

Sunday April 1, 2012

## **Rewriting the sixth Commandment**

By Jim Taylor

Memo to self -- stop buying iced tea! Apparently a can of tea is a dangerous weapon, enough of a threat to paranoid vigilantes that they can shoot and kill to defend themselves.

Fortunately, I don't buy Skittles, the other lethal weapon carried by 17-year-old Trayvon Martin.

On a rainy evening of February 26, Martin was walking through the Retreat on Twin Lakes, a Florida gated community. He was returning from a nearby 7-Eleven convenience store to the townhouse of his father's girlfriend or fiancée (some reports called her his stepmother). He wore a hoodie, the unofficial uniform of disaffected youth.

He was shot, once, in the chest. By Neighbourhood Watch captain George Zimmerman. Zimmerman notified the police dispatcher that he was following a suspicious-looking black male.

Zimmerman later claimed that Martin ambushed him, knocked him to the ground with one punch, and bashed his head against the sidewalk. Zimmerman's reported (but so far unproven) injuries seemed to support his claim.

The police in Sanford, near Orlando, have been criticized for failing to lay charges against Zimmerman. In fact, Florida's "Stand Your Ground" laws prohibit police from charging persons who kill in self defence.

### **Protests spread**

Since Martin's shooting, mass demonstrations have filled streets. Martin's parents have testified in the U.S. Congress. Even President Obama spoke about it. Bobby Rush got kicked out of the House of Representatives for wearing a hoodie to protest Martin's fate. The Globe and Mail devoted a two-page feature to the evolution of hoodies.

The National Rifle Association, incidentally, now markets its own hoodies -- with a concealed handgun holster built into its pockets.

Commentators have weighed in for and against accusations of racism, police incompetence, and gun abuse. The personal histories of both schoolboy Martin and insurance broker Zimmerman have been exhumed to challenge their credibility.

After listening to conflicting reports on television, my wife remarked, "We'll probably never know the truth about this case."

I disagree. I think we do know the truth. But nobody will do anything about it.

### **Unpleasant truths**

First truth, that Zimmerman was and is a troublemaker. By comparison, Trayvon Martin's school offences pale into insignificance.

Zimmerman had been twice arrested for violent crimes -- for resisting a police officer, and for domestic violence. All charges were quashed, without explanation. But he was required to take an alcohol education program.

Since he moved into Twin Lakes in 2009, Zimmerman registered 46 calls to Sanford police, filling a 28-page file. The complaints range from a neighbour leaving his garage door open to boys doing wheelies on their bicycles.

Although described as a public-spirited volunteer, police records show that Zimmerman initiated the Neighbourhood Watch program, organized its first meetings, and nominated himself as its first captain. Neighbourhood Watch gave him an excuse to patrol the community, carrying his 9 mm pistol.

As Watch captain, he canvassed the community door to door, asking people to watch out specifically for “young black men who appear to be outsiders.”

On February 26, he found one.

The police dispatcher told Zimmerman that police were on their way, that he didn’t need to follow Martin. Zimmerman ignored the instruction.

Transcripts of that exchange suggest he referred to Trayvon Martin as a “coon” or “goon.” He told the dispatcher, “These assholes always get away.”

Even if Martin did attack him, it was an unequal contest. Martin was a skinny teenager, six feet tall and 140 pounds. Zimmerman was 28, at 250 pounds almost double Martin’s weight. Even the fittest super-lightweight boxer would have trouble decking a heavyweight with a single punch.

To make the match even more unequal, Zimmerman had a gun. Martin had a can of iced tea and a package of Skittles.

## **A licence to kill**

And the second obvious truth is that Florida’s “Stand Your Ground” legislation is a licence to murder. Since it became law in 2005, Florida’s rate of “justified homicides” has tripled.

In an eerie parallel, in 2005, two security guards claimed self defence after shooting another teenager, Tavares McGill -- in the back.

Twenty-one states have similar laws, but Florida extends the right to kill in self defence into public places. Which means it can apply to a belligerent bargain-hunter in a shopping mall. Or to the Jehovah’s Witnesses who knock on my door with the knuckles of a closed fist.

If I consider their behavior threatening, I’m entitled to blast them with both barrels of a shotgun. Was it “justified”? Hey, who you gonna believe -- me, or the dead guy?

In effect, “Stand Your Ground” amends the Sixth Commandment: “YOU shalt not kill -- but it’s all right for ME.”

To compound the problem, in Florida, anyone can obtain a licence on-line to carry a concealed handgun; the process doesn’t even require a Social Security Number.

Personally, I think that Florida’s gun laws are themselves a crime. But then, what do I know -- the most dangerous weapon I’m familiar with is a can of iced tea.

