

Sunday May 4, 2014

The good news in the bad news

By Jim Taylor

“Is there anything positive going on in the world?” a reader lamented. “A serious TV watcher could feast 24 hours a day on tragedy and suffering... Decades ago the media learned that bad news sells...”

I have to agree, even as I play the same game. I can’t help taking the side of those I consider underdogs. Doing so requires exposing the sins of the overdogs. Which becomes, almost inevitably, a recitation of bad news.

But sometimes, there’s good news in the bad news.

The bad news, this last week, was the prejudice expressed by Donald Sterling, owner of the Los Angeles Clippers basketball franchise, against racial minorities in general, and against Afro-Americans in particular.

Recordings of a 10-minute conversation the billionaire 80-year-old had with his 31-year-old girlfriend, V Stiviano, criticized her for “associating with black people.... You can sleep with them, you can do whatever you want with them, [but] not bring them to my games...”

Sterling has admitted to Adam Silver, commissioner of the National Basketball Association, that his voice made those comments.

He seems blind to the fact that 75 per cent of NBA players are black. And that Stiviano herself has mixed Mexican and black ancestry.

But then Sterling, who made his billions in real estate deals, has a long history of racial prejudice. In 2009, he paid a \$2.7 million settlement after his apartment buildings were found guilty of discriminating against racial minorities. In a similar case in 2003, he settled with 19 aggrieved tenants, after stating that “black tenants smell and attract vermin.”

Universal censure

The good news has been the reaction against him.

His own players wore black socks and black armbands in last Sunday’s playoff game, as a symbol of protest. In another game, they refused to wear their Clippers warm-up jackets, and wore their shirts inside out to conceal the team’s name.

Past and present basketball greats, such as Magic Johnson, LeBron James, and Kevin Johnson united in condemning Sterling.

Rhythm-and-blues singer Tank refused to sing the national anthem for a Clippers’ game.

The censure went right to the top. President Barack Obama weighed in from Malaysia, calling Sterling’s words “incredibly offensive racist statements.”

I assume that Sterling would not welcome the president of his country to his games or his home.

The NBA acted decisively. Adam Silver announced on Tuesday that Sterling was banned from the NBA for life. He was also fined \$2.5 million, the maximum fine the NBA can impose. The fine itself is a minor blink for billionaire Sterling – roughly equivalent, I suspect, to fining the rest of us a token \$25. Hardly worth getting upset about.

Corporate reactions

For me, the really heartening news was the business world's reaction. State Farm Insurance called his comments "offensive," and pulled its advertising. CarMax ended a nine-year sponsorship. Bloomberg Business Week called Sterling's position "untenable." The Los Angeles Times called on other media to refuse advertising from Sterling-owned companies.

Face it – we live in a world dominated by market forces. Corporations are not idealistic do-gooders. They exist only to make money for their owners (which sometimes includes thousands of shareholders).

When the corporate world penalizes prejudiced attitudes, you'd better believe that the culture really is changing at last.

Slavery was officially abolished in the U.S. 150 years ago. Discrimination in housing and education was outlawed 50 years ago. But as Obama noted, "The U.S. continues to wrestle with the legacy of race and slavery and segregation."

The tide seems to have turned, finally. Former NBA star Kevin Johnson, now mayor of Sacramento, called the response to Sterling's comments "a defining moment" for the NBA. And perhaps for the nation.

Stuck in the past

Jazz Shaw, a writer for the *Hot Air* conservative blog, calls Sterling, "an old man who lives in isolation from the world around him... He comes from a different generation, growing up among attitudes which were common beyond notice in their day."

Sterling was 24, a full grown adult, before Jackie Robinson became the first black player to crack the colour barrier into previously all-white professional sports leagues. But Sterling still thinks in pre-Robinson terms.

In that sense, Sterling and his ilk are like the hind end of a snail, which doesn't realize the front end has moved ahead.

