

Sunday September 30, 2012

Privacy contracts and Kate Middleton's breasts

By Jim Taylor

Britain's royal family is in a royal snit. As everyone knows by now, Prince William and his wife Kate Middleton, the Duchess of Cambridge, were holidaying at a private chateau in Provence in the south of France. On the far side of a stone wall, Kate dropped her top.

A photographer on a distant road with a powerful telephoto lens – not, I gather, a member of the dreaded paparazzi who hounded William's mother to death 15 years ago – snapped pictures of Kate, exposed.

A French paper, the *Closer*, published the pictures.

The royal family got a court order banning further publication of the revealing photos. But a French court has no jurisdiction in Ireland, where the *Daily Star* published 13 pictures. Or in Italy, where one of former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi's papers displayed 26 pages of them.

Twenty-six pages? How many variations on one pair of mammary glands can prurient readers salivate over?

Anatomical obsessions

Two points (sorry, but with this subject, double entendres are almost inevitable) deserve consideration – breasts, and privacy.

Kate's breasts made headlines largely because, in our social context, breasts have become boy toys. Whatever their other talents, Ava Gardner, Jayne Mansfield, Dagmar, Julia Roberts, and Pamela Anderson all achieved early prominence because their superstructures excited men's fantasies.

Even mainstream publications seized the opportunity to run pseudo-academic essays about how female breasts have historically bounced between being taboo and titillating.

Ironically, when William and Kate then visited the Solomon Islands, the female population greeted them bare-breasted. And no one called that an invasion of their privacy.

Bare breasts are, in other words, a cultural thing. Thousands of women drop their tops on the Riviera's beaches. So what? And yet in our own society, in earlier times, even piano legs were once considered so sexy they had to be covered lest they drive men mad with desire.

Other cultures prohibit public display of other feminine body parts. Hair, for example. Or lips. At an extreme, even eyes must be concealed behind burqas.

Public and private

Then there's the question of privacy. Do public figures have any right to privacy?

I think they do. Unless their private life contradicts the persona they project to the public. Several U.S. televangelists preached fidelity but practiced philandery. They deserved to be exposed.

There are exceptions. Hollywood stars rarely have private lives, because most of them are media fabrications. Without constant attention, they fade away like Alice's Cheshire cat.

And obviously nothing in the electronic world can be considered private any more – as *News of the World* hackers proved in Britain. Once you post thoughts to FaceBook or YouTube, they're fair game for anyone.

How about politicians? Canadian journalists have generally been kinder than their U.S. counterparts. They did not feel it necessary to denounce a respected parliamentarian for living with a woman who was not his wife, as

long as it didn't affect his performance in parliament. Or to mock a prime minister for consulting psychics, unless it influenced his judgment.

The same principle should apply to the royal family. What the Queen and Prince Philip do in their bedroom in Buckingham Palace is private – even if they neglect to draw their blinds. That's why we have laws against "peeping toms".

An implied social contract

Privacy is, I suggest, an implied social contract.

If I declare something private, I expect you to respect that agreement.

For example, a personal letter is private. If you make it public, you risk losing my friendship and my trust – unless you can show me convincing reasons for breaking our contract.

Implied contracts always have fuzzy edges. As Karen Selick noted in the Vancouver *Sun*, Hutterites refuse to have their photos taken, even for drivers' licences. If someone snaps a Hutterite's photo on the street, is he still protected by his dedication to privacy? If a Muslim woman wearing a full burka for privacy objects to having her photo taken, does she have the same legal recourse as Kate Middleton?

As a writer, some parts of my life inevitably become public. My experiences affect the subjects I write about, and how I feel about those subjects. But I have learned to be cautious when including family and friends. They don't always appreciate having their private lives exposed to public scrutiny.

At least I have the privilege of choosing what to reveal, and what to keep to myself.

Kate Middleton was denied that privilege. A photographer violated the social contract that she expected would apply behind chateau walls. She was not parading herself on the Riviera. She was in a private place; she was doing private things.

The French court upheld that understanding.

But it was already too late to undo the damage.

There is only one safe rule – for Kate and for anyone else: if you don't want people to know what you're doing, don't do it.

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YOUR TURN

Last week's column about the roots of the anti-American riots in the Middle East and beyond brought a veritable flood of mail. I'm going to leave out most of the letters that simply sent congratulations. Wayne Irwin summarized their views: "I find your thoughts 'bleeping' fabulous, to be alliterative about it! You express it all in a way that seems so obvious. Despite instant communication around the world, we in the West continue to be relatively oblivious to the experience of those on the receiving end of our self-righteous attitude and behaviour."

Nan Erbaugh shared her experience: "I talk to folks a lot about the fact that the rest of the world has good cause to dislike us in the USA. My husband and I are very aware of this as we travel back and forth to Sudan. Thanks for having the courage to name the elephant in the room!"

Duane Thomson added his own piece of insight: "I think that your article on the Muslim riots was spot on. I also think that it is beyond the imagination of numerous folk in the Muslim world to imagine a world where free speech is allowed, and so Obama must be to blame as he is the President."

Dan Bouchard: "I've noticed a more activist tone in your writing lately and it is welcomed. From environmental responsibility to balanced political consideration your style is much appreciated. As a young adult in an old valley (Okanagan BC) to see this from your someone of generation is refreshing. Please do keep it up."

