

Wednesday October 23, 2013

The wisdom of saying no

By Jim Taylor

"Just Say No," Nancy Reagan told the students at Longfellow Elementary School in Oakland, California, in 1982, when a schoolgirl asked about using drugs. Her impromptu phrase caught on, although many addiction workers consider it only partly effective. "It reduces a very complex decision to a simple slogan," said one researcher.

That is, it doesn't take into account the power of peer pressure, celebrity models, poverty, adolescent rebellion, and the tendency of all adolescents to experiment. Earlier generations sneaked a smoke behind the barn, or smuggled a mickey into Scout camp. Today's young people have a far greater range of temptations to deal with.

Aside from that, though, most of us have great difficulty "just saying no."

Even though we may oppose organized gambling, we rarely say no when a local service club asks us to buy raffle tickets for a good cause.

We find it hard to say no when a host offers another glass of wine shortly before time to drive home.

And few people ever say no to a promotion at work.

Great expectations

My friend Ralph Milton occasionally describes his experience at the National Council of Churches offices in New York. For three years, he worked happily with religious broadcasters around the world. Then the NCC decided he deserved a promotion. He was miserable in management. After a year, he quit.

"Why didn't you just say no?" I asked him.

"Nobody turns down a promotion," he replied. "You're expected to move up."

Author Lawrence Peter based his book, *The Peter Principle*, on that expectation. People get promoted until they reach their level of incompetence. Often, they leave a job that suited their talents, and get stuck in a job where they are chronically unhappy. They no longer qualify for further advancement, but their egos won't let them move back to a less responsible position.

Nothing guarantees that a brilliant teacher will make a good principal, or that a skilled electrician can become an efficient administrator.

Of course, the reverse also applies – a brilliant editor may prove a ho-hum writer, a gifted manager may be all thumbs with a socket wrench...

It takes courage to say no

Another author, Richard Rohr, in his book *Falling Upward*, argues that most of our pre-retirement lives are ego-driven. Our culture tells us that unless we climb the ladder towards a higher salary, a corner office, a bigger house, a fancier car, we must be failures.

And it never occurs to us to question those cultural expectations.

I know clergy who were happy and successful in a smaller parish. But when offered a more prestigious pulpit, they felt impelled to accept. Some rationalized their move as a call from God. Others admitted – perhaps too late – that it was mainly status or personal challenge that attracted them.

It takes courage to say no to a questionable investment opportunity. Or to say no in the middle of a passionate embrace. Or to say no to the anger that flares up when a total jerk cuts you off on the highway....

According to Rohr, learning to say no – at the right time – is the beginning of wisdom.

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YOUR TURN

I wonder what I said – or didn't say – last week... Very few of you responded with your own comments. Indeed, one of the three comments that came in dealt with your letters rather than my column!

Pat Brush wrote, "Two things came together in my mind: Isabel Gibson saying, 'I don't like it when people treat holy writ as 'holy writ' ...' and Cliff Gieseke saying, 'Too many are too comfortable with literal interpretations of the Bible ...'

"In a chat group for Chaplains, I was called the antiChrist and a whore because I had dared to interpret a passage with consideration for what the Greek said and the context in which it was written. It seems to me that the holy writ that is being literally interpreted is often an inadequate translation.

"I find it frightening how some people unthinkingly hold up these translations as the infallible word of God and use them as weapons. We have seen it time and again throughout Christian history and it still continues."

James Russell (also in Ottawa, by some coincidence) picked up on my reference to 'religions are the oldest organizations I know ...'.

James asked, what about "Families? Tribes? Isn't religion a product of society, not the other way round? Indeed, the point of the column at least in part is that society at its most basic level is what we need to get back to, if we want real friends, real trust, real respect and a common understanding of what those mean. Without common experience, communication goes adrift."

I wonder – certainly families are a basic level. But I don't think that Canada has blood-linked tribes any more. Do professional associations (lawyers, engineers, doctors...) qualify as a modern version of tribes?

The third letter, from Allan Baker, urged me to submit an essay to the **Dalton Camp Award** competition (honouring the memory of a great Canadian journalist and political actor) intended to encourage more Canadians to **think and write about the links between media and democracy**. I'm flattered....

PSALM PARAPHRASES

Psalm 65 treats God as the wizard behind the green curtain, pulling the strings that make everything dance. The psalm implies that without God's active intervention, morning would not break, and evening would not fall. I don't totally buy that interpretation any more, but it makes a great psalm!

- 1 We can't put it off any longer, God.
- 2 We come crawling to you, because we have all fallen short of your expectations.

3 We have all missed the mark.
 But you have not held our failures against us.

5 We stumbled, and you picked us up;
 we were sinking, and you helped us swim.

4 You treat us with honor and respect.
 You make us welcome.
 It is more than we dare ask, more than we could ever expect.

6 We have no right to such kindness.
 You push mountains into ranges;
 you calm the raging oceans;

7 you spin the earth on its axis.
 Before you, we are as insignificant as ants, parading our puny armies.

8 If you stamp your feet, we will be squashed.

9 We boast of our science and technology,
 but by ourselves we cannot make even one seed sprout;
 we cannot shape a single raindrop.

10 We destroy, but only you bring life.

11 Through the cycle of the seasons, with reckless generosity, you share the wealth of the earth.

12 As tiny drops of dew gather into rushing streams,
 so our small thoughts gather into a torrent of gratitude.

13 The whole world celebrates your goodness.
 Like dolphins dancing through the waves,
 like antelope leaping through long grass,
 the earth jumps in a shout of joy.

For paraphrases of other psalms, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publications,
info@woodlake.com.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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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;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write 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 to get onto her mailing list.

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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, or send a note to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca
