

Sunday December 16, 2012

A juvenile prank backfires

By Jim Taylor

You've all heard the story – a pair of Australian broadcasters pulled a sophomoric prank. By pretending to be Queen Elizabeth and Prince Charles – in a poor impersonation of both – Mel Greig and Michael Christian did an end run around privacy policies at London's King Edward VII Hospital and wheedled confidential information about Kate Middleton's morning sickness out of her nurses.

Then the prank backfired. One of the two nurses who handled the call was found dead. The subsequent autopsy suggests Jacintha Saldanha hung herself.

Were Greig and Christian responsible for her death?

Apparently they thought so. The tearful pair appeared on television, distraught and tearful. Their remorse seemed genuine.

I think they took their role too seriously.

Of course their phony call was in poor taste, juvenile, even smart-alecky. So what? That's why their employer hired them for that show. They could not have anticipated that their clumsy efforts to penetrate a royal privacy shield would result in someone's death.

They said themselves that they expected to get cut off.

Prankishness abundant

I don't say that to excuse them. But I doubt if there's any one of us who has not attempted some similar prank.

A twelve-year-old boy made prank calls from a telephone in our daughter's house. He thought it was a big joke. So did our grandchildren. Until the outraged victim called back, and gave their mom an earful.

That prankster was not welcome in my daughter's home any more.

My wife recently discovered a TV channel that still runs old episodes of M*A*S*H. Many of those plots, I realize now, revolved around schoolboy pranks played on each other.

A prank, in and of itself, is hardly cause for censure.

Conflicting priorities

It's a hospital's job to protect its patients from unwanted intrusions, whether or not they're famous. Eliza Doolittle is just as entitled to privacy as the Duchess of Cambridge.

In this case, the hospital failed. But I can't fault the nurses – if I believed the Queen herself was on the line, would I tell her to bugger off? Hardly likely! She is, or was, the symbolic head of state for 54 countries and some two billion people. Who am I, by comparison?

At the same time, it's a journalist's job to find the cracks in that privacy shield. How hard to try, and how far to go – that is always the journalist's dilemma.

Journalism has two extremes, equally dangerous. Rupert Murdoch's London tabloids, hacking into personal phone messages and cozying up to politicians, represent one extreme. Like the paparazzi who hounded Princess Diana to her death 15 years ago, they swarm after potential news headlines the way vultures tear into a carcass.

No one admires that extreme.

The other extreme is less obvious. It involves lazy journalists who publish handouts from corporate and political authorities without making any attempt to dig out the truth behind the bafflegab. Far too often, news media routinely repeat what they know to be outright lies, comforting themselves that their role merely requires making sure that the liars have been quoted accurately.

When they do get a knowledgeable opinion on climate change, abortion, monetary policy, unions, euthanasia, or religion, they counter it by quoting a crank or crackpot who holds an opposing view. Then they call it balanced reporting.

In short, some go too far in ferreting out facts that certain people don't want them to know. Others go too far in blandly accepting garbage as if it were gold.

Invisible lines

Responsible journalism falls somewhere between those two extremes. But no one knows exactly where. We only know someone has stepped over an invisible line after they do it.

And what's responsible today may not be responsible tomorrow.

Mel Greig and Michael Christian may have done us all a favour. Of course it was a childish prank. And it ended up costing a life. But in doing so, they've made us look once again at how easy it is to cross that invisible line between responsible and irresponsible journalism. One day they were celebrities, revelling in their achievement. The next, they were pariahs, scorned and reviled even by their peers.

The news hadn't changed; its context had.

Journalists operate in an environment as unstable as a bowl of Jello. Trying to establish clear boundaries for professional conduct is like painting lines on a lake. You only learn where a boundary is when you discover you've crossed it.

Which is, unfortunately for them, what happened to Mel Greig and Michael Christian.

Copyright © 2012 by Jim Taylor. Non-profit use in congregations and study groups encouraged; all other rights reserved.

Please encourage your friends to subscribe to these columns.

To send comments, to subscribe, or to unsubscribe, write to jimt@quixotic.ca

YOUR TURN

And continuing, for a moment, my comments on journalism from the column above, it is much easier for journalists to focus on bad news than good news – and yes, I include myself in that criticism. I doubt, for example, if any newspapers or newscasts anywhere opened their coverage of the Connecticut shootings by announcing, “Dedicated teachers save 400 students from gunman.”

But I do try to present good news occasionally, as in last Sunday's column. To which Christa Bedwin responded, “I love this column. It's very uplifting. Thank you!”

Marjorie Gibson also endorsed it: “I wholeheartedly agree with the premise of this article. As an amateur historian I long ago came to the conclusion that talk of ‘the good old days’, was simply wrong. The further back in time one goes, the harsher life was. Accepting that does not mean that one believes that the present is anywhere near being perfect. Still, slowly we are edging our way toward a better world. I also believe the any progress that is made will come mainly from the ordinary masses, more than from governments.

“You may have heard the words of a long ago rabbi who said: ‘It is not laid on our shoulders the task of perfecting God's world. Neither are we free to refrain from doing what we can.’ That's another way of saying what you did. The trick is for those working to improve the world to win the race with those bent on destruction. Time

will tell. Unfortunately, at 90 years of age I won't have enough years left to see how the race is going, but I wish the improvers' side all the best."

John Hatchard mused about how far we have come: "Islam as a major world religion is about 1400 years old. The Christian world deplores and eschews the apparent barbarity and fanaticism and intolerance of difference it endorses, yet when Christianity was a mere 1400 years old, it was demonstrating all those same characteristics. What will Islam be like given another 600 years?"

HYMNSIGHT

My friend Ralph Milton, who published his Rumors newsletter for many years, has something special for you. It's called HYMNSIGHT, and it's for any church that currently projects the words of hymns and prayers, or plans to.

Ralph writes, Since retiring, I have rediscovered my old love of photography, and found creative use for my pictures in the life of First United where Bev and I worship. Our entire liturgy is projected, so that people read responses and sing hymns from screens. I use my photos to add color, vitality and depth to all the hymns and most of the liturgy.

In the course of this, I have developed slide sets to go with 600 hymns, plus about two thousand slides, in both the standard screen and the newer wide screen shape. You can use all of them, in any way you wish, without permission, and absolutely free, as long as it's non-profit and church related.

All you need to access the website is go to: <http://www.hymnsight.ca>

In addition to all that visual material, there's a comprehensive "how-to" manual for using projected visuals in church.

HymnSight provides a set of suggested visuals to go with each hymn, but the words to the hymn are not there, mainly for copyright considerations.

Please take a look at this service. If you think it's worthwhile, please let some of your colleagues in ministry know about it. And if you know of a website that could benefit from a link to HymnSight, why not add it?

Blessings,
Ralph Milton

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.

To subscribe or unsubscribe, send me an e-mail message at the address above. Or you can subscribe electronically by sending a blank e-mail (no message) to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca. Similarly, you can un-subscribe at sharpedges-unsubscribe@quixotic.ca.

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.
