

Sunday January 22, 2012

## There but for the grace of God...

By Jim Taylor

We took a wonderful Caribbean cruise in December. Our ship was small, with only 400 or so passengers. We had superb meals, attentive waiters and cabin staff, and jazz pianists in every bar. Aside from seasickness, I never once felt I my life was at risk.

So it came as a shock to hear about the *Costa Concordia* running aground off Tuscany in the Mediterranean a week ago.

As I write this, 11 people are known dead; another 24 are missing. That sounds good, considering that the ship had over 4,000 passengers and crew on board.

But the low numbers also surely result from the ship being only 100 metres or so from shore. Many survivors swam to safety. Had the ship gone down far out in the Mediterranean – or, like the *Titanic*, in the icy Atlantic – the death toll would have been much higher.

Unlike the *Titanic*, the *Costa Concordia* had enough lifeboats for everyone. But half of those lifeboats were unusable. As the liner heeled, lifeboats on the high side could not be launched.

## Practice makes perfect

Our cruise ship held lifeboat drills twice. We were given ample warning. At the appointed time, alarms sounded. We collected lifejackets from our cabins, and strolled through brightly lit corridors to the ship's theatre, where we sat and waited for instructions. Then we followed crew leaders to our muster stations, where we stood around a while longer before returning to our cabins.

I don't think many people took the drill seriously. No one hurried. Some passengers continued chatting during the instructions. At the muster station, no one asked how we would climb into the lifeboats, how many to a lifeboat, who would give the orders...

Even on a five-star cruise line, we were only partly prepared for possible disaster. On the *Costa Concordia*, some survivors claim, the ship never conducted any lifeboat drill at all.

So in the emergency itself, chaos reigned.

The captain delayed any evacuation announcement for over an hour after ripping open his ship's hull on submerged rocks. By the time alarms sounded, the ship was already tilting. Power had gone off. Passengers had to grope along pitch-dark corridors to their cabins for lifejackets, then to their muster stations.

Frankly, I'm astonished more lives weren't lost.

## Does anyone care?

Analysts claim that travel on modern ocean liners is probably as safe as you can be – safer, for example, than staying at home. A disaster like the *Titanic's* – 100 years ago this April – could not happen today, they say.

I'm not convinced. Had the *Concordia's* captain (who now faces charges of manslaughter for negligence) headed towards deep water after hitting those rocks, the ship might well have rolled right over rather than coming to rest on its side.

Other forms of transportation seem even less concerned about safety training. Yes, airline attendants mime their routine demonstrations at the beginning of every flight. But hardly anyone pays attention.

I don't recall ever having a safety drill on a bus or train – although they have more accidents than cruise liners.

And no one has ever coached me on how to escape from a car that has plunged into a lake. Or gotten trapped under a semi-trailer. Or even how to hold a steering wheel to avoid having my arms broken by an exploding airbag.

Yet the likelihood of having a motor vehicle accident is infinitely higher than the likelihood of going down with a ship.

## **Dereliction of duty**

It is not true, incidentally, that the captain is supposed to go down with the ship. A few famous captains have done so. But in fact, maritime law requires only that the captain must not leave until all persons on board are accounted for.

The captain of the *Costa Concordia* did not do so. Not only did he unnecessarily risk lives by deviating from his assigned course, he fled his command while passengers were still struggling to escape.

He brings me to my point -- those who assume positions of responsibility must not allow personal concerns to affect the performance of their responsibilities.

The principle applies not just to ship captains.

Airline pilots, bus drivers, railway engineers should not operate their passenger carriers if their judgement is impaired by alcohol, drugs, weariness, or illness. Judges must not allow indigestion to influence their decisions. Investment advisors must not let their own financial well-being affect the quality of service to clients.

The principle applies even at the most basic level. A migraine, a hangover, a social engagement, does not excuse parental abuse or neglect.

So I repeat: persons in positions of responsibility must not allow personal concerns to affect the performance of their responsibilities.

The captain of the *Costa Concordia* failed that test in a big way. But before we throw stones at him, we need to be mindful that we do not also fail in lesser ways.

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## **YOUR TURN**

Understandably, modern pipelines are a specialized and highly technical field of expertise, so I wasn't too surprised to get fewer letters than usual.

Cameron Baughen was particularly helpful, in clarifying how the Northern Gateway pipeline is a problem.

