

Sunday April 8, 2012

Holding innocent victims for ransom

By Jim Taylor

Once upon time – as all fairy tales begin – there was a rich and beautiful kingdom, ruled by a queen (which should make it a queendom, but let's not fuss about details).

The kingdom next door elected its rulers democratically. However, once the voters had asserted their independence by choosing those rulers, they packed their independence in a paper bag, turned it over to their rulers for safekeeping, and became obedient robots.

The democratic kingdom had no natural resources other than its robots. So it rented them to the queen – or more accurately, to the viziers who ran her kingdom for her.

But the contract for the robots' services ran out. "Off with their heads!" ranted the queen, instead of negotiating a new contract.

So the kingdom of the robots kidnapped the queen's children, and held them for ransom.

"We want 15 per cent more," demanded the robots' representatives. "Or we'll sacrifice your children."

"There's no money," the viziers chorused.

"Also the right to determine how many children each of us looks after," the other representatives continued.

"That's a management decision," replied the viziers. "You're just the robots who do the work."

"If that's management," snorted the robots collectively, "you're doing a lousy job of it. You don't care about the children, just about the allowance the queen gives you."

"That's not true," retorted the queen's viziers. "We place a high value on the queen's children, at \$6300 each. But they're not worth an additional \$1000. If you sacrifice our children, we'll seize your wallets."

Worth every penny

As you may have guessed, this is not a fairy tale. It's a bitter parody of the current education dispute in B.C. The Teachers' Federation and the provincial government have both locked themselves into non-negotiable positions, with school children as hostages.

I don't know how much teachers should be paid. But I do know that you couldn't pay me enough to get me to commit 35 years of my life spending every working day with 30 or more children.

Granted, most of them are good kids. A few even want to learn. But every class has a few spoiled, bored, and rebellious children who'd rather be almost anywhere else. At least ten per cent of any class today will have "special needs" -- physical, intellectual, linguistic, or emotional difficulties. All this within an educational system that requires an hour of paperwork for every hour of teaching time, and while placating parents who refuse to admit that their obstreperous offspring might have any faults....

Whatever good teachers are paid, they're worth every penny.

Oops, I forgot – Canada is getting rid of pennies.

Carry a big stick

But this column is not just about teachers. It's about how we work out what any person is worth. The mechanics and pilots, who keep planes flying safely while I'm 12 km up. The nurse who makes sure I get the right medication. The butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker... and the CEO who gets 50 times more than any of them.

In labor disputes, guess who gets shafted. Here in B.C., anesthetists threaten to cancel all elective surgeries. Hospital employees lobby for support with TV ads. Library workers vote to strike. And almost everyone at Air Canada – except the elite in their executive offices – has tried to walk out in protest and been forced back to work by government intervention.

Government intervention, says a former negotiator, “subverts the normal bargaining process.”

But that bargaining process depends on who can swing the biggest stick.

Governments start with very big sticks. They can legislate settlements; they can punish rebels.

So do corporations. After Caterpillar bought the Electro-Motive Diesel locomotive plant in London, Ontario, it demanded that workers take a 50 per cent cut. When the company didn’t get its way, it closed the plant, pocketed its federal grants, and moved to Indiana.

Drag in a third party

Conflict resolution courses typically warn against triangulating the problem. That is, instead of working things out yourselves, you drag in a third party. Or several of them. In smaller conflicts, you expect them to intervene on your behalf. In bigger conflicts, you expect them to line up on your side, so that you can accumulate enough collective mass to stomp the other side into submission.

And God help anyone who dares break solidarity.

This adversarial system guarantees that someone must lose. Unfortunately, this system has become the norm for negotiating in a free-market world. Both sides start by defining non-negotiable demands. Having nailed their colours to the mast, so to speak, they find it difficult to dip their flags even a fraction.

So they take hostages – children, patients, travelers, clients, customers....

The principle seems to be that if they – either side– can inflict enough pain on their hostages, the other side will have to give in and pay the ransom demands.

We may not have progressed as far from the grim world of Grimm’s Fairy Tales as we like to think.

