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What Greeting Cards Say About Us

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Following my usual practice, a couple of years ago I quickly ran into a local card shop to pick up a Mothers Day card for my wife. Easy enough, you may say. Not so. Men are just not well equipped for greeting card shopping. It's bad enough to pay an outrageous sum for painted paper covered with sloppy prose — it's even worse to be forced to read through a few of the insipid messages in order to find just the "right" card for the occasion. This time, I blew it. Big time.

As the kids and I were gathered to tell Mary how much we love and honor her as the mother of our household, the time came for her to open and read my card. Disaster quickly followed. It turns out that I had picked out a card for "blended families," which we are not. The card expressed awe for the mother's ability to blend two families together. You can imagine the sound of a crashing airplane as background music.

Understanding wife that she is, Mary turned the occasion into an opportunity to laugh rather than to get angry. Our kids enjoyed it even more, warning me never to go into a card shop alone.

Greeting cards are a sign of cultural decadence. The card companies have largely invented new holidays, just to build business. What's next? National Plumbers Day? When genuine sentiment disappears, the greeting card industry will remain. The slogan for the industry should be this: "*How to say something close to something when you have absolutely nothing to say.*"

The emergence of greeting cards for "alternative" families is just a sign of how commercialism follows demographics. But, does the commercialism merely follow? In some sense, it appears that the commercial aspect may actually *drive* cultural momentum. After all, a new family form represents a new market. Every new lifestyle is a new opportunity. Keep this in mind when you read [The Los Angeles Times](#) news story on the emergence of a new line of cards for adulterers. In "[Adulterers Need Cards Too](#)," the paper reports that a woman named Cathy Gallagher has developed a line of cards for couples involved in an adulterous affair. The whole idea is profoundly sick, but the reality is truly revolting. A Christmas card for the adulterous couple includes this line: "As we each celebrate with our families, I will be thinking of you."

According to the paper's report: *Gallagher says her Secret Lover Collection of 24 cards is the first line exclusively for people having affairs, and she expects hot sales. She says half of married people have had affairs (though some studies show the figure to be far less — more like 15% of married women and 22% of married men, according to the University of Chicago). From former President Clinton's relationship with "that woman" to shenanigans on TV shows like "Desperate Housewives," affairs are out in the open.*

Further: *Gallagher says her cards express sentiments that people in affairs can't express to anyone else, even their best friends. "These are not sex cards; these are emotional," she says. "No other card reflects having to share someone or not being able to be with that person on the holidays."* Yes, there's nothing like a little home-wrecking sentiment to warm the adulterous heart at Yuletide.

Now, this little line of cards is not yet a major cultural phenomenon. After all, the major national greeting card companies have no similar product line — at least not yet. But consider this fascinating and revealing section from [The Los Angeles Times](#) story:

Hallmark, the nation's largest greeting-card seller, says some of its relationship cards are broad enough that their meaning can vary depending on the situation, so it doesn't see a need for an explicit line of cards for adulterers. The "Between You and Me" line covers a wide variety of relationships, says spokeswoman Rachel Bolton. She points to a card that says, "I love the private world that you and I share." "I look at that and I'm thinking of my husband. You might look at that and think of your secretary," Bolton says. "The purpose of a greeting card is to make somebody feel good — to solidify or further a relationship."

Well, there you have it. Hallmark is marketing toward adulterers with a line that is "broad enough that their meaning can vary depending on the situation." Capitalism triumphs with blandness and moral relativism combined.

As for me — I'm not going into the card store without a chaperone. It's dangerous in there.

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