

*Sunday September 16, 2012*

## **A civilization addicted to denial**

By Jim Taylor

The forest fire started last Sunday, at about 3:00 in the afternoon, close to an information centre on the highway to Vancouver. It took only minutes for a west wind blasting down the creek valley to fan it into a raging blaze.

At times, the fire was advancing 140 metres a minute. An Olympic sprinter could outrun it. But most of us would have trouble. Especially when the fire refused to stop growing. Within hours, it had covered 200 hectares, about 500 acres. Authorities evacuated 1500 homes. Four homes were reduced to charred rubble by the fire. Video of trees exploding into flame appeared on all the national news networks.

By the next morning, thanks to a wind change, cooler overnight temperatures, and a splash of rain, the fire was mostly under control.

Rumours circulated that the fire had been caused by a stray meteorite. Indeed, there had been a shower of meteors on Sunday. But investigators rejected the meteorite theory. They said only that the “cause of the fire was under investigation.”

Oh, come on! It was caused by human carelessness. Someone stopping at the information centre probably flipped a cigarette butt into the brush.

## **Human responsibility**

In fact, forest fires have only three causes – volcanoes, lightning, and humans. When this fire started, the Okanagan Valley had no volcanoes erupting, no lightning zapping out of clear skies.

That leaves only humans. They leave smouldering cigarettes. Campfires. Broken glass that focuses the sun's rays. Sparks from machinery. Flames from vehicle accidents.

There are no other natural causes. Debris on the forest floor does not spontaneously combust. Marmots do not strike sparks off rocks. Eagles do not drop embers from on high.

What is it about us humans, that we are so unwilling to acknowledge the consequences of our actions?

We have become a civilization in denial.

The record speaks for itself.

In the 1970s, Rachel Carson blamed DDT for causing eagles to lay eggs with abnormally thin shells. We denied that humans could affect nature that way.

Banning DDT may or may not have been a wise decision. It gave malaria and other tropical diseases a free hand. But there's no question about one effect of the ban – bald eagles bounced back.

The same with acid rain. When lakes in northern Ontario and Quebec became eerily clear and still, we denied that our industrial effluents could rain down from the heavens. But they did.

When medical research implicated tobacco smoke – first- or second-hand – as a carcinogen, smokers everywhere denied any connection. But as smoking became less popular, lung cancer rates declined.

And when holes appeared in the ozone layer high in the stratosphere, we refused to believe that our handy little aerosol sprays could have such a global effect. But when industries converted from fluorocarbons to slightly less damaging chemicals, the ozone layer began recovering.

## **A predictable pattern**

The pattern repeats over and over. First we deny the problem. Then we deny responsibility for it. Eventually we make changes – despite continuing denial by the industries implicated. Then we deny our experience of denial, and do it again the next time.

Granted, some natural disasters cannot be blamed on human activity. As far as we know – so far -- we have no influence on continental drift that produces earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanoes. We cannot stop the tides or affect solar flares.

Now we're busy denying global warming. Climate change. Extreme weather – call it whatever you want. The earth has had cycles of heating and cooling in the past, we insist. Unusual weather patterns have nothing to do with greenhouse gases or fossil fuels.

Have we learned nothing from our pattern of denials?

Communities that have never had earthquakes before are experiencing tremors. By some coincidence, they occur near where the oil and gas industry has been “fracking” – injecting sand, lubricants, and water under extremely high pressure deep underground. The process frees pockets of trapped petrochemicals by fracturing rock formations bonded together over millions of years.

But no, fracking can't be the cause.

## **Deny, deny, deny**

Our instinctive reaction to any change seems to be to deny responsibility.

Like a small child, standing amid the shards of a shattered lamp, we bleat, “It wasn't me! I didn't do it!”

Once upon a time, we might have claimed credit rather than denied involvement. We gloried in our technology's ability to move mountains and reroute rivers. We performed rain dances to end droughts. We sacrificed virgins to make volcanoes quit erupting. Priests and shamans lassoed the sun with invisible cords to prevent it from sinking below the winter horizon.

But now, like Pontius Pilate, we prefer to wash our hands of responsibility. For tornadoes that ravage new regions. For melanoma epidemics. For organic mercury slithering down river bottoms. For failing salmon runs. For genetically mutated seeds that contaminate traditional crops. For floods and landslides and melting glