

Sunday December 30, 2012

## A calendar full of opportunities

By Jim Taylor

Two days from now, we throw away our 2012 calendars and start using new ones.

With the New Year comes the removal of Christmas decorations. The last of them – usually the outside lights -- will be dismantled by the end of the traditional Twelve Days of Christmas. When I was growing up, my parents religiously stuck to the old customs – nothing came down until January 6. Except the needles of the Christmas tree, which didn't bother waiting for the official period to end before falling onto the floor.

The world always seems a little more grey as wreaths and ribbons go into storage for another year, as the festive lights no longer gleam in the darkness...

The newspaper tells me that many people suffer post-Christmas depression. The joie de vivre, the social get-togethers, the glow of candlelight, have faded away. And have left... what?

### Cynical views

Half a century ago, the relatively unknown – at least in North America -- Irish poet W. R. Rodgers penned a bleak tirade against the artificiality of commercial Christmases. Families gathered, he scoffed, “in old stone circles” to share “the tinned milk of human kindness.”

But after Christmas, he went on hopefully, we will see

*“... this silent and dissembling world  
Of stilted sentiment suddenly melt  
Into the mush and watery welter of...  
... feet and actual fact. Over the stark plain  
The silted mill-chimneys once again spread  
Their sackcloth and ashes, a flowing mane  
Of repentance...”*

Repentance isn't a word we hear too often nowadays. We associate it with that radical John the Baptist wading in the Jordan River, exhorting his people to change their ways.

But how about our ways?

I first encountered Rodger's poem when I was writing commercials for private radio. Every day was an orgy of orgy of sell, sell, sell. Then it was over, and we had nothing to fill the blank airwaves with, but music.

### A New Year's Resolution

I no longer share Rodgers' cynical view of Christmas. But once it's over – with little to look forward to but our credit card statements -- what will we fill our blank pages with?

The same old same old as last year?

We try not to do that. So we make New Year's Resolutions. Even if we soon break them, they're a symbol of hope, a desire to make our worlds a little better.

May I suggest a resolution for you? Give up apathy.

In over 50 years of working within churches and community organizations, I've become convinced that the most bitter conflicts don't come from a few radicals pushing new visions, or from conservatives clinging to old

ones. They're caused by the vast complacent middle, who wish the whole thing would just go away and leave them alone.

But it won't. Climate change and technological developments, abortion and euthanasia, gun control and health care – none of these will resolve themselves if we just keep our heads down long enough.

When the middle cocoons itself in a security blanket, the extremes escalate.

## **No one but us**

I challenged a pro-gun correspondent recently to define his goals for a more livable world. To his surprise, I agreed with some of them. He would ban many things. Politicians from voting on anything from which they might profit, directly or indirectly. Genetically modified foods. Massive corporations. Drugging children to treat mental and emotional disorders. Government deficits, currency manipulation by big banks....

"So who's going to do it?" I asked.

I would want to have universal health care, universal education, universal human rights....

But again, who's going to do it?

An evangelical acquaintance assured me that all disparities and injustices would end when Jesus returned to take control over a sinful earth.

"How?" I asked. "By taking away human ability to make decisions?"

It should be obvious -- if anyone's going to do anything about the world's disparities and injustices, it has to be us. Expecting anyone else to do it for us is like expecting Mommy to kiss it better.

The blank pages of the 2013 calendar invite us to make a difference. To refuse to sit in silence while demagogues claim to argue on our behalf. To do what we can, in our own context, to overcome poverty, homelessness, hunger, powerlessness, exploitation, prejudice, bigotry....

In the great game of life, there are no spectators. We are all involved.

So for 2013, let us set aside apathy. Let us speak up, and speak out, on issues that affect us. Not by hurling accusations or insults, but by making our views clear. To ourselves, as well as others. We cannot effectively debate issues we haven't made an effort to understand.

The pages of the new calendar are not blank, after all. They're filled with invisible invitations. To make this a better world. For us, and for all living creatures.

