

Wednesday August 29, 2012

Snapshot of a society

By Jim Taylor

Because I spent more than half my working life in magazine publishing, I still pay attention to magazine racks. If you haven't tried it, try looking at a magazine rack as a mirror of our society.

Sometimes, while I wait for a prescription, I spend 20 minutes considering the magazines at our drug store.

On the lower right, magazines about cars, motorcycles, and other things that burn gasoline. On the upper right, a small selection of magazines about knowledge, in general – psychology, astronomy, physics, geography....

Over to the left – I don't think this has anything to do with politics – a mass of magazines deal with home and garden. Mostly they're about what you would like your home or garden to look like, if you had the money, staff, or time. I suspect they rely on envy for their sales.

With their gorgeous pictures of Caribbean isles or Asian temples, travel magazines splash across the front of the rack at eye level.

The body fetish

But the vast bulk of the magazines deal with human bodies. Perhaps about building a better body through exercise. Or through diet. Or about clothing that body with the latest fashions. Or disguising that body with makeup techniques that will hide wrinkles, pimples, and sags, and will make you look younger.

The magazines on the highest level, often with part of their covers shielded from prurient eyes, portray the human body as a plaything. Most often, the female body, as a sex toy for the male libido.

Omissions are significant too. I'm surprised – this being a rural community – at the lack of magazines about guns and horses. Perhaps people with those interests go to some other drug store.

Because no one stocks a magazine rack with publications they think people ought to buy. They put out magazines on subjects the community cares enough about to spend money on.

In that sense, a magazine rack is a printout of the community's interests.

Obviously, a hole-in-the-wall cigar store in Brooklyn, a roadside café in Kentucky, a military base in Texas, won't offer the same selection as my drug store.

Notable omissions

Very few magazine racks have anything at all about contentment. Who's going to spend money on a publication that asks, "Do you really need this?"

Despite the range of subject matter, magazines today all seem to share a common theme – more! More possessions, more horsepower, more excitement, more sex.... more of more...

Don't be too critical of secular society. But even churches fall into this trap. They may not endorse consumerism, but they certainly encourage more commitment, more involvement in programs, more generous giving....

It seems to be a universal flaw in human wiring. If two pills are good, four must be better. If keeping busy is good, keeping busier must be better. If one beer helps you relax, a dozen must...

And why limit yourself to 13 cable channels, when you can have 500?

We don't seem to know when to say "Enough."

On a finite planet, learning to say “Enough” may be a fundamental survival skill. For individuals, for our species, and for the world.

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YOUR TURN

Last week's column, about the “Trapper Nelson” pack frame and its more modern successors, was really a rant about the way that elements of the public domain get privatized for profit.

Susan Price correctly pointed out a potential flaw in my reasoning. “To be fair, when a patent is granted can have little to do with when the patent was filed. Nelson may have filed before the war and the patent got held up in processing until years after. Even if you got the exact date when the patent was granted, you'd still need to access the application to see when the concept was filed for patent.”

True enough. However, several of the sources I consulted stated that Nelson learned about the traditional pack frame on a hunting trip to Alaska in 1920. So it was obviously in common use in the north – ignoring James Dun-Waters claim to have introduced it to the western forces during World War I – long before Nelson filed for a patent.

Mary-Margaret Boone had some thoughts about carrying burdens: “Recently a young parishioner in our charge has been to Kenya and spoke of [the women] walking to the river to fill 20-litre jerry cans and then strapped them to their backs to bring back to the village. At church I quipped that in my first home our running water consisted of me going to the neighbour's hand pump (about 800 feet away) and filling a five gallon pail and then hauling it home -- probably about the same weight, so I know how heavy it is. And then the local grandmother spoke up and said the river was two miles away! We need to put things in perspective!”

Cliff Boldt continued the discussion about the nature of paradise, specifically, to Clare Neufeld's comments in the “Your Turn” section last week.

“I agree with Clare -- I often do,” Cliff wrote. “Context is important. A late afternoon sit on the patio after a day in the garden with a cold beer is a situational paradise for me. So was having an anniversary dinner with our daughter last night.

“Joni Mitchell writes: ‘We don't know what we've got till it's gone.’ Writing that, I remember paradise 'gone', times in my past that I figured this was the best place on earth to be. But a new paradise came along.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

The NRSV calls Psalm 45 an “Ode for a Royal Wedding.” Indeed, the whole thing, verses 1-17, does read as a tribute to a royal person entering a new phase of life. However, the excerpt scheduled by the lectionary for Sunday September 1 feels more like sucking up to a corporate CEO.

- 1 Thank you for taking time to see me.
 I'm so grateful.
- 2 I know you have much more important things to deal with;
 you move in circles that are far beyond me.
- 6 This is a marvelous office you have here.
 The view over the city is spectacular.
 It makes all other corporate towers look insignificant.

7 You make the rules we must follow;
 You brook no exceptions;
 You don't bend them for anybody.
 We know where we stand.
8 Your business suits must be hand-tailored,
 they fit you so well.
 Is your after-shave custom-made for you too?
9 And your secretary is stunning!
 Oh yes, and competent too.
 She must be a joy to work with.
 I'd love to be more like you.

For other paraphrases, you can order *Everyday Psalms* through Wood Lake Publications, info@woodlake.com or 1-800-663-2775.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@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
