

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Can the Mailbox be Emptied?

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You could say that you wrote me a loving greeting over the holiday, and I wouldn't know if it was true. My mailbox was full, and for two days everything sent to me by e-mail bounced back to the sender. It wasn't until I became aware of the problem, and disposed of the junk mail and the old, unnecessary information, that was I able to receive new correspondence. Making the decision as to what was spam and what was important provided another opportunity to observe and learn.

I wonder if the storage space in our brains is also limited and needs to be emptied periodically. The heart has unlimited seating, but with our brain, does too much data close down our ability to think clearly or learn new things? Some older people complain of "senior moments" when they can't easily recall a name. Perhaps it's because our mental file folders are stuffed to capacity. It's easy to see why.

Those of us who want to be fully engaged in life are open to all things that are new. We want to be aware of everything that is going on in the world: in politics, sports, the arts, commerce, healthy living, spirituality, and in the lives of other people. We want to know, for instance, in which countries Shiites are the majority, why that's important, and how their beliefs differ from those of the Sunnis. We watch to find out who won the election in Liberia, and who just sent troops to Somalia. Closer to home, we want to know the names of President Obama's cabinet members, and of the Republican candidates. We'd like to have read the number one book on *The New York Times* bestsellers list, and have seen the films that will be nominated for Oscars. We may not have watched the game, but we want to know the final score of the big football matchup on Thanksgiving Day. It interests us who are in the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations, and what the Tea Party people really want. We'd like to read every op-ed in the national and local papers each day, and be informed by the best bloggers on the Internet. We watch *The Good Wife*, *Homeland Security*, *Boss*, and *Blue Bloods*, and want to know what we're missing by not taping *Saturday Night Live* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*.

Some of us have met hundreds and hundreds of people across the globe through our work and travel, and we want very much to remember each and every person's name. We may have homes in two cities and need to remember who works at which supermarket and which day the trash is picked up. Our spouse may have had back surgery so we need to learn the significance of L-4 and L-5, what pain meds relieve what symptoms, and what side effects we should expect. We may also have had to learn the names of HIV diseases and drugs, or cancer treatments, or heart medications. We research the Internet to become as knowledgeable as the doctors who are treating us or our loved ones.

If we aren't up on who is cool according to young people, we risk losing touch with that generation, just as our grandparents often did with us. And we need to not forget that Great Aunt Helen has a

nephew in Worcester who she wants called if anything happens to her. We've written his number down in our contact list which has grown so large we don't remember who many of the people are.

We pride ourselves in memorizing our Social Security number, telephone number, zip code, street address, alarm code, favorite charge card numbers, and the addresses and phone numbers of our last four homes. Some of us even have memorized the cell phone numbers of our veterinarians and haircutters.

Minority groups give us lists of the words that are considered welcoming and those we should never say, such as the word "midget" being offensive and "short statured" being preferred. We try to remember the distinction between gender identity and gender expression, and the need to say "sexual orientation" and not "sexual preference". We want to remember the holidays that are important to our black, Latino, Asian, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Wiccan, and gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender friends. We know not to call a Catholic priest a "minister" and a Methodist minister a "priest". We need to decide between "Merry Christmas" and "Happy Holidays".

Just that is a lot of information to be expected to easily recall, and it's only the beginning of the data that's stored. The rules on grammar, recipe measurements, fertilizer nutrient numbers, the sobriety prayer, the words to the *Star Spangled Banner*, Mom's favorite perfume, Dad's favorite scotch, the distinguishing characteristics of a 747, and who sang *Tiny Bubbles*, are in the pile. With all of that in our heads, how are we supposed to take on a new project that requires we learn a whole new list of names, acronyms, ingredients, or concerns? Is it possible to learn a new language, such as American Sign Language, with the other things in our head that demand attention, such as the birthday of our favorite nephew or niece?

Some people who are overwhelmed with too much stimuli simply close down. We call it "burn out", as when circuits are fried. Other people learn to prioritize what's important and what is not. They don't care about what movie won the Oscar in 1998. I used to be really hard on myself when I drew a blank, but I've learned to let go of the fear of not remembering dates, the names of people and plants, and the capitals of all 50 states. I can't consciously empty my brain of spam and unnecessary data, but I can choose to kindly say to myself, "It's not important."

The challenge we all face is in deciding what's worth remembering and what's not. Those choices determine the quality and character of our lives, such as whether we remember to empty our Internet mailboxes, and how much we care that we missed receiving e-mail.