

Sunday July 28, 2013

Small decisions have big consequences

By Jim Taylor

Detroit's on-again/off-again bankruptcy forces me to reconsider my understanding of what bankruptcy means. I used to think – silly me – that going bankrupt meant you were flat broke. You had come to the end of the line. You could no longer pay your bills.

So you closed your doors. Washed your hands of the whole thing, and left your creditors to pick over the carcass of your assets to salvage what they could.

Can a city do that?

The people still live there. They still struggle to earn a living, to feed themselves, to raise children. They still have houses, cars, corner stores, community associations. Are those also considered carrion for the vultures?

I had to revise my notions about bankruptcy when General Motors and Chrysler sought bankruptcy protection a few years ago, but still continued farting automobiles out of their assembly lines.

Under certain circumstances, it seems, bankruptcy is simply a stalling tactic, a way of calling a time-out while formulating some new plays.

Is that Detroit's game plan?

Or is the whole thing an underhanded plot to privatize the city, to bust the unions, and to plunder pension funds?

Walk away

A few years ago, my wife and I visited Dawson City in the Yukon. I was astounded at the equipment that gold companies used to dredge flecks of gold from six feet into solid bedrock. My friend Bob, owner of a heavy metal fabrication plant, was equally astounded at the machine shops that produced those dredges. The 100-year-old metal presses and welding equipment were bigger, heavier, more powerful, than anything he had ever seen in modern factories.

When profits plunged, the gold companies simply abandoned everything and walked away. The dredges still squat in miles of sterile tailings. The mighty machinery gathers dust.

Could that happen to Detroit? Could the legally incorporated entity that is the city simply walk away from its losses, and abandon its assets – the people, the buildings, the infrastructure – to fend for themselves?

I don't live in Detroit, of course. Indeed, I doubt if you could pay me enough to live in Detroit. So I have no first-hand knowledge of what went wrong. But from a safe distance, it seems to me that Detroit offers a case study of the importance of seemingly small decisions.

In essence, it says that there are no small decisions. Every decision has repercussions. And Detroit's councils and staff based their decisions on the bottom line, rather than on citizens' needs.

Sure, you can save a few dollars by not keeping roads paved. By reducing bus schedules. By stuffing more students into fewer classrooms. By cancelling recreational frills. By laying off police and firefighters.

But then residents move out to more desirable locations. Where they can have roads without potholes. Better schools. Sports and recreation programs. Parks. Emergency services.

Businesses – medical clinics, shopping malls, office complexes – follow those residents.

And there goes your tax base.

A sink hole of poverty

According to Robert Reich, former U.S. Secretary of Labor, the Greater Detroit region as a whole is prosperous. Oakland, a Detroit suburb, ranks as the fourth wealthiest county in the country. Detroit's suburbs, says Reich, include "one of the nation's top five financial centers, the top four centers of high-technology employment, and the second-biggest source of engineering and architectural talent.

"Not everyone is wealthy, to be sure," Reich continues, "but the median household ... in Birmingham, just across the border that delineates the city of Detroit, earned more than \$94,000 last year; in nearby Bloomfield Hills - still within the Detroit metropolitan area -- the median was more than \$150,000."

But the city itself, a wasteland occupied by just 700,000 people now, has become a sink hole of poverty and depression.

Economists talk about the risks of dependence on a single industry – in Detroit's case, the auto industry.

Pittsburgh, like Detroit, used to be dependent on a single industry – steel. But unlike Detroit, when steel fell on tougher times, Pittsburgh invested instead of cutting back. It invested in parks, facilities, buildings, and services. Pittsburgh is now considered one of the most desirable American cities to live in; Detroit, one of the worst.

An obviously biased slide show circulating on the Internet gleefully compares the squalor of Detroit, as an example of capitalism, with the architectural glories of cities once under communist rule.

I've no doubt that each of Detroit's municipal decisions made sense at the time. I'm not accusing any city councilors or staff of corruption – although corruption is always possible, as Montreal is currently proving.