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

Diane Robinson sent the first letter in response to last week’s column: “The Zimmerman-Martin ‘affair’ has me thinking that race relations in the United States is not a done deal yet. African-Americans may, no longer, be required or expected to avoid white-only locations or to sit at the back of a bus, etc. However, African-Americans still comprise the majority of prison inmates, still live in ghettoized neighbourhoods, and so on. While there’s been some progress (thank God!), it would seem that ‘race’ still simmers and seethes just below (if not also above) the surface of American life.

“Canadians should not, however, feel too smug as First Nations also comprise the majority of prison inmates, also live in ghettoized neighbourhoods, and so on. There is still much race relations work to do in both countries!”

Charles Hill poked fun at the ability of the religious right to find biblical loopholes for the Ten Commandments: “Ah! You obviously haven’t read the exceptions to the sixth commandment listed in 2nd Luke! Moses obviously didn’t record everything God said.”

There is no 2nd Luke, of course. My friend Ralph Milton similarly supports anything outrageous by citing a fictional verse from Leviticus. Any verse. He feels confident that hardly anyone has read Leviticus thoroughly enough to challenge him.

Steve Roney argued several points in George Zimmerman's defence, but I think this was his main point: "I think it is a big problem that so many public figures and media have already tried the case in public, when we really do not know the evidence. This is by its nature prejudicial. It more or less guarantees that Zimmerman cannot get a fair trial. This may let him off the hook, if he is guilty, or unjustly stigmatize him for life, if he is innocent. Or, worst scenario, railroad an innocent man to death row. It all looks like a lynch mob."

Nancy Kerr also criticized the news media: "You just gave us more facts than I've gleaned from several 'news' reports. Even knowing your biases beforehand, your presentation of the news showed more investigative activity regarding factual background than I've seen in any other print. (I'm behind in reading my *New Yorker*, *Atlantic*, and *Harpers*; perhaps such I'll find such information in there.) At any rate, thanks for a real treat in reading a real news article.

"Many underlying attitudes and oppressions remain in the South, 67 years after I first went to South Carolina as a 10 year old and was permanently shocked. It hadn't changed when I went 20 years later as an NCC chaplain to volunteers in the long, hot summer of 1964 in Vicksburg, Mississippi. Our local pastor, a bird-watcher, traveled through Southern States three years ago and reported similar experiences as mine so long ago. Yes, there have been changes in opportunities, but not in attitudes -- and danger still lurks."

Mary-Margaret Boone: "Thank you for expanding on the unpleasant truths -- this entire incident is shameful. Canadians put a lot of money into the Florida coffers every winter -- perhaps we should be boycotting travel there as our own way of protesting their gun laws."

Freda Stewart thought some of the comments directed at the Fanshawe College rioters, in last week's "Your Turn" section, were unfair: "I am always amazed at the blame game that goes on -- somebody else seems always to blame for young people's problems and fears, and their seeming constant need to try to get something for nothing as their right. I've worked with people who like me, spent years about in university and jobs because scholarships were available for the very select few. But we were the ones that appreciated, enjoyed, and used our education -- to full advantage -- and became life-long learners. Because we earned it and nobody could take it away.

"My daughter's comment 'Where, when, and how are these kids supposed to learn responsibility for themselves? They want it all - given to them' The nanny state has truly invaded and I wonder which world will turn out the better people. I fear for these young people if they can survive."

I'm going to throw in a follow-up to Freda's comment on "the nanny state," that perhaps some of you may wish to respond to. I still hear people wishing for the 1960s, when churches were full and Sunday schools overflowed. But that social culture produced the generations that now have no interest in church, or in religion of any kind -- except, perhaps, the self-centred greed religion of Ayn Rand and Milton Friedman. Surely the test of a culture is the kind of people it produces for the next generation. Post World-War-II culture seems to me to have been failed to pass on its own standards. What kind of people did the 1980s produce? What kind of people are the 2000s producing?

PSALM PARAPHRASES

A couple of weeks hardly makes a scientific survey, but the results were fairly definitive. Seventeen letters came in about including psalm paraphrases. Fifteen were in favour; one opposed; one maybe....

So I have started including a 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.

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 unsubscribe 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 "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 to get onto her mailing list.
