

Sunday November 11, 2012

Timeless encounter with love and loss

By Jim Taylor

The U.S. election dominated the news this last week. But I've been away from home most of the week, with limited Internet access, and limited time to explore the implications of that election. So, rather than try to draw universal significance out of a short-term political contest for this Remembrance Day Sunday, I shall plagiarize a column I wrote six years ago about a truly timeless event.

The Burren is a vast limestone plateau in the west of Ireland. The rock itself is 320 million years old, laid down in a warm sea before two ancient continents collided and thrust the hardened sediments up from the ocean bottom.

From the sea coast along Galway Bay, the Burren broods over postcard-pretty villages like a great grey glacier, cracked and crevassed.

Parts of the Burren still look as primeval as they must have looked when bare rock emerged into light and air for the first time.

Countless centuries have eroded the limestone slabs into gigantic paving blocks. In the cracks and crannies between blocks, vegetation ekes out survival – bright buttercups and daisies, sweet clover, various kinds of violets, gentians, harebells, and even some orchids. Some 70 per cent of Ireland's entire flora are found in the Burren.

Over 6000 years ago, unknown Stone Age people used those slabs of limestone to build burial sites called portal tombs or dolmen.

If you've ever built a house of cards, you have a good idea of a dolmen. On the sides, you stand the slabs upright. Then, to keep them from falling, you rest another slab on top to lock them all in place.

Except that the "cards" here are blocks of limestone two feet thick, ten feet long, ten feet across. Each slab weighs many tonnes. Ancient people with no metal tools, no cranes or machinery, pried those slabs up, stood them on end, and raised the largest block of all into the air so that they could perch it gently on top of the other blocks.

They did it so well that the stones still stand, 6000 years later.

Then they buried the bones of their most honoured warriors within that structure.

That's a guess, of course. Because those ancient peoples had no writing to leave records of their reasons.

But the remains within the tombs have been carbon-dated from between 4200 B.C. to 2900 BC. That's older than Jericho or Babylon. Older than Moses and the Pharaohs. Older than Stonehenge...

More than that, no one knows. Did they do their ceremonies at noon under the midsummer sun? At midnight, in the dark of the new moon, with torches flickering on the surface of the limestone? On the spring or fall solstice, as the first rays of the rising sun lit the great standing stones? We don't know.

They were certainly not buried in disgrace. Because the common tomb contains valued possessions – stone axes, pendants, pretty crystals, beads...

Then the ceremonial burials stopped. For a thousand years.

And then there was a final burial. Of a child. Not inside the dolmen itself – that would be sacrilegious. But on the path, just in front. About 1700 B.C., some unknown parents brought their child here for burial.

It was not a ritual sacrifice, to appease some vengeful god. If the gods had demanded that kind of sacrifice, there would have been other examples, not this one small body.

The parents came to commit their child to the company of the great ones.

I can only imagine the emotions that prompted that child's parents to choose that place. To come back to a site untouched for 40 generations, perhaps protected by taboos. To lay their child to rest for the last time, there, in the company of the greatest of their ancestors...

In truth, I *can* imagine their feelings. I *can* imagine their desperate need to perform this one last act of devotion to their child. They felt such love that only this place could do justice to their sense of loss. Because the place had been hallowed by those emotions for 2,000 years.

And I realized that I know those grieving parents. I have felt the same emotions. So has any parent who has ever lost a child.

And suddenly the veil of centuries that separates us is torn apart, ripped down the middle. It splits, fades, and dissipates like Irish mist in summer sunshine.

Languages, power struggles, politics – these all change. But we humans don't.

The ancient Irish warlords could be as brutal and ruthless as any culture today. But that small body tells me that there was also love. And grief.

Sitting silently on a slab of ancient weathered limestone on the Burren in August 2006, I felt a deep and surprising kinship with people 6000 years ago. I still do.

They are me, and I am them. Amen.

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YOUR TURN

Wasn't it amazing – and a little depressing – how quickly the devastation caused by Hurricane Sandy faded from top spot in the news, to be replaced by electioneering?

Isabel Gibson suggested we need more “mental balance.”

“Coming to Ottawa from Alberta at the age of 50,” she wrote, “I was amused to see how seriously folks here took every political twitch. Having lived here for 10 years, I'm surprised to find how little folks there know (or care) about what's going on in Ottawa.

“It's a tough balancing act. We need to take politics and political power seriously, or it will run away on us. We need to keep it in perspective -- its faults and its potential -- or we risk sitting by and not doing the things that fall to us.

“As any physiotherapist will tell you, physical balance is one of the casualties of age, unless we work at maintaining it. So, too, perhaps, a mental balance?”

Jim Henderschedt reflected on a lesson learned from the superstorm: “This was a lesson in perspective for us. The Saturday before Sandy struck my wife and I were scheduled to set sail on a cruise ship to Bermuda. Our two sons, both of whom are seasoned sea men, did not tell us to cancel but urged us to think long and hard about it. We decided to take the financial loss in favor of comfort and safety. The reports that came back from a ship that should never have sailed confirmed our decision.

“We were home when Sandy went through and early Monday evening our electric service (including phone and internet) ended. We kept warm by layering our clothing, cooked on a gas grill, and read by candle and kerosene lantern light. At night we snuggled under a pile of blankets. It was not until Friday afternoon that electric service was restored. Battling frustration and impatience half way through the experience we, accepting the invitation of our daughter and son in law to warm up (their electric service was restored on Wednesday) and watch the news and a couple of our favorite TV programs, had a brief reprieve. Images of the devastation in New York and New Jersey gave us a wake-up call. What we experienced was an inconvenience. Others were victims of a disaster.

“I have heard since that the cruise line we were to sail with refused to refund the cost of the cruise to a family that lost their home completely.

“At this end of the experience we offer our prayers for those for whom this storm was more than inconvenience and who suffered catastrophic loss.

“And now...barely one week later, our political candidates have already put Sandy on a shelf and continue to spend obscene amounts of money trying to convince us that, if elected, they will do what they do not have the power nor the authority to do.”

Wayne Irwin took issue with Chandra Schraefel's letter, criticizing my article the week before: "Your reader putting your feet to the fire for an apparent inaccuracy causes me to ask whether the charge is ever levelled by that person against the politicians who intentionally pay little attention at all to the accuracy of what they publicly declare. At least journalists like yourself do your best to have your facts right. It is so easy to deflect attention from the message by attacking the messenger."

Isobel McGregor agreed with Wayne: "As a relatively uninformed person on world affairs, I greatly appreciate getting your witty, well informed weekly diatribes, especially since they usually agree with my relatively uninformed opinion. Keep up the careful research! It saves me a lot of time."

Umm, thank you... but "datribes"...? I had hoped I was more even-handed....

PSALM PARAPHRASES

I have started including a psalm paraphrase for the coming Sunday with my Soft Edges column, on Wednesdays. Why not publish it in a Sunday column, you ask? Well, partly because psalms seem to me to fit better with the general mood of Soft Edges, which is more likely to deal directly with faith-related matters than these Sharp Edges columns. And partly because Soft Edges is about 250 words shorter than Sharp Edges, and so including the paraphrase on Wednesday won't make the e-mailing quite as long.

That does mean that if you want to receive the paraphrase, and are not on the Soft Edges mailing list, you'll need to subscribe. No charge, just send me a message, jimt@quixotic.ca. Or you can subscribe automatically by sending a blank e-mail to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca.

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at jimt@quixotic.ca.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

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-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@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.
