

Sunday January 5, 2014

The selfishness of year end resolutions

By Jim Taylor

I didn't make any New Year's resolutions this year. Or last year, either. Several years ago, I made a New Year's resolution not to make any more New Year's resolutions. It is probably the only one I have been able to keep.

New Year's resolutions often have good intentions. Unfortunately, they're also often selfish. Few of us make resolutions to sacrifice more of our time, our money, or our lives to make life better for others. I cannot imagine anyone single-handedly resolving to reverse climate change, eliminate extreme weather, cure financial finagling, or clean up corruption in government.

Rather, we promise to lose weight, get more exercise, drink less alcohol, or spend less time peering at electronic images. It's all about me, me, me.

Our good intentions may have some benefits for the world at large – consuming less alcohol might reduce the number of drunk-driving accidents, for example – but that's a secondary spinoff.

No one decides, on New Year's Eve, to cause fewer impaired driving convictions. That's like resolving to have fewer heart attacks. No one plans to have them, so how can one plan not to have them?

Giving to others

A few people resolve to give more to charity. Very few, unfortunately.

According to Statistics Canada, the median donation is just \$123 per year – which means that half of all donations are less than \$123. And that's only the median among those who actually donate. Almost 80 per cent of Canadians claim no charitable deductions at all on their income tax returns.

Clearly, helping others does not figure largely in Canadian New Year's resolutions.

I have to say, though, that the aggressive marketing of many charities must turn a lot of people off. Sure, they send out endless requests for support, with self-addressed envelopes. But they also send unwanted address labels, Christmas cards, calendars, notepads, newsletters, fridge magnets, sticky notes, and even real nickels.

It certainly turns me off. My accountant says I'm far more generous than most Canadians. Even so, my wife and I slashed several organizations off our list this year. As I wrote to one of them, we want our money used to preserve Canadian wildlife, not to preserve Canadian printers.

Volunteering

Fortunately, Canadians are more generous with their time than their money. "About one-half of Canadians contributed their time, energy and skills to groups and organizations such as charities and non-profits," says the StatsCan website. "They provided leadership on boards and committees; canvassed for funds; provided advice, counselling or mentoring; visited seniors; prepared and delivered food; served as volunteer drivers; advocated for social causes; coached children and youth.

"In short, they shaped their communities and enabled non-profit organizations to deliver programs and services to millions of their fellow Canadians."

But as with charitable giving, there's a catch. The website continues, "A small proportion of volunteers do most of the work... 10% of volunteers accounted for 53% of all volunteer hours given to non-profit and charitable organizations."

You may have heard of the “80/20 rule.” That is, in any organization, 20 per cent of the people do 80 per cent of the work. The other 80 per cent do just 20 per cent of the work – but 100 per cent of the griping.

Putting their lives on the line

Still, I’m heartened by stories of some people’s level of commitment. A group of older volunteers, wrote Robert McDonald in FreshSheet, are “offering to take the place of younger workers at the crippled Fukushima nuclear plant.”

The group’s founder, Yasuteru Yamada, a retired engineer, insists that this is no kamikaze suicide squad. It simply makes more sense for elders in their sunset years to pitch in.

Many of Yamada’s 400-plus volunteers know they’re living on borrowed time anyway. Yamada himself survived a brush with lymphoma three years ago. Now 72, with his cancer in remission, he’s determined to make every moment of his life count.

Radiation sickness is relatively slow acting. By the time it can kill these older volunteers, Yamada suggests, they’d have died anyway.

And it’s not all men tackling these risky jobs. “If the nuclear plant isn’t brought under control, it could have all kinds of effects on young children,” said one grandmother volunteering with Yamada’s group. “I couldn’t sit back and do nothing.”

The Fukushima plant symbolizes the challenges of the New Year. On the one hand, corporate cost-cutting that left enough radioactive material to poison the entire northern hemisphere, housed in a teetering structure weakened by earthquake and tsunami. On the other hand, selfless volunteers, willing to put their lives on the line for future generations.

Would I be willing to do the same? I don’t know. But I’m proud of those who can see an opportunity, and are willing to do something about it – wherever it is.

Like the big charitable donors, they make our collective average look a little better.

