Sunday November 16, 2014

Crossing an invisible line

By Jim Taylor

Accusations of sexual harassment apparently took two male members of parliament by surprise.

Two unnamed female members charged Montreal MP Massimo Pacetti and Newfoundland MP Scott Andrews with sexual harassment by their language and behaviour.

It's possible, I suppose, that this is simply partisan maneuvering, in a situation where everything takes on political overtones. Pacetti and Andrews are both Liberals; the two women are both NDP.

Liberal leader Justin Trudeau acted immediately. He suspended both MPs. Without a trial, as his critics immediately noted. He thus violated a primary principle of our justice system, that a person must be considered innocent until proven guilty.

But what constitutes guilt? What is harassment? How do you prove it?

Cultural differences

A video that circulated on the Internet and in news broadcasts showed a young woman walking through downtown New York. She endured a constant chorus of whistles, cat calls, leers, and indecent proposals. One man even insisted on walking along with her.

The same scenario, re-enacted in New Zealand, evoked not one salacious suggestion. In Rome, I suspect, the same stroll would have resulted in a few instances of physical groping.

Given these cultural variants, how does anyone define determine what's harassment, and what isn't?

Obviously, it is not acceptable for me to fondle a woman's bum. Or, for that matter, to flatter her that her bum looks really good in those tight jeans.

But can I say she looks good today? Especially if she seems to have

made some special effort?

Perhaps. Unless I do it too often. Unless it feels as if I'm singling her out for unwelcome attention.

Between the extremes

Here, as in so many other areas of life, I would argue that you cannot know when you've crossed some kind of invisible line until you've crossed it.

Somewhere between two extremes -- between paying no attention to another person and paying too much attention -- lies a golden mean, a midway point.

Except that it's never exactly in the middle. The difference between child neglect and child abuse is not halfway. The difference between starvation and gluttony is not halfway.

There may, in fact, always be a huge undefined middle. Everyone recognizes the extremes of drowning and of dehydration – but no one, literally no one, knows exactly how much water each human should have available for a comfortable life.

What one woman considers friendliness, what one woman may even invite, another may consider harassment.

I worked one summer in an isolated Canada Customs border post that had two female officers. The rest were all male. I know those women experienced harassment. I know, because the men bragged about it. They thought it was all in fun, a way of building a working team.

To them, it may have been just fun. To the women, it must have felt humiliating, a major invasion of privacy.

As far as I know, the harassment never escalated into rape or assault. But that might have had something to do with the shotgun that one woman's husband carried when he went for a walk.

Only the victim knows

A customs office and the Canadian parliament are both artificial environments. They throw people together, like astronauts on the International Space Station. People work long hours, in close quarters, often in tense situations, isolated from the support of friends and family.

In that context, it could be argued, conventional standards may feel malleable. Nothing can ever define exactly when a working relationship turns into friendship, when a friendship turns into flirtation -- or when casual

flirtation turns into harassment.

Which is why I don't think that any man can ever pre-determine what constitutes harassment for a woman. If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, then harassment is in the emotions of the harassed.

Each of us moves in a private bubble, a comfort zone. Face to face, we keep about an arm's length apart. Side by side, we'll stand closer. In a crowded subway, we tolerate intrusion into our comfort zones. With a lover, we invite intrusion. Lovers cling together; strangers do not.

The accusations in Ottawa make me wonder how often I may have assumed a closeness that the other person doesn't feel and doesn't welcome. How many times I may have trespassed into someone else's comfort zone, by my words or actions. It gives a new twist to the familiar words, "Forgive us our trespasses…."

This incident has brought the subject of harassment into the public eye. At least it can now get talked about.

Instead of operating on the assumption that we know where that invisible line is, we may start to recognize that the line is not fixed. It depends on the other person's response.

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YOUR TURN

The Remembrance Day column spurred a whole flood of e-mail, and I have had to edit some letters heavily.

I had said that there were few moving poems coming out of WWII and later conflicts.

Steve Roney disagreed: "I can't think of a Korea or Vietnam poem to rival those of World War I, but I can think of another WWII poem as good as 'High Flight': 'The Naming of Parts'."

I looked it up. The poem, by Henry Reed, brilliantly counterpoints the prosaic routine of learning of rifle parts with the glories of springtime all around.

Similarly, Vern Ratzlaff reminded me of Laurence Binyon's "For the Fallen," with its memorable fourth verse:

"They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:

Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them."

Judyth Mermelstein provided a long list of poems I might have considered. I'll list them here, rather than quote them, but I'd recommend using a Google search to find and read them:
A Soldier's Question, by R.D. Quincey
Where are the War Poets? by C. Day Lewis
Recalling War, by Robert Graves
A Box Comes Homes, by John Ciardi
Collateral Damage, by John Balaban
http://www.merkki.com/poetry.htm also contains dozens of war poems, mostly by unknown authors, some being satirical makeovers of popular songs.