And that's the good news. The snail is moving. The bad news is that Sterling didn't bother to change his attitudes, didn't acknowledge that the world around him had changed.

So I'm delighted that the world has dumped on Donald Sterling.

But I can't help wondering if they would have dumped on him the same way for making sexist comments about women. Or prejudiced comments about gays. Or immigrants.

I suspect not.

We've come a long way, baby. But we still have a long way to go.

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YOUR TURN

I excerpted the quotation that starts this week's column from Charles Hill, in Texas. Here's his full comment: "Is there anything positive going on in the world? A serious TV watcher could feast 24 hours a day on tragedy and suffering in both fiction shows and news. I'm not minimizing anyone's suffering. Your observations about financial inequity and heroic risk-taking for survival income are accurate. Is there a line, however, at which we are so saturated with suffering that we become numb and don't care? I don't know how many readers you have but I wonder how many did not say, but felt, 'oh well, shit happens.'"

“Decades ago the media learned that tragedy sells airtime and that sells commercials. Those to whom God has given tender hearts have many opportunities to shed tears.”

Bob Stoddard pointed out a minor error that I put into last week’s letters: “Prof. Yunus started the Grameen lending from Bangladesh -- not India.”

About the Sherpas, Bob commented, “I too got excited about the Himalayas when I was at Woodstock. I then began reading about mountaineers and following the reports of expeditions of the 1950s.

“Your column, with the various perspectives about the Sherpas' role, has added to the complex issues about exploitation vs ‘financial opportunities’ when wealthy persons/corporations pay low wages to workers from impoverished places. This complex issue of inequality occurs in so many ways throughout the world ranging from tips to ricksha wallahs, to prostitution, to factory workers in Bangladesh, to....”

Bob pointed out that “skilled mountaineers have climbed Everest, Annapurna, and K2 solo. But you are right that those with lots of money and few skills would not get up the mountain without Sherpas. And the behaviour of some ‘climbers’ is quite contrary to the true spirit of mountaineering.”

Robert Mason came to Winfield United Church to see and purchase some of the sweaters I wrote about the previous week: “Annette and I were just amazed at the quality of the sweaters, shawls, even dresses, made by the Minkha women, especially having just returned from three months in the high Andes of Ecuador, and seen the lesser quality of alpaca products available there.

“I am totally in agreement with you that the Sherpas should receive very much more for their services, including considerably higher wages, injury insurance, and much higher death benefits payable to their surviving families. That the companies which arrange Everest climbs would make so much profit, and the men who make it possible so little income, is unconscionable.”

Bob recalled Hillary and Tenzing’s first summit: “They made it to the top on May 29th. 1953 -- my twelfth birthday -- and we got the news on Coronation Day, June 2nd. Having been born and brought up on the Wirral, U.K., I was familiar with the story of Mallory and Irving, whose names are memorialized by having streets named after them. I subsequently met John Hunt, the leader of the 1953 expedition, who visited our Scout camp later that summer. The following school year, George Band, the expedition photographer, another Wirral boy, visited my Grammar school and gave a presentation, so I had the privilege of chatting with two members of the first successful Everest expedition.”

George Brigham had some additional thoughts about ING Direct re-branding itself as “Tangerine”: “Having just returned from a week in the Netherlands, I have been reminded again of the significance of Orange to Dutch peoples and (perhaps) the real reason for ING embracing Orange. The Dutch royal family are the House of Orange and the Dutch people are overwhelmingly enthusiastic about their monarch. I've been in Holland a couple of times previously for Queen's Day when very many people dress in orange and engage in all kinds of festivities. Having had a succession of female monarchs, Saturday 26 April was the first King's Day for more than 100 years, with Willem Alexander having recently come to the throne after his mother's abdication. The whole country was awash with orange. When a Dutch bank rebrands itself as orange it is simply being patriotic.”

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.

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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

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

- * Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- * David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- * Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- * Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.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.