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YOUR TURN

In last week’s column about the Northern Gateway pipeline, I wasn’t (at least, I think I wasn’t) coming out in favour or in opposition to the pipeline – although in honesty I am opposed. But mainly, I wanted to explore the unquestioned axioms of our society that influenced the Joint Review Panel’s decision.

Cameron Baughen was “one of the 1159 people that spoke to the Enbridge JRP. If you look at prior decisions of the National Energy Board it would be pretty incredible for them to not approve this pipeline.

“The worst part of their decision was stating that the pipeline was in the ‘national interest’ while ignoring both the increased emissions of the tar sands and aboriginal rights. It is a corrupted form of English to use national interest while ignoring fundamental issues to our nation. A quasi-judicial panel should do better.

“Sadly, many people will stand in front of bulldozers to stop this pipeline. Having Stephen Harper OK this pipeline will not see it go forward.”

Joan Janzen counts herself among those who would stand in front of the bulldozers: “As far as we anti-progress types are concerned, neither the Northern Gateway, the Kinder-Morgan, nor the Pacific Trails LNG lines will go

through. Besides the 1159 people who spoke against the NG there are hundreds of thousands more who see through the ridiculous plans to spread oil around the coast.

“People are lining up to stand in front of the bulldozers if they even get that far. If belief counts, I truly believe that we'll be successful in stopping them as more and more people realise what a horror could result from these precarious pipelines. So many groups often led by First Nations are so against the pipelines that I continue to think that BC will remain pipeline free.”

Bev Ireland took a middle ground: “I do not pretend to be knowledgeable about every aspect of the Keystone Pipeline. An appreciation of nature and the importance of preserving it, is a strong belief of mine. The dangers of an oil spill are well documented and a concern. There is one aspect of the debate I rarely hear discussed. Here on the prairies, our highways have become congested with large oil carrying trucks. Needless to say when there is an accident, which is inevitable from time to time, the trucks always win. What was once a safe drive to the city has now become a dangerous game of dodging in an out of slower traffic, wide loads, and conveys of trucks hauling oil and other oil related equipment.

“Then there are the trains. Having one family member who makes a living working for the railroad, I have some knowledge of that industry. Talk about cutting corners!! The whole thrust is to try to turn a profit, and the safety of its workers or the public is a thing of the past. We have only to recall a small town in Quebec to realize the potential for disaster when safety becomes unimportant.

“The Keystone Pipeline may be distasteful to many. I'm betting those poor folk who are currently ‘freezing in the dark’ in Ontario and New Brunswick wouldn't mind an alternative method of heating, even temporarily, to electricity. In fact some are living in their cars (burning fossil fuels).

“Finally with your statement that 1159 spoke against the pipeline and only two for it. I wonder how many of those 1159 actually had all the facts and did the research. And how many spoke with passion and preconceived ideas? We pay our government millions and millions of dollars to do studies. Of course there are influences and companies with vested interests.

“Personally, I'm very happy to have my gas furnace working this morning and it is doubtful I will have to venture out into the -33 C weather today.”

Mary Elford had some thoughts about what I called “the gospel of growth, growth, growth.”

“Of course we will pick money over caring for the earth,” she wrote. “Ocean and air are hurting, why not trees? This site has more scary information: <http://www.stateoftheocean.org/howbad.cfm> How long will the oil last, even with the pipelines? Then we will all be freezing in the dark, without plastics, not driving, etc.

“Isn't uncontrolled growth called cancer?”

James West picked up on Mary's closing thought: “Cancer kills because the cells grow uncontrollably, refuse to die, clump and finally choke the life out of an organism. There is benign growth, there is malignant growth. It's up to people to distinguish between the two.

“I have no idea what a healthy relationship with oil would look like. I am surrounded by petroleum products from this keyboard to the asphalt my car is resting on and all those black ribbons of highways that connect us, provided that we have the gas and the gumption.”

Bill Peterson commented about the comments on the column about calling Christmas Christmas, and not Holiday.

Bill wrote, “My study group just finished ‘Embracing The Human Jesus: A Wisdom Path for Contemporary Christianity’ by David Galston. The theme is that the development of the ‘divine Christ’ concept lost the human Jesus who started it all. (I had the thought, years ago when I first heard of the Jesuits, that they beat us all to the right name.)”

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

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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

- 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;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsraps@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.
