

Sunday March 3, 2013

Archives reduce society's amnesia

By Jim Taylor

There weren't many female doctors, back in 1932, the year Christina Agnes Fraser graduated from the University of Toronto's School of Medicine. And there certainly weren't many licensed female radiologists in 1944, the year she earned a Special Certificate in Diagnostic and Therapeutic Radiology from the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada.

Chris died in 1982, predeceased by all her family and relatives.

When she died, she was married to my father – his second marriage, her first. From him, we inherited Chris's diplomas, a few paintings she liked, and a small chest of unsorted and unlabeled photographs and papers.

What are we supposed to do with them?

Both my wife and I are only children. The treasures of four family lines – her mother and father, my mother and father -- have filtered down to us. Plus Chris's stuff.

We have only one child. All this will eventually pass to her. She can't afford to buy a bigger house just to have enough space to store everything she will inherit.

A lifetime in boxes

Fortunately, the University of Toronto archives wants Chris Fraser's documents.

Equally fortunately, the United Church's B.C. Conference Archives has agreed to take my collection of manuscripts and papers.

For some reason, I kept the raw manuscripts, and sometimes my research notes, for almost everything I have written since 1955. Several thousand articles and columns; 22 books; 50 years of journals.... The accumulation fills boxes and boxes in our basement.

Why did I keep it all? Ego, I suppose.

What should I do with it? Ego, again, won't let me simply take it all to an industrial shredder.

Some years ago, poet Gwen Grant – to the shock of the Canadian literary community – started destroying her files.

I called her. I begged her not to. Her poetry deserved a place in Canada's history, I argued.

"No one cares any more," she replied sadly.

Slashing budgets

When I was trying to find a repository for my own papers, I contacted several archives. I got no response at all from B.C.'s provincial archives. Or from the United Church's national archives. The national archives in Ottawa at least had the courtesy to tell me they couldn't handle anything more.

Now I understand why.

An article in the Anglican Journal noted that "funding cuts to Library and Archives Canada will severely restrict [its] ability to acquire, preserve, and make accessible the precious original documents that chronicle our history."

Canada's Library and Archives is considered equivalent to the U.S. Library of Congress or the British Library.

The funding cuts not only slash jobs in Ottawa, they also affect local archives. “Many small archives have depended on grants from the national Library and Archives to carry out their work,” said Laurel Parson, assistant archivist at the General Synod Archives of the Anglican Church, in Toronto.

The Library and Archives used to have 61 staff dealing with non-governmental records – 21 of those jobs were eliminated, along with the entire inter-library loans unit.

Perhaps I’m prone to find Feds under every bed. But it looks as if Stephen Harper’s government wants to re-define the role of the national archives -- to record what the government does, not what the nation does.

Where we’ve been

I can understand – although I cannot support – the appeal for slashing archival budgets. At a meeting of the United Church’s Toronto Conference, some years back, delegates filled out a questionnaire on church priorities.

Archives ranked at the very bottom. “What’s the point of keeping records of what we used to be,” I heard in the discussions going on around me, “if we can’t draw enough new people into the church to keep it going?”

Marshall McLuhan coined one of his many aphorisms about our way of navigating into the future. “We look at the present through a rear-view mirror,” he said. “We march backwards into the future.”

It sounds like a criticism. It’s not – it’s a statement of fact. We cannot see ahead. Our windshields are blacked out. Using a rear-view mirror to estimate the road ahead may not be ideal, but it’s better than driving blind.

Our archives, our libraries, our stories – these are our rearview mirror. Without them, we not only don’t know where we’re going, we no longer know what we did to get where we are.

The world went through what’s called the Dark Ages not because of a lack of knowledge, but because that knowledge wasn’t available. The wisdom of Aristotle and Ptolemy, Euclid and Abu Kamil, was stored not among the nations of Western Europe but in the Islamic cultures of the Middle East.

