

Sunday July 29, 2012

A messiah-figure falls from grace

By Jim Taylor

Joe Paterno's statue has been removed from Penn State University. Paterno, once the winningest coach in American college football history, fell from grace over sexual abuse by his assistant, Jerry Sandusky.

Sandusky, just in case you've been hibernating for the last month, was convicted of 45 counts of sexual abuse involving Penn State football players. An investigation by former FBI director Louis Freeh found that Paterno, along with Athletic Director Tim Curley and university President Graham Spanier, had known about and covered up Sandusky's indiscretions.

As punishment, the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) nailed Penn State University with a \$60 million fine, banned its teams from any post-season games for four years, and erased all the university's wins back to 1998.

Students wept in shock, burying their faces in their hands.

Institutions defend themselves

Normally, I would not care about Penn State. In my scale of values, college football rates somewhere below an infestation of earwigs.

But the story illustrates a recurring theme – institutions react to a threat just the way living organisms do. They protect themselves.

Any institution – from a university to a bank to a church – will instinctively defend itself, regardless of what it may have done to its victims. In fact, individuals don't matter; only institutions do. You saw it with Rupert Murdoch's newspapers, BP oil, the tobacco industry, the Roman Catholic Church, minor hockey, any political party, the Scout movement...

When all else fails, the institution sacrifices its senior staff in the hope of saving itself.

Penn State first sacrificed its young football players, to protect its reputation. When its reputation was beyond protecting, it sacrificed Paterno.

Religion without God

A recurring phrase in news reports about Paterno's fall from glory caught my attention. It referred to a cult of "hero worship."

As heroes, Paterno and his coaching team were too big to bring down – just like U.S. banks in 2008.

But I think the significant word is "worship." The term is typically associated with religion, not sports or academia. But it fits.

Because every religion – aside from Hinduism – seems to set up its own superhero.

Christianity, obviously, has Jesus, described as the Messiah, the Christ, the human embodiment of God. Buddhism would be nothing without Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha himself. Islam has Mohammed. Judaism, Moses. In China, Confucius and Lao Tse.

Likewise, Baha'i looks to Baha'u'llah; Sikhism to Guru Nanak Dev, Christian Science to Mary Baker Eddy (the only woman in this parade of males), Mormonism to Joseph Smith, Scientology to Ron Hubbard...

I don't mean to equate all those religions. Some are much more credible than others. But they all set up the same pattern – one person, a founder, who cannot be wrong.

Whenever there's a dispute, a controversy, the community turns back it to what its particular messiah-figure said, or did, or would have said and done had those circumstances occurred.

He or she is allowed to be mistaken about details – like whether the earth has corners – but never about principles.

Building a following

The Great One gathers disciples, devotees. They follow in his footsteps; they never surpass him.

On that basis, I submit, college football qualifies as a religion. It becomes for those disciples what theologian Paul Tillich called the “Ground of Being”; it gives meaning to the lives of students, staff, and alumni. It provides a focus for loyalty, for fund raising, and for recruitment.

At Penn State, Joe Paterno became a god-figure. His acolytes basked in his aura. Not even the university president dared tackle his omnipotence.

In the same way, the unquestioning devotion of economists to their favourite theorist resembles religious adherence.

Milton Friedman or John Maynard Keynes becomes their unassailable authority. They fall into line behind their chosen prophet and deify him. Or her – as with Ayn Rand.

In the Golden Rule, Jesus said, “Treat others the way you would want them to treat you.” Ayn Rand, an avowed atheist, says bluntly, “Screw others, the way they would screw you if they had a chance.”

Biologists put Charles Darwin on a pedestal.

Mathematician and astronomers bow to Albert Einstein. Which might account for the consternation when some recent experiments apparently suggested that some things can move faster than light. According to Einstein's Theory of Relativity, nothing can travel faster than light.

If the guru can be wrong, what happens to the structure of the universe?

If the winningest coach in college football history can be wrong, what happens to the university that built its reputation on his record?

British author G.K. Chesterton wrote, years ago: “When people stop believing in God, they don't believe in nothing – they believe in anything.”