But I think the Detroit malaise results from a flawed vision of responsibility. The civic government asked, "How can we cut costs?" instead of asking, "What will benefit our citizens?"

When you place all your bets on cutting costs, the cuts will come back and make you bleed.

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YOUR TURN

I haven't included all comments in the letters below. Several of you sent links to similar articles in other publications. Several also connected the theme to Barack Obama's spontaneous remarks about the Trayvon Martin shooting and verdict.

Susan Roe-Finlay, in Winnipeg, scolded me: "I wish you would read more carefully. The speech before the UN was on Malala's 16th birthday and Queen Elizabeth Hospital is in Birmingham. When I note that lack of detail all the rest becomes suspect."

Susan is right about the Queen Elizabeth Hospital being in Birmingham, not London. My mind slipped a cog on that one. But the reference to Malala being 15 was to the age when she was shot, not the age when she delivered the speech.

Life friend Janie Downs Wallbrown expressed some skepticism: "I've known many very bright even precocious 15 year old girls. The sentiments can be hers. But the words used just don't sound like a girl her age. Supposedly I'm a genius type. Never ever would I have written like this at her age. Her meaning....yes.

"So who is doing her writing? She is being used, by whom? I could have stood up and done what she did. I was ornery enough; not caring about authority enough to do it if I felt I was right.

"But use those very grown up words? No."

Florence Driedger explored women's roles: "I just happened to finish reading 'The Conflict -- How Modern Motherhood Undermines The Status Of Women' by Elisabeth Badinter. She is a French author and the book came out recently in English. I found this a fascinating commentary on motherhood and womanhood. While I agree with much of what you wrote, it seems you make some assumptions which may not reflect the reality of today's experiences of women in particular, or for that matter about men either. e.g. equality of the parents and their responsibilities in the home. I would like to see you write more on not just racism with which I am very concerned about, but also about parenting which you talk about in this column. My husband and I are pastors of a house church in which about 3/4 quarters of the attendees are refugees and recent immigrants from Africa and Asia and many are single parent; both topics are part of our life together in our congregation."

Dale Perkins celebrated Malala's willingness to "speak the truth". He wrote, "Count me in as another voice ready and willing to 'speak my truth.'" Writing that reminds me of a wonderful friend and fellow-traveler, Dr. Stephen Faulkner, who said to me that the sign of a wise man (person) is someone who will 'show up', 'listen and pay attention', 'speak one's truth', and 'not become attached to outcomes'. I find the last point the most difficult -- probably because I am male. However, that little mantra continues to uphold and sustain me. I would only hope that the institutional United Church of Canada might embrace the truth of what you've written, and that more of the current batch of practitioners would lead by example. Right now I see few 'risk takers'; only hard core bureaucrats making sure the institutional church does the 'right' thing and succeeds. Sad."

Don Schau tried to trace my opening aphorism, and couldn't. "I can't find the phrase as you have worded it, so I think you can take credit. However, the song Teach Your Children, written by Graham Nash and first recorded by Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young contains this concept if not the exact words. I have always found that song to be a powerful message that we should pay more attention to. So too, the words of this brave young woman. Now if only we could learn the art of effective listening and start living out her words."

I received letters from a mother/daughter duo.

Mother Marjorie Gibson wrote, "Tragic to think how often, and for how long, violence has been and is still used to perpetuate wrongs. May 'whatever Gods there be' protect Malala so that she lives long, and continues her mission."

And daughter (daughter-in-law?) Isabel wrote, "I saw the news reports on Malala but also missed her speech -- thanks for giving it more exposure this way. I don't know where people like her come from, but we need more of them."

My own daughter, Sharon, doesn't often comment on my columns. But on this occasion, she wrote, "Wow Dad, that was a powerful column today. I made Katherine [Sharon's daughter, my granddaughter] read it and afterward we talked about how girls and women in some countries were not allowed to be educated (including her own, if there was not enough money in the family). I think it was a bit overwhelming to her, but definitely eye opening. The concept of retribution through education definitely gave her pause."

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

- 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.
