

Sunday November 10, 2013

Saving a forest for the future

By Jim Taylor

They say, “You can’t beat City Hall.” They’re wrong – you can. But you need to know how to do it.

Organizations like Avaaz and its Canadian counterpart LeadNow organize worldwide e-mail protests against highly visible cases of injustice. But no one will launch an international petition to preserve, say, a small patch of rainforest in a municipality hardly anyone has heard of.

That was the situation that confronted B.C. poet Susan McCaslin. McCaslin taught English and Creative Writing for 23 years at Douglas College in New Westminster. She is the author of ten volumes of poetry, and a book of essays. But that hardly qualifies her as a political activist.

Until the day she and her husband went for a walk in McLellan Forest in the Township of Langley, about 45 km east of Vancouver in B.C.’s Fraser Valley.

“As we walked under the canopy of Douglas fir, Western red cedar, and hemlock, the sunlight filtered down on us,” she wrote later. “We stepped over maidenhair, sword, and liquorice ferns. We paused at the base of a giant Black Cottonwood, more than 240 years old. I knew this was it. I’d fallen in love with a forest.”

But the Township of Langley planned to sell off the forest to raise funds for a recreation centre.

When renowned wildlife artist Robert Bateman visited the forest, he commented, “What’s a better recreation centre than a forest?”

Revealing terminology

The Mayor and Councillors didn’t see it the same way. They described the 27 acres as “inventory,” “surplus,” and “idle land.”

With words like those, the outcome is inevitable. A forest, as a forest, has no value. Logging it has value. Building on it has value. But undeveloped forest is, well, undeveloped.

It’s not fair to blame that mindset entirely on the Langley Council. The provincial B.C. Assessment commission calculates the value of lands for municipal taxes, according to its complex formulas. But the value of undeveloped land is always – always! -- less than the value of developed land.

Without a stubborn streak that refuses to be confined by conventional economic definitions, municipal councillors can't help seeing an apartment tower or an industrial incinerator as more valuable than a forest or a wetland.

Changing the picture

McCaslin and her friends set out to change that perception. They organized afternoons of "Art in the Park". They brought 160 students from the Langley Fine Arts School to sketch, sing, and photograph in the forest. The Opus Women's Choir put on a concert in the forest.

Langley Council remained unmoved.

McCaslin remembered an obscure Chinese poet named Han Shan who wrote his poems on rocks and suspended them from tree branches. "Han Shan became my mentor and my muse," McCaslin said.

She launched the Han Shan Poetry Project. She put out a call to fellow poets through the websites of writing organizations. Within two weeks, she received over 200 poems. They came from all over the world. Not just B.C.'s Lower Mainland, where the forest is located. Also from Vancouver Island, other provinces, distant U.S. states like New Mexico and Florida, even from the U.K., Australia, and Turkey.

She and her friends "festooned" the poems, sealed in plastic paper protectors and adorned with colourful ribbons, from trees in the forest without "harming a single branch..."

"Poems pirouetted like white angels," the poet recalls. "Drops of rain, frost, sprigs of moss, bits of bark clung to them and seemed the forest's way of claiming them."

Public pressure grew. A letter published in the Langley Times called the forest "a time capsule that can't be replaced in our lifetimes."

For two months, thousands of people came to stroll through the threatened forest and to read the fluttering poems.

Happy endings

The Langley Council began to see this "surplus inventory" in a different light. In January, they took the acreage off the market for development.

And this fall, a local family donated \$2.5 million so that Trinity Western University could buy the forest, plus a neighbouring plot known as Grey Pit, a total of 20 hectares or about 50 acres, to preserve it under a perpetual covenant.

I find it ironic that land owned by the people has to pass into private hands to be preserved for the people's use. Langley Council had previously offered a local environmental organization three months to raise funds to buy the land – in effect, as McCaslin put it, "to buy back the land already belonging to them."

But for me the most important thing that Susan McCaslin's Han Shan Project did was to force municipal administrators to change their language. Instead of thinking about "surplus

inventory” and “idle land,” they had to learn to see beauty, history, and nature as part of their “assets.”

They broke free of a self-imposed linguistic prison. And saved a forest for the future.

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YOUR TURN

The column about the murder of young women in India, to maintain family honour, made me furious. Your responses were generally less heated.

Isabel Gibson write, “As a 21-year-old who was always called a ‘girl,’ even though I had a baby at home, I rebuked (often rudely, I fear) what I saw as patronizing language.

“As a 61-year-old, I see more clearly the distance we’ve come since then, as well as the things that haven’t changed. I understand that we have it better than women at any time in history, and likely in most places today. Does that make insulting behaviour OK? No. It makes me a little less agitated; a little less heated; a little more inclined to take the long view.

“Not to compare being called a ‘girl’ with being killed because of transgressing a social norm, I still end up about where you are. If accurately depicted, this situation in India is many things at once: completely intolerable, sadly understandable, and only slowly changeable.”

Joan Janzen sent a long letter connecting the situation in India to similar contexts in Vancouver, BC.: “You could have related this to the upswing in violence against females of all ages in the western world.

“The most likely way for a woman to die today is at the hands of her husband or boyfriend. Young girls and women are ostracized for everything from their wearables, daring to be different or having strong leadership skills, being too friendly with boys (or NOT being friendly enough), not being submissive enough, being gay, and many other trivial reasons.

“Regularly women disappear - and in Canada, horrifying numbers of them are Aboriginal women. Vancouver is known for its human traffic, most of which is female. Both western and eastern cultures kill women when they do not conform to whatever is decided by men, elected and unelected.

“Currently there’s been an increase of women getting targeted on university campuses in the Vancouver area. Women being treated terribly for no apparent reason other than that they might want to walk alone. Even non-rapists still think they have the right to approach women alone on the street and in public transit, treating them as though they were objects.

Meanwhile, more and more women I know are becoming more and more independent. Fewer women idolize men as they once did. One of the reasons for this is that men have proven to be so awful. Who wants to be forced by society to take care of an adult who refuses to act like one? What on earth would be the benefit?

“Men are increasingly selfish and unreasonable, unwilling to take full partnership, unwilling to make promises even for the date they just made. Many women are totally puzzled as to why men would want to be so destructive to themselves and others.

“I don’t mean to get a hate on for a whole gender, but it’s getting harder and harder to point to men who are doing good in the world as all-around people, not just in the narrow field of their employment or hobby.

“I wish only healing for men (and women) and hope they can understand that they can only benefit by accepting women as equally worthy along with all other creatures.”

Well, that letter just might provoke a few responses....

Bill Peterson kept the discussion about hospital care going: "My father-in-law used to say; 'You go to the hospital to die.' Is that expectation still true today, by either the public or the hospital administrators?"

Bill cited his own experience: "the doctors' tendency to assume the aged have 'lost their marbles'. Luckily, I was present when the doctor made his diagnosis based on an assumption but no evidence. His compatriot made a textbook quotation of diagnosis after I insisted on a second opinion. That is when I insisted on someone else. That [new] doctor asked my 80+ year old mother-in-law what he had around his neck (a tie). Her response, 'a cravat', opened his eyes and brought a smile to his lips. The sad part of all this -- the nursing home staff knew what her problem was (a bladder infection) but the original doctor wouldn't listen to them."

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...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to 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

- 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" -- 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.