The students, alumni, and administration of Penn State University have lost their Messiah. They have no one to follow. If Chesterton is right, they will flounder around aimlessly, seeking a new Moses to lead them out of their wilderness.

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YOUR TURN

What I thought of as a local issue, in last week's column, turned out to be more universal.

Barb Miller wrote, “My brother is also on disability and has faced those same issues for years (we are from Ontario but it is dealt with in the same manner here). Because of his disabilities he doesn't have the stamina to work more than three mornings a week. And what he can do is limited -- that doesn't mean he should be denied the chance or should have his well-earned money deducted dollar for dollar when he makes so little to begin with. We treat no one else so callously. My mom and I have often said that we'd like to see the politicians live on what they expect people on disability to survive on. It's ridiculous.

“One small note: the [lottery] tickets could be gifts [that is, not purchased with disability funds]. My brother often drives his friends to bowling and they often buy him a ticket in thanks.

“It was very gratifying to see our thought reflected in your words.”

Stephanie McClellan had personal experience with the system: “This discriminatory system was in place in Ontario while I still lived there almost 20 years ago. I pray there have been changes since then. Somehow when I was first sick and receiving the Disability Pension to help with school costs and such, we were supposed to only ‘make’ \$300 before they clawed it back. Unfortunately, I didn't have to win a lottery, I simply had to receive a monetary gift from family on special occasions and the ‘watchers’ saw the additional bank transactions and adjusted my account ‘appropriately.’ So much for a special dinner out for a birthday celebration!”

John Hatchard says the situation is not limited to Canada. “It seems to be much the same the whole Western world over. Australia and New Zealand also have their quota of bureaucratic donkeys incapable with empathising with the folk they are appointed to help. The God-almighty dollar rules.

“What gets to me most is that politicians charged with managing an economy and their hirelings who manage the changes are seldom affected personally by the changes and charges they impose on the general population in the name of balancing the books. But methinks the looming scandal over the Libor fraud is going to see immense changes to not only the way global finances are run but the way national, provincial/state and local finances are run.”

This writer didn't ask to have her name withheld, but I will anyway, to avoid possible embarrassment to her children. “I have 3 adult mentally ill children,” she wrote. “One son, 40, cannot reason although he appears smart enough, can read, write, and work, sometimes to a degree. Yet he is expected to live on \$285 per month after rent. I believe the most mentally stable among us couldn't live on that for food, clothing, electrical, and phone.”

Isabel Gibson thought my proposed solution “seems altogether too simple to be possible: Provide the disability benefit and tax it back where individual circumstances warrant? What would all the tax lawyers and human rights lawyers do?”

Carol Stein, who identified herself as a senior citizen and retired RN, wrote, “How enlightening! Thank you for recommending that our disabled persons in our society deserve to be given as much freedom and responsibility as possible...

“These people, for the most part, are intelligent and need a 'hand up' to become responsible and employed to the best of their ability. I believe the disabled should be able to earn at least \$1500.00 per month without any kind of a penalty. And if they are lucky enough to win a lottery, good for them. Can't you just imagine the self esteem and personal pride they would have? Not to mention the happiness in their lives when they feel accomplishments. Our cost of living in dignity these days is very expensive.

“Isn't it ironic how our politicians can give themselves increases in wages, benefits & pensions, and look after their friends without giving [similar benefits] to the underprivileged? I would love to see this all reversed!

“With proper medications, support (therapy & financial help), these persons can become very constructive, helpful working members in our society. Just maybe some of the public stigma will disappear.”

Sally Stoddard was struck by Grace Hawke's letter, last week, expressing frustration about people who “quote the Bible to back up every crazy and bigoted idea that runs down the track, without any regard to the reality of different times, different cultures.”

Looking at the American scene, Sally wrote, “her thesis fits so well if you substitute the Constitution of the United States for the Bible. That is, the strict constructionists on the Supreme Court believe they know exactly what our forefathers meant by every word and every clause, and they believe their interpretation of them is the only correct interpretation. Give me a break! Unfortunately, we're stuck with them.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

I have started including a psalm paraphrase for the coming Sunday with my Soft Edges column, on Wednesdays. Why not on Sunday, 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 "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, 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.
