made mention of a sign supporting trails being in the Mayor's yard. At the time, my wife, Kim, was still Covington's Mayor. And, my role as a local trail advocate had created connections in some folk's minds that simply were not there. My anger with Nat's column was because A) there was not and never had been a sign in our yard, B) I would never have asked Kim to allow me to put up a sign and compromise her objectivity, and C) Kim never would have agreed had I asked her to do so. I had other concerns with the column, but that was the gist of it.

I fired off my angry email to Nat and the editors demanding a retraction. Nat responded immediately and was understandably a bit defensive, considering my angry tone in the email. Throughout my Sunday routine, I seethed and plotted, crafting a letter to the editor in my mind that would attack and demolish point-by-point every allegation in Nat's column. I would teach him a lesson!

That's when a voice from some deeper and, thankfully, wiser place spoke: "Call him." I realized Nat and I casting barbs back and forth in print, trying to embarrass and discredit one another, was the same old trap we were falling into everywhere in this community. And, in that moment, I had a chance to do better.

So, I called him. I'll be forever grateful that Nat immediately invited me to come over and talk. I did. We sat in his den for close to two hours. We didn't just talk about the column, trails, or our differences of opinion. We got to know each other. It was -- as he later wrote and I wholeheartedly agree -- delightful. Through simple conversation, we each realized the other guy was not so bad after all.

We didn't part magically agreeing on everything. But, we did leave understanding and respecting one another. We went beyond the familiar cop out of "agreeing to disagree." We left able to understand. I didn't always like everything he wrote after that day, but I read it with interest. And, a few times, I emailed him to commend a particular point he made. He's written and called me with encouragement also. It means a lot.

Like me, Nat was a soul whose intentions were good. He deserved to be understood. We all do. He and I took the road less travelled, and it made all the difference. Next chance you get, take the risk. Try something different. It's the only shot we have at better outcomes.