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## **YOUR TURN**

I expected to get a deluge of hate mail from members of the National Rifle Association after last week's column, but I guess they had bigger fish to fry. Or shoot at. Or something. I received only four letters from gun defenders, and they were relatively civil and reasonably argued.

There was a lot of mail, though, because the column got picked up by CounterCurrents, an alternative news source based out of India. And that got picked up by Al Jazeera. Which got picked up by Information Clearing House, an American-based news network. As far as Homeland Security is concerned, I am now an Al Jazeera columnist. I may never be allowed into the U.S. again!

Fifty letters came in – a new record for a single column. I'll print only those excerpts that added some substantive content.

Tom Watson connected individual guns to national obsessions: "I found it fascinating that, in the aftermath of the shooting, the news carried statements such as "The NRA hasn't made comment yet" or "The website for the NRA has made no mention of the events in Newtown" waiting almost with bated breath for the gods of the NRA to come down the mountain and speak. And then they spoke: "Arm the schools." Spread more guns around and then we'll be safer. Proposals are being made for the arming of school teachers, administrators and custodians. A friend mused that maybe we should provide guns to all the children so they could protect themselves. Imagine the first day at school, "Okay Fred and Sally, here's your free Glock along with your iPad. Get ready for the wonderful educational life that lies ahead of you."

"There is one, admittedly overly simple, solution to all of this, of course: ban the manufacture of these kinds of weapons. But don't hold your breath waiting for it to happen. Why? Follow the money.

"This event in Newtown, Connecticut, and others like it, are only a microcosm of the world as a whole, and the logic is the same: Our nation will be safer if we have a bigger missile, or a higher power nuclear bomb, than your nation."

Steve Lawson connected to the Christmas story: "Every Sunday we light an extra peace candle along with the Advent Candle -- not much, but it brings to mind the condition we are in, the memory of lost children and innocence and what we need more than anything else -- peace -- peace within and peace in our midst. After two thousand years we still don't get it, or worse don't believe it: 'I have come to bring peace - my peace I give.'"

John Willems also thought my column had more to do with Christmas than I had anticipated: "At best, an eye for an eye only limits violence. There has to be a better way. What we need in this world is more radicals. Violence in any form in my opinion is contrary to the gospel of love and peace. If radicals in the US would practice love of enemies as taught by Christ and to be peacemakers it would change the world. We need to be involved in actively intervening in situations of conflict to establish peace. I believe, Jesus teaches one of the ways to live as peacemakers is to refuse retaliation (buy more guns and place armed volunteers in schools). If we only understood Christmas. Maybe your 'hardly a Christmas-y column' is more about Christmas than there was no room in the inn."

Cliff Boldt anticipated my theme in today's column: "Many who read and shake their heads at what happened at Sandy Hook and some of the nastiness of what is happening in Canada are part of what I call the mushy middle. These are the ones too comfortable or afraid to speak out, act out for fear of rocking their own boat, let alone upsetting anyone else. They are truly the silent majority and their silence means consent."

Deborah Lawson offered her own example: "Not many people (myself included) would want to find themselves 'in the sights' of the NRA. I thought Seinfeld's Jason Alexander was very brave to post a Twitter message in much the same vein as your column... he's so widely recognized that he would be an easy target for some lunatic who might take it upon himself (or herself, I suppose) to mete out some 'vigilante justice' ... But I also thought 'better Jason Alexander than me,' because the fanaticism and reach of the NRA is frightening. The tweet, as you can imagine, got hundreds of thousands of responses, ranging from congratulatory and supportive to vitriolic and life-threatening."

Laurina Tallman picked up a biblical parallel: "Very few have had the courage to explore the idea that weapons as a method of defense never solve a problem but at best delay a solution and more often escalate the problem. The difference between the American and Canadian responses to British tyranny provides an example of people taking a peaceful if slower route to independence. Jesus used the one sword among His company to make that point the night He was arrested; He healed the ear of the man injured in the one display of violence by his followers. Adam Lanza was not the only person with damaged ears in the recent tragedy... We need to heal ears as one of several approaches essential to ending the violence.