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## **YOUR TURN**

Vic Sedo had little sympathy for the Fanshawe rioters I wrote about last Sunday. He wrote, “The Fanshawe students are the 1%, don’t care about the rest. Fear no Hell and care less about Heaven... Classless losers. The lowlife dead beats of our society.”

Cliff Boldt referred to my assessment: “Their future is being stolen from them. Frankly, if I were them, I’d be tempted to erupt too.”

“Absolutely,” he agreed. “We have had our future and we are screwing up theirs with our arrogance and greed!”

Cliff added a PS applicable to BC residents, about the government’s imposition of a harmonized sales tax without parliamentary debate or consultation with voters: “The HST failed not just because it was an unjust tax. It failed because people were mad as hell about cuts to health care, seniors, public education, increased fees like MSP premiums, higher property taxes, wait times, lousy private care for seniors in facilities, increased ferry rates. There was a lot of gas on the floor; HST was the match/spark.”

Freda Stewart mused on the fears that motivate people: “WWII was declared while I was a very small child with an all-right world, as long as my dad was about. My fear -- that 'they' would take him away to the army and 'overseas'. With so many other young chaps not returning home again, it was not an irrational fear.

“Later my fears in job hunting when I didn't have work qualifications except for low paid jobs... Homestead kids did not fare too well for university levels, there being no university grants or such.

“The difference was I think that I ... didn't expect a nanny state to pander to us, pay for educations and other such niceties. University was a marvellous experience for me, taught me the true value of an education, and I know many more people of my era who were in the same boat -- we just got onto the oars and kept on rowing. If these Fanshawe students are truly suspended, they may live to well regret letting down what common sense they did possess. But, who pays for the property damage done -- taxpayers. That no one was killed may be accidental. Perhaps some time on a cleanup crew would help them understand a bit better the value of property, which they will all want to own someday, if they ever make it to adulthood.”

Steve Roney wrote, “We're broadly in agreement -- the students are rioting because they are afraid for their future, and because the authorities have lost moral authority. To my mind, it looks very similar to the 1960s.

“I think you have overlooked some likely causes, though. First, the worldwide recession, which has hit the young especially hard. Are these kids going to be able to find jobs on graduation? In the meantime, rapidly inflating academic requirements have forced them into prolonged adolescence and dependency. And rapidly rising tuition, in tandem with this, means many, perhaps most, will graduate and enter adult life with huge debt they see no way to repay. They will not be allowed to shirk this debt through declaring bankruptcy.

“And, on top of this, they are going to be required to finance insupportable pension schemes for their elders, which they can never hope to enjoy themselves. Their elders who on the whole had a much easier go of it entering the workforce. On top of this, huge and growing present government debts. We have spent at least a generation—I'd say forty or fifty years—running up our charge cards for our children and grandchildren to pay. Why wonder if they are finally rebelling?”

Sandy Anderson connected with his own youth: “I grew up in the 60's and remember well the youth revolt of our time. We WERE fed up with and although the main thrusts of our movement began with anger about the Vietnam War, it quickly spread to the corruption we found everywhere.

“I think that's what's happening again. You were spot on when you said that they don't necessarily know why they are angry... But they will. As time goes on, they will ask that question of themselves: ‘Why am I angry?’ and will notice more and more that what's going on in the political arena, the global, and on the local scene just isn't right, and they'll identify and target those issues. We older ones are aware of them as well, but we somehow lose the courage to protest very loudly, for the most part, as we ourselves fall into the ‘establishment pit.’

“We are in for some rocky roads, I fear. But at the same time, I welcome them because change is needed on every level. The young people are not afraid to tell it like it is, and I applaud that. For the most part, they are more open and tolerant AND more confident that CHANGE -- positive change -- CAN happen. And they want to right the wrongs because, once again, our "entitlement" skirts and shirts are showing as free countries ~ in politics and in divisive actions -- pit the ‘haves’ against the ‘have nots,’ rather than working together for solutions. The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. It seems the "free world" needs to have that pointed out to them about every other generation or so, if not more.

“I pray that the God of all creation will create in us once again clean hearts and right spirits, so we can turn things around. Lord, have mercy!”

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## ABOUT MY BOOKS, ETC.

Sorry, I have no more copies of "Seeing the mystery" available any more. Please do not send any more cheques.

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## QUESTION FOR YOU

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 will start 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 have an implication, though. 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](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca). Or you can subscribe automatically by sending a blank e-mail to [softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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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 "SeemslikeGod" page, [www.seemslikegod.org](http://www.seemslikegod.org);
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- [reynoldsraps@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsraps@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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