Judyth also commented on the theme of handwriting and creativity: "**I don't think keyboards put an end to the poetry. I think the perception of war changed significantly in WWI. We had the poetry of Sigfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen and Robert Graves who had seen combat on the ground, with men dying in the trenches, rather than from an airplane in the sky far from the bloody mess like WWII's 'High Flight'.**

"**By Vietnam times, cynicism and profanity were more pronounced, and many draft-age poets took to songwriting instead. Think of Phil Ochs with his 'Talking Vietnam' and 'Draft Dodger Rag' or Country Joe MacDonald's 'Vietnam Rag' on the cynical side; think of Ochs' 'Pin a Medal on the Man' and 'One More Parade,' Buffy Sainte-Marie's 'Universal Soldier,' Barry McGuire's 'Eve of Destruction,' among many others. Pete Seeger's 'Where Have All the flowers Gone' is the closest thing to elegaic I can remember from that time. Those who stuck to the written form mostly wrote things the public preferred not to know, like 'War Profit Litany,' by Allan Ginsberg:**
'These are the Corporations who have profited by merchant-
dising skinburning phosphorous or shells fragmented
to thousands of fleshpiercing needles…"

"**But for what it's worth, I've never met a poet who wrote directly on a keyboard -- except me on occasion, and I always went back to the pen because type depersonalized the process in a way I didn't like.**"

Cliff Boldt also endorsed handwriting: "**I have forsaken the pen and paper [for most purposes] but I write thank you cards on occasion and you are right --**

something happens when I write that isn't there when I type. I'll think of this column on Tuesday when I am at the local cenotaph."

Fran Ota wrote from "**the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, on Adventure of the Seas. On Tuesday morning there is an interdenominational service, in which I am taking part -- including two minutes of silence, and the captain laying a wreath. I went to the planning meeting feeling that while I am not a veteran, I might be able to assist in some way. As each of us talked about our war experience, and I talked about the camps in Viet Nam and the work of the YMCA, in which I participated, one of the veterans commented** '**If you were in 'Nam, you're a veteran. Period.**' **It is wonderful to a part of something like this, even as a passenger/tourist on a holiday trip -- and virtually every veteran there agreed, war must cease, it solves nothing.**"

The importance of silence caught Laurna Tallman : "**I live in what often feels like too much silence, but an experience two nights ago resonates with the exceptional quality of quiet in what you have written about the silencing of the guns of warfare.**

"**My childhood friend and prayer partner stays in almost daily email contact when she is at home. We had a rare opportunity on the weekend to spend face-to-face time together. I was surprised how much our limitations of time and typing ability diminish our ability to communicate one another's concerns and insights. When we paused in our conversation to pray, our intercessions were more specific and our praise stronger. As we talked late into the night, I voiced a prayer for a seemingly incurable person and we both fell silent. I felt, as I have felt only a few times in my life, that I had been *silenced* by an active power. My friend was not experiencing the silence as I was, but when I described the power she knew what I meant. A prayer service had been held at her Anglican church last week for one of the members … At the end of the service the entire congregation fell into spontaneous potent silence in the awareness of God's presence.**

"**Thank you for reminding me that power resides in the pauses intrinsic to handwriting. I must let God back into my writing that way.**"

John McTavish wrote about the Remembrance Day service he attended: "**Standing behind me was the warm, friendly, quiet spoken Lorne Munce. I remember asking Lorne once about his war experiences. I learned after a fair bit of prying about the time Lorne and eleven other soldiers were standing in a**

field in France near the end of the war when a shot rang out and the guy standing right beside Lorne fell instantly dead. Just another moment, the way Lorne talked, another day in the trenches.

"**Your comment about handwriting leads me to note that John Updike wrote the first drafts of all his novels in pencil. Somehow it didn't matter when he was composing short stories or poetry. But the novels had to be handwritten for the flow to maintain itself.**"

"**We baby-boomers had to memorize the poem 'High Flight' in school,**" **Gayle Simonson recalled.** "**I read it each year (I do still remember parts of it!) as my dad was in the RCAF overseas during WW II. He rarely spoke about the war, but later in his life, my sister convinced him to write some of his stories. It is amazing that so many who had seen so much were expected to return home and pick up their normal lives as if nothing had happened, yet somehow most of them did.**

"**As a writer, I related to your words about pen and ink. It was some time before I could create on the computer but as a contract writer, it became a necessity to meet deadlines. However, following my husband's death, I needed to write as therapy. For that writing I had to revert to handwriting first. The computer was too cold and impersonal. The handwriting allowed emotion to flow, and it was cathartic.**"

Don Schau agreed: "**Although I write almost entirely on a computer keyboard (no clicking sounds turned on) I would agree that writing rather than keying gives us time to consider our words. From my experience we are more likely to think about them more this way. The argument is that it is easier to go back and change our words when we key them, but how many of us do a serious job of this? I tend to, but only because I learned from a great editor… and just because I do, doesn't mean I do a good job of it. Once an idea is down on paper, thinking differently [about it] is a challenge.**"

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TECHNICAL STUFF

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I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-

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PROMOTION STUFF…

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Other sources worth pursuing:

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, http://www.hymnsight.ca, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslikeGod" page, www.seemslikegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

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