"What is often missed from this debate is that the Northern Gateway pipeline would be shipping diluted bitumen and not conventional crude oil. Conventional oil pipelines crisscross many continents. They don't have a perfect safety rating but they are much safer than diluted bitumen.

"Diluted bitumen is a mixture of tar-like bitumen and gas placed under such extreme pressure the gas becomes liquid. This extreme pressure is essential to this process. A second pipeline is also necessary to ship back the dirty gas, making landslides or breaks even more dangerous. The Northern Gateway pipeline will be one of the first large volume diluted bitumen pipelines to cross remote and rugged terrain. This is a huge experiment and risk for Jasper, the Fraser River, the Great Bear rainforest and the north coast of BC.

"[In addition] no proven technologies exist to clean up bitumen in marine environments, but more than 200 supertankers a year could be plying the dangerous Hecate Strait [and Douglas Channel].

"Anyone supporting the Northern Gateway project should look closely at the record of diluted bitumen pipelines and recognize this is not a normal crude oil pipeline. We've had four years of 'too big to fail'. We should start applying that concept to the natural wonders of BC and Alberta."

Ginny Adams wrote, "Here in Nebraska we've been involved with a nasty pipeline fight, as well -- and the comments here are similarly negative. I read where some Washington, DC honcho said the pipeline across the Sandhills and the Ogallala Aquifer was being stopped by 'conservation crazies.' Well, I'm one of those crazies; I know how fragile the Sandhills are, how difficult it is for even grass to grow in parts of it. And I do believe that the aquifer and its water are crucial to maintaining life in this part of North America. Thanks for your comments -- we must speak out against the 'money as the only motivation' people; our land, our future, and our faith require it."

Frank Martens, the Summerland Director of the Farmland Defence League, commented, "Like a lot of committee members responsible for making important decisions that effect groups of people in specific areas, MPs and MLAs rarely visit the part of the country that will be effected by their decisions. The proposed Northern Gateway Pipeline is a typical case.

"That was a particular asinine letter posted by Joe Oliver, whose corporate-sponsored agenda is so obvious. His letter could have been written by a member of the Fraser Institute or the Ethical Oil organization, both of which have hidden agendas beholden only to BIG OIL."

Margaret McKenzie-Leighton made a similar point: "Railing against 'foreign' special interest groups is hardly fair given that the corporate interests Joe Oliver defends are, for the most part, foreign themselves!"

Jean Skillman suggested my column "puts some balanced perspective into a debate that is intense economically, environmentally, politically and personally. As a resident of Ontario, I live some distance from the debate but of course it affects me... Climate change is global, and every change has a ripple effect around the world. I agree that options are few to move the oil and that other means of moving the oil may be worse than a pipeline. If we left the oil where it is then we lose money in the short term. Must be a lot of money to cause so much political pressure... [I]question the greed that motivates such large projects. The Occupy movement reminds me that greed motivates many and that few are enriched. Oil sings a seductive song to many predators."

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## ABOUT MY BOOKS, ETC.

I have a few copies of a book my father wrote exploring Christian theology through Christian art.

The problem with art, of course, is that it cannot put an abstract concept on canvas. An artist cannot paint an Incarnation or a Resurrection without putting real humans, in real situations, into the picture. The expression, therefore, has to be grounded in a particular culture and society; the infinite and universal has to be represented in finite terms.

My father – who once took art lessons from members of Canada's Group of Seven – spent much of his life after retiring as principal of the Vancouver School of Theology, seeking out the ways artists through the centuries had attempted to deal with this dilemma. I'm probably biased, but I think that in examining the ways art portrays theological concepts, he explained those concepts better than most theological texts.

The book is Seeing the Mystery: Exploring Christian Faith through the Eyes of Artists, by William S. Taylor, 94 pages. There are only about 20 copies left in the world. Most of the illustrations are in full colour.

If you would like a copy, write to me – Jim Taylor, 1300 6<sup>th</sup> Street, Lake Country, BC, Canada, V4V 2H7.

Unfortunately, I can't send these out on the honour system, as I do with my biblical paraphrases. I will have to charge \$30 Canadian to include postage, paid in advance.

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## 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](mailto: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](mailto:softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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## 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](mailto: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](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsrap@shaw.ca)
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com](mailto:isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Wayne Irwin's "Model T Websites." a simple (and cheap) seven-page website for congregations who want to develop a web presence <<http://www.modeltwebsites.com>>
- 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](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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