John Hatchard asked, "Is this [attitude] yet another example of Western hubris (the Greeks still have the best words for certain states of mind!) that has been developing from the Age of Discovery when Europeans went voyaging around the globe, met new people and cultures, and failed to give them fair value except for what could be done by way of trade. Where this was not possible those people were considered beyond even contempt as credible human societies.

"Down here in the corner of the planet where I now live are two examples. The Australian aborigines were not even recognized as human, their land was considered uninhabited, and therefore a good place to exile 'criminals'. Yet they knew how to live intelligently in an extremely harsh climate for 60,000 years...

"Across the Tasman pond the Maori were looked down on because they were a tribal culture and did not have metals of any kind. Their culture was exploited with guns, even by missionaries, and they were easily bamboozled into giving up their land and sovereignty to the British in exchange for 'protection' from other marauding white nations. But, the fact that they were a formidable warrior culture could not be overlooked.... The Maori have continued to demonstrate that they are a highly intelligent people, so much so that they are making an increasingly important contribution to national life. Unfortunately the non-Maori element of NZ society still believes it is superior and white culture still rules. If anything would point to a better way it is the All Blacks rugby team. Blacks and white united have produced the most formidable team in the world from a population base of only four million. Hubris takes a different form in this case!"

James Russell forwarded the column to his own mailing lists, calling it "a strikingly clear and convincing column on the anti-U.S. riots in Islamic states started by the viral video that mocked Mohammed. What Jim points out, and no one else seems to have done, is that the video was just the match that lit the fire. The fuel for that fire had been carefully accumulated and assembled, readied for the match, by decade after decade after decade of U.S. foreign policy.

"Islam takes values of collective honour and shame as basic (as do fundamentalist Christians, among others). And the greater the collective offended, and the more contemptuous the treatment, the greater the offence, the outrage and the need to hit back. And for decades the U.S. has been, as it is today, the world's pre-eminent repeat offender at treating foreign peoples as stepping stones to its own interests, providing figurehead 'protection' and real exploitation.... If we want to prevent more fires, it's the woodpile we need to worry about, not the match."

My Toronto friend Sam Strauss wrote, "I understand your analogy of Mexicans in Texas. But where do you stop? How far back in history can you claim land or territory? The map of the world is constantly changing. With respect to the Middle East, do we go back to the birth of Christianity? Back to the first temple in Jerusalem? Back to the Pharaohs? These situations have changed over many years. The history of the Middle East is not that simple."

Ted Spencer picked up on the same point: "You wondered how Americans would feel about Mexico settling (i.e. acquiring) Texas. It might be quite an improvement from my perspective, but that's by the bye. A more Canadian thought experiment would be France settling Québec and beyond. Would Canadians take it lying down? I rather doubt it. Although we might once have thought so, Canadians can no longer hold themselves above the more nefarious political goings-on around the world.

"Nor those in our own front yard: the patently stupid understanding of issues as black and white was something we (Canadians) used to laugh at. Now we are governed by a cadre who are oblivious to grey and nuance. The results cannot be pleasant."

Ted Swart shared these thoughts: "Your accurate description of the US foreign policy over many decades makes for depressing reading. It would not be unfair to describe the US behaviour as both dishonest, self absorbed and ham fisted.

“By sheer accident -- before the recent riots occurred -- the discussion group to which I belong met just a few weeks ago to discuss the topic of Israel. We naturally touched on the issue of anti-Semitism and we came to a consensus that we are totally opposed to anti-Semitism -- when defined as hating/opposing Jews simply because they are Jews. But we arrived at an equally strong consensus that describing anyone who criticises Israel's treatment of the Palestinians as anti-Semitic is just as deplorable. The very term anti-Semitism is a misnomer. A Semite is -- mythologically -- a descendant of Noah's eldest son Seth and this includes both Arabs and Jews -- which includes, of course, the Palestinians. And from a more scientific point of view DNA analysis shows that Palestinians and Jews are close cousins -- with both of them belonging to the same Semitic branch of the human family tree. From a language point of view Hebrew and Arabic belong to the Semitic branch of the language tree. These languages have an overlapping vocabulary and , in both cases, the word structure emphasises consonants -- with vowels playing a secondary role.”

On a related subject, Ted suggested, “The majority view within our group is that Iran has just as much right to have an atom bomb as anyone else. Both India and Pakistan have the bomb and my impression is that mutually assured destruction is a powerful force for more sensible thinking. If Israel attempt to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities the consequences would be too terrible to contemplate.”

Finally, Byron Wilson had some thoughts connecting the last two columns, on denials and on anti-Americanism: “The scientific consensus on climate change is certainly NOT in doubt despite the well-financed noise that would have us believe otherwise. At the very least, those who maintain the obfuscation cannot morally disagree that the precautionary principal must apply until proven otherwise....

“As we watch the violent backlash of Muslims throughout the world from our ‘enlightened’ viewpoint, too many forget -- or don’t know -- that it’s only 50 years since we enfranchised native Canadians, and less than 100 since Canadian women’s suffrage. Our continued denial of rights to portions of our own society today will one day be seen as no less wrong than those which we now condemn elsewhere. Nor should Canadians exempt themselves from what America has done with both our tacit and active support, and usually to our economic benefit. The repression we continue to support in other societies we plunder is both our shame and our responsibility.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

I have started including a psalm 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

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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

- 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, 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 to get onto her mailing list.