But it was stored. That’s the point. So it could be re-stored.

Which is why archives – and the historians who use those archives – matter. They help us see where we have been, and how we got where we are. Even if we can’t see exactly where we’re going.

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YOUR TURN

There were not a lot of letters about last week’s column, about how much abuse is tolerable – or intolerable – but those that came in were uniformly thoughtful.

Elsie Goerzen works for Abuse Response and Prevention, for the Mennonite Central Committee, BC. “I’d like to add a few thoughts” Elsie wrote.

1) Women stay with partners who are abusive for many reasons, one of them being that they made a vow before God.

2) Women do not give ‘assent’ (an unfortunate choice of word on y pat: JT) to the abuse: there are many ways they resist, but living in a dangerous environment, often trapped in a myriad of ways, limits their options.

3) Twenty years of research by Dr Nancy Nason-Clark tells us that abuse in ‘Christian homes’ is as prevalent as elsewhere in society; the only difference is that Christian women stay with the abusive partner much longer. Check her website: www.theraveproject.com for more information. ‘Rave’ stands for Religion And Violence E-learning.

4) My experience as the Abuse Response and Prevention worker with Mennonite Central Committee BC certainly verifies that. Most of the women who come to us for support and resources have been married 25—50 years.
5) Education, for both response and prevention purposes, is essential. Every year, MCC BC offers a 12 hour training in Understanding Abuse in Relationships, this year on Friday March 8 & 9, in Langley, BC. See <http://bc.mcc.org/whatwedo/endabuse> for more information, or email me at endabuse@mccbc.com.

In subsequent letter, Elsie added, “We do know that a minimum of 1 in 4 women experience abuse at the hands of their partner. Some men also experience abuse by their spouse, but the numbers are significantly lower (about 10% of victims are men) and men do usually not live with the fear that the women live with.

“Another point is that women who experience forms of abuse other than physical (i.e. emotional, spiritual, verbal, psychological, sexual, etc.) continually tell me that those forms are much more hurtful than physical violence. It is an assault to the soul, to the image of God in them.”

Florence Driedger also works with abuse victims: “We experience these issues almost daily in our work with Circles of Support and Accountability. What is so sad is that when your grandson is an adult, he will be seen as a perpetrator rather than a victim. We so often deny the fact perpetrators may have been victims, not necessarily of their parents (certainly not in your case), but of systems of violence and abuse in society ... We so often are blind to the pain of the person who has so little or no control of their own behavior.

“And yes, we can spend money to punish which has worse than no effect, and have no money to prevent through research and people who care and support, etc.”

Charles Hill did not offer an optimistic forecast: “The child who grows up with an abusive parent will many times seek an abuser. The unconscious agenda is to relive trying to please the mother/father so the abuse will stop.

“Then there is fundamentalist religion -- you can't get a divorce or you'll go to hell. I've personally known one woman who was sent by her minister back into an abusive relationship and got killed. Some can't afford to leave. My wife worked at a place called the Family Abuse Center. More than one of her clients was severely injured or killed by going back. They were low income, had no source of income, no place to go.

“There is, also, the factor of fear. Abusers do a lot of threatening. It's complicated. Right now, there is an ongoing trial in the US, heavily covered by the media, of Jodi Arias. She seems to fit the category of a child reared in an abusive home. It appears that she chose a series of abusive sexual relationships. In the last one, she finally snapped and murdered the boyfriend.”

James Russell liked my closing line: “Perhaps, for an eight-year-old girl growing up, it's not as crucial to condemn every possible form of abuse as to learn to make wise choices – to know which human flaws she can safely work around, and which flaws could be fatal. Literally.”

James commented, “Well said. It's our adult judgement about which choices are wise that we have to worry about, especially where the consequences fall most heavily on others, are irreversible and final. Hard to take one's own hopes and dreams out of the equation. I wonder if we can? Is that what moral teachings are really about?”

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

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...

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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, 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.
