

*Wednesday November 6, 2013*

## **Reading the characters in a nasty play**

By Jim Taylor

The scandal over expense accounts, shady deals, and excommunication in the Canadian Senate has gone on so long, so vehemently, that I cannot help writing something about it.

To recap: three senators -- Mike Duffy, Pamela Wallin, and Patrick Brazeau -- were accused of fudging their expense accounts for housing and travel. The total involved about \$315,000. They have repaid the funds that they should not have received.

Except that Mike Duffy had his expenses covered by a personal cheque from the Prime Minister's Chief of Staff. And Duffy's legal expenses were paid by the Conservative Party, approved by the party's lawyer.

In the House of Commons, opposition parties have attempted to incriminate the Prime Minister in these payments. He denies all charges. He did not personally interfere. He knew nothing of any arrangements for payment. Anything his staff did, they did on their own.

### **Matter of trust**

The controversy has grown steadily more bitter, with Prime Minister Stephen Harper and former journalist Mike Duffy battling accusations back and forth like a ping pong ball.

I don't like either of them. I don't trust them. But in this controversy, I'm more inclined to believe Duffy than Harper.

I have no inside knowledge of the situation, no "Deep Throat" informants. All I can judge by is the way they have played their roles on stage.

Duffy presents evidence to back up his accusations -- e-mails, cancelled cheques, signed letters. No one has suggested those documents were forged. That lends credibility to Duffy's charges.

His behavior also rings true. Before he came under fire, he campaigned loyally for the party and the leader who appointed him. The venom with which he now attacks that leader fits with a sense of personal betrayal.

Under similar circumstances, I would want to lash out too.

As a child, I remember, I usually avoided confrontation. I backed away from bullies. Until I got cornered. When I could no longer escape, I didn't care what might happen to me as long as I could hurt my tormenters. Basically, I went berserk.

That's precisely what Mike Duffy seems to be doing.

## Never the whole truth

Stephen Harper, on the other hand, reminds me of a slick corporate CEO trying to divulge as little as possible about his company's unethical practices. He issues denials; he attacks his attackers. He never presents hard evidence. He avoids adding additional details.

Here too I recognize myself. I learned long ago that I'm a lousy liar. I believe lying is wrong. So when I'm under pressure to fib, I squirm so uncomfortably that the truth is painfully obvious.

I learned, instead, not to volunteer information. The less I said, the less likely I was to get tripped up later by some nasty detail.

Stephen Harper acts as I would, if I were trying to avoid telling the full truth. He's not necessarily lying, but he's concealing stuff he doesn't want us to know.

I could be wrong, of course. I'll be interested to see how my character assessments pan out, as the Senate soap opera rolls through further installments.

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## YOUR TURN

After last week's column, Wayne Irwin provided "The definition of an extreme egotist -- the person who says, 'If I had not been born, everyone would be asking 'Why not?'"

Wayne added, "My grandmother on my father's side was a 10th child; my grandfather, a 6th. If their parents had decided each to have one less child, I figure that someone else would be responding to this column -- or maybe no-one would."

Jim Henderschedt and I seem to move on parallel lines. He wrote, "You must be reading the same books on Buddhism that I am. You are also in sync with Fr. Richard Rohr. It is one of those concepts that, in the words of Tevya (*Fiddler on the Roof*), is enough to 'cross a rabbi's eyes'."

Bruce Fraser was surprised by my column: "This article showed me a side of you I hadn't met before. Am I reading this correctly, that you believe that people who follow Jesus do not continue to live with him after death? Yes, of course, it's quite plain that's what you meant. My question is more rhetorical than inquisitive, a reflection of my surprise."

Cliff Boldt wrote, "You have opened the issue of ego, and that is a subject for even more discussion than politics and religion -- it gets even more personal. I'll be thinking about that today."

Paul James commented, "I've been wondering about that myself lately. I'm still on the side of continued life but maybe it is just wishful thinking."

The Paul rephrased Pascal's Wager: "If I'm right then I'll see you in whatever form it takes. If you are right then I won't know to be disappointed anyway."

Gary Taylor (no relation, we agree) tested my reasoning. "You ask," he wrote, "If there is no preexistent 'I' is there a post-existent 'I'?" and then basically state that it doesn't much matter. (I hope I have paraphrased your thoughts correctly.) I agree with you for the most part.

"Let me explain. As I understand it, heaven isn't a place we go to if we are a believer when we die (and there is so much wrong with that idea). Heaven is the presence of God. If we believe in a God who knows us to our very core; who knows every fiber, iota, and atom of us; and who knows our thoughts, desires, fears, joys, and loves before we can speak or name them, then when our physical body on earth no longer lives we will be entirely known by God. In essence, we will be completely in the presence of God.

"I could go on about how this understanding of the presence of God can become a reality in our lives today (us abiding in God and God abiding in us, from the Gospel of John) but I won't because there are way too many roads we could go down."

Charles Hill commented, "Your writing stunned me." (In subsequent correspondence, Charles explained that he was stunned because he had never before seen a religious writer express doubts in the same way.) "In some ways, the writers of the Bible agree with you. We have a 'hope' and 'faith,' not a tangible certainty.

"Secondly, you won't 'live-on' in memories for very long. In all probability, your existence will be forgotten with the passing of two generations -- unless you have been as infamous as Hitler."

James Russell called it a "good column: Essentially the reason I don't believe in the Christian afterlife or Buddhist reincarnation, and clear evidence that we don't need such beliefs to act morally here on earth."

There were also a couple of letters, clearly marked "Not for publication!", in which the writers explored their own understandings of what precedes birth and follows death. They shared richly from their experience and their thoughts.

One phrase in particular captured me: "Having dodged the death sentence, I have been sentenced to life."

Jack Driedger had some further thoughts about the previous week's column, on saying No: "We are told to 'love your neighbor as yourself'. Too often we forget that it is assumed we love our self. As a matter of fact, the assumption is that we love our self so much that it serves as the example of how much you should love your neighbor. Hence, it is your unequivocal duty to say NO if that is in your best interest!"

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## **PSALM PARAPHRASES**

The lectionary offers a choice of two psalms for this morning -- portions of Psalm 145, or Psalm 98. Since November 10 is the day before most nations remember those who died or suffered through wars, I went with this version of Psalm 98.

- 1 How different God's creation is from human society.  
The clamor of human conflict creates a cacophony  
like orchestras competing with their conductor.  
Dysfunctional families sacrifice their favorite songs,  
and nations murder each other's melodies.
- 2 But God plays other music.
- 3 The colors of nature never clash with each other.

4 In a garden, every shade of leaf and flower joins a joyous chorus;  
bare branch and bonsai provide a counterpoint  
balancing the beauty of blossoms.

5-6 In the depths of the jungle,  
the sounds of termite and tiger weave a wondrous harmony;  
eerie descants echo through the ocean's deeps.  
The rhythm of life throbs in every cell,  
and the seasons swell and ebb away.

7-8 From the farthest nebula to the tiniest atom,  
all creation dances to honor its choreographer.

9 God applauds each performance.  
But God detects the discords, too.  
And God does not applaud.

For paraphrases of this and other psalms, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publications, [info@woodlake.com](mailto:info@woodlake.com).

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#### YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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 web links 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](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [www.traditionaliconoclast.com](http://www.traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsrap@shaw.ca)
- 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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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca), or send a note to [sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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