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'Freedom' is just another empty word

Leonard Pitts Jr. I'd like to think it was the sangria talking. But the plain truth is, when Anna said she doesn't find this country to be especially free, it was Anna talking. Granted, her complaint is hardly new. People often grouse about the lack of freedom in the land of the free.

But you see, Anna is from Estonia, a former republic of the old Soviet Union. As in the Evil Empire, world's leading exporter of communism. So when Anna says she feels less free in the United States where she now lives than in the once-totalitarian regime where she was born, well ... it gets your attention.

And when she says Americans sometimes remind her of the gray, fatalistic men and women who shuffled along under communism, unwilling to think too deeply, say too much or laugh too loudly for fear of offending the State, it is striking, to say the least.

You won't know Anna from Estonia. She is a friend's fiance and these insights were not part of some think tank paper but, rather, came in the ebb and flow of table talk one recent night at a Mexican restaurant.

Still, I think Anna is onto something. Americans, she said, love to trumpet their freedom. But it's hard to square that with political correctness that straitjackets communication for fear of giving unintended offense, hair-trigger litigiousness that requires major corporations to treat customers ("Caution: Coffee is hot") like idiots for fear of being sued, zero-tolerance policies and mandatory sentencing guidelines that remove human judgment from human encounters for fear of rendering unequal justice.

You do not have to agree that Americans compare unfavorably with the dull and dispirited Party men and women of a generation ago — I don't — to believe Anna has a point.

A nation of iconoclasts and originals seems hellbent on becoming a nation of hall monitors. A nation born in revolution has lived to see revolution neutered and co-opted. So much so that even that which poses as a threat to the status quo (hip-hop, for example) nowadays has commercial sponsorship and corporate tie-ins.

It's hard to imagine an Elvis Presley happening in such an era. Or a Malcolm X, a Miles Davis, a Marlon Brando, a Bob Dylan, a Walt Disney, a Betty Friedan or any of the other American originals who pole-axed the 20th century.

After all, originality is anathema to uniformity and, make no mistake, uniformity is what we're talking about here, the campaign to regulate language, law, culture and every other aspect of human intercourse in the hope of thereby removing from that intercourse every hint of risk or danger of unequal treatment.

To put it another way: You can hardly accuse the cashier of being rude to you because of your sexual orientation if the cashier is a keypad; you can hardly sue the maker of the vending machine you rocked until it fell over on you if it bears a sign that says rocking this machine will cause it to fall over on you; you can hardly say the judge gave you a harsh

sentence because you're Hispanic if the judge had no role in choosing your sentence.

And if this impulse toward uniformity sounds noble in theory, what it leads to in practice is kids kicked out of school because Midol violates the zero-tolerance drug policy, or a guy getting 25 to life because the pizza he stole violates the three-strike law.

And, too, it leads to Anna from Estonia making it a point to show visiting friends a sight they could never see in the old country. They laugh, they point, they whip out cameras and take pictures.

Of the Everglades? No. Of Mount Rushmore or Lady Liberty? No.

Anna said they take pictures of the idiot signs. These, she said, crack her friends up.

"Caution: Coffee is hot." Apparently, elsewhere in the world, you don't need a sign to know this.

Leonard Pitts Jr. is a columnist for The Miami Herald. Readers can write to him at lpitts@miamiherald.com.

Pitts chats with readers from 1 to 2 p.m. every Wednesday online at www.miamiherald.com.