

*Sunday February 3, 2013*

## **When to hold'em, when to fold'em**

By Jim Taylor

Brazil went into collective shock when 235 young people died in a nightclub fire, last Sunday. The rest of the world shrugged – my subjective analysis of available news reports.

Brazil lost roughly ten times as many promising youth as the U.S. did in the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary. Brazil's President Dilma Rousseff declared three days of national mourning.

But the world media largely ignored that profound sense of loss. They tended to focus on more superficial elements:

**Statistics.** How did the Brazilian tragedy compared with other nightclub disasters? Not as bad as the Cocoanut Grove in Boston, in 1942, where 492 died. Or Louyang, China, 309 people in 2000. But worse than Rhode Island, 2003, 100 people. And Buenos Aires, 2004, 194 deaths.

**Pyrotechnics.** Most of these disasters resulted from flares and other incendiary effects generated on stage, which have less to do with music than with desire to wow the audience.

**Corruption:** The Brazilian nightclub's licence expired last August. It had close to 2000 people inside, twice as many as legally permitted. It had only one exit...

But then, what can you expect from a Third-World nation? Shrug....

## **Following rules**

I haven't been in Brazil for 40 years. Back then, I remember, alleged corruption in Brazil's construction industry made Quebec's current scandal look like kiddies in a sandbox. Rip-offs in contracting; rip-offs in inspection and enforcement; rip-offs in construction materials, resulting in the roof of a multi-acre supermarket collapsing.

Gee, just like one did in Elliot Lake, here in First-World Canada.

Brazil is now a member of the G20, a rising star in the world economic order. Yet news reports imply that not much has changed there.

What caught my attention, though, was not the self-righteous toothsucking about Third-World incompetence and inefficiency, but a few paragraphs about the nightclub's bouncers.

Apparently, when fire first broke out, security guards refused to let panicking patrons out, because they hadn't paid their bar bills.

Some reports suggested that the bouncers relented when they realized the situation. Others indicated that the bouncers were simply overwhelmed by the crush of people trying to escape.

But by then it was too late. The pile of trampled bodies at the sole exit prevented anyone else from getting out anyway. Rescue crews had to force their way through a solid wall of bodies to reach the survivors still inside.

Some of the 235 dead were crushed in the stampede to get out; the rest asphyxiated from toxic smoke inhalation.

The guards, we should note, were simply doing their job. They had instructions. They did what they were told.

The same rationale used by German guards in the Nazi death camps.

## **Situations change**

Let's acknowledge that it's comfortable to know exactly what's expected of you, so you can do it. The nightclub's rule was clear – don't let patrons out without paying.

And as long as the situation remained normal, that rule maintained order.

But situations have a habit of changing. The primary lesson of evolution, it seems to me, is that simplicity never lasts. Situations keep getting more complex. And what had been a comfortable norm turns into a horrifying extreme.

At that point, continuing the extreme simply because it used to be the norm is wrong. Or criminal. Perhaps even sinful.

My book, *SIN: A New Understanding of Virtue and Vice*, argued that sin (or whatever else you choose to call it) is almost always a virtue taken to an extreme. Self-esteem becomes pride; enjoyment of food becomes gluttony; labour-saving becomes sloth...

The extreme is usually too much. But it can be too little. Too much physical interaction with children becomes abuse; too little, neglect.

## When virtue becomes vice

In the Brazilian nightclub, the intended virtue was to maintain order. Under normal circumstances, the extremes would be either to let patrons cheat the owners, or to ruthlessly prosecute cheaters with criminal charges.

The same extremes face the owners of retail stores – from the corner grocery to Walmart.

The nightclub chose a middle ground, avoiding both anarchy and criminal prosecution – don't let patrons out until they've paid. The same way Costco checks your cashier's receipt as you leave the store.

But the middle ground unexpectedly morphed into an extreme. When a member of the band lit an outdoor flare and set the place on fire, cheating was no longer the primary concern. What had been the right thing to do suddenly became wrong. Dead wrong.

It's a salutary lesson for all of us. As Kenny Rogers warbled in *The Gambler*, "You gotta know when to hold'em, know when to fold'em..."

The principle applies to climate change, gun control, interest rate manipulation, race and religious intolerance, women's rights...

Whatever your ideologies, if you hold'em in spite of new evidence, if you can't fold'em when the game changes, even the best of intentions will go awry.

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## YOUR TURN

There weren't many responses to last week's column, which wasn't a column at all but a collection of responses to previous columns, so perhaps the lack of responses is a responsible response.

John Shaffer followed up on some of the letters about guns: "I have done my little part. I have gotten rid of (sold) all my personal guns, even the trusty 30-06 I used for wilderness protection and hunting (for food) in the State of Alaska.

"As far as wilderness protection, I found a dozen children (campers) made me safer in bear country than a gun. No self-respecting bear stayed in the neighborhood of that much noise. But I did walk upon some still steaming evidence of a bear on one of our hikes to a glacier.

"In reality, the safety features of having guns in my home meant they were useless for home invasion. In truth, I have yet to find the bullets for the guns which are no longer in my home.

"There has been at least one time, if I had had a gun on my person, that I was so angry that I might have been tempted to utilize a gun. As a result, I would probably have spent a few years in prison. A 'local' tried to force my car off the road in a remote Hawaiian island spot. I still remember the look of glee on his face, as he enjoyed the look of panic on my face. Being armed would not have been a good idea in that case."

Ted Wilson wrote from Terrace, with some a possible rationale for the long delay in bringing the Queen of the North trial to court: "When people go missing and the cause of death is known or presumed but bodies are not recovered, they are not declared 'Officially Dead' until 7 years have passed. That might fit with the delay in starting the trial."

And Tom Watson sent along a Washington Post article on how gun ownership correlates with professed Christian faith. "It proves once again," Tom noted, "that people choose what they want to think and believe and then figure out a biblical affirmation for it."

"We liberal types do it too. In the days when I was chairing the United Church's Division of MP&E, and was therefore on General Council and Executive, it always amazed me at how adept folks were at deciding they wanted to do something and then providing a theological rationale for it."

That comment should generate some other people's thoughts!

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## HYMNSIGHT

My friend Ralph Milton, who published his Rumors newsletter for many years, has something special for you. It's called HYMNSIGHT, and it's for any church that currently projects the words of hymns and prayers, or plans to.

Ralph writes, Since retiring, I have rediscovered my old love of photography, and found creative use for my pictures in the life of First United where Bev and I worship. Our entire liturgy is projected, so that people read responses and sing hymns from screens. I use my photos to add color, vitality and depth to all the hymns and most of the liturgy.

In the course of this, I have developed slide sets to go with 600 hymns, plus about two thousand slides, in both the standard screen and the newer wide screen shape. You can use all of them, in any way you wish, without permission, and absolutely free, as long as it's non-profit and church related.

All you need to access the website is go to: <http://www.hymnsight.ca>

In addition to all that visual material, there's a comprehensive "how-to" manual for using projected visuals in church.

HymnSight provides a set of suggested visuals to go with each hymn, but the words to the hymn are not there, mainly for copyright considerations.

Please take a look at this service. If you think it's worthwhile, please let some of your colleagues in ministry know about it. And if you know of a website that could benefit from a link to HymnSight, why not add it?

Blessings,

Ralph Milton

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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" -- [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsrap@shaw.ca)
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [www.traditionaliconoclast.com](http://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](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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