And this from Richard Knight: "I've been listening to some absolutely ridiculous interactions between CNN commentators and advocates of the NRA. ... All countries have mentally ill people. The variable is guns, which explains why gun-related deaths in the US soar above any other country in the world."

Charles Hill wanted to make sure we didn't overlook the related problem, of mental illness: "The psychopaths amongst us will find some weapon, some way, to hurt and kill. Illegal guns will join drugs as the import of choice. The drug war is lost. So would a gun war be ineffective. The elusive problem is how to control those who are severely mentally ill and guns without becoming a police state. What I have read suggests that the shooters in most mass killings have been previously identified as having serious mental illness. Some of the blame for the recent

carnage rests with the mother who obviously knew that something was wrong with her son but supplied him with the weapon used to kill her. Teachers and peers knew he was anti-social. Yet, until someone is hurt, nothing can legally be done. Controlling some types of weapons will help. The problem, however, won't go away. The social glorification of violence won't go away. Mental illness won't go away."

Wilma Davison echoed Charles's concern: "I wonder why the main focus of the comments on the mass murders in Sandy Hook is not an enraged response to the lack of recognition and treatment of mental illness. I wonder just how many parents and family members are out there who are at their wits end in trying to find help for their unstable family members. [Instead]we pontificate on how one cannot legally act on an act that has not yet occurred."

To which Dale Perkins added his counter-argument: "The notion that greater mental illness treatments would help their situation... Nonsense! There are just as many Canadians, Europeans, etc. who are mentally ill as (per capita) in the States. The reason why we and others don't have 10,000+ killings each year is we don't have guns all over the place/house. If our mentally ill folks want to act violently against others they are forced to find other means."

Barb Lakey described her father's suicide (perhaps too vividly!), and went on: "There is no doubt that if he hadn't had that gun in the house he'd have passed out like every other night and maybe would have lived to get over my mother and know and love his grandchildren, great grandchildren etc."

Walter Wright wanted to set me straight about the Second Amendment: "Clearly you do not understand why the second amendment was included in our constitution. It was not for fear of the fledgling country being attacked. It was made abundantly clear by the founders (because they understood the propensity of people for power) that we had far more to fear from our own government becoming corrupt than from foreign invaders. ... Just for what is worth, between 2006 and 2010 we lost nearly 10 times more children to pool drownings than we did to mass shootings."

Byron Wilson thought I should not point fingers only at Americans: "Surely the same charge of responsibility -- "Yes, you" -- must be extend to Canadians who have allowed our self-titled 'Harper government' to loosen our gun laws... As distorting as the influence of the US gun lobby is, it seems there is plenty of blame for complacent moderates in Canada to deal with, before we start pointing fingers south."

Finally, Christine Fraser, who calls herself a "co-conspirator to make the world a better place" had some further insights about the nurse who released information about Kate Middleton: "In your article, you let the broadcasters' phone call off lightly as a 'sophomoric prank'. But from a nursing perspective, this is huge -- giving out a patient's personal information to someone not authorized to have it. One of the most important things we are taught in nursing school is to maintain a patient's confidentiality. We see them at possibly the most vulnerable point in their lives, we ask them questions that no one else could ask and expect detailed answers. We know many intimate things that even their families may not know. So we are charged to protect this information....

"The trouble comes when people misrepresent themselves over the phone, which is what happened in this prank. Yes, it is the hospital's responsibility to ensure safeguards to protect a patient's privacy. But it is also the responsibility of the general public to not misrepresent oneself, lie, or commit fraud in cases like this where sensitive personal information is at risk.

"You say that 'it's a journalist's job to find the cracks in that privacy shield.' I agree to this to an extent. But, having found such a significant crack, I believe it was wrong of the radio station to air the conversation with the nurse. A more general report should have been given, without giving the details...."

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## **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

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#### TECHNICAL STUFF

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

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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 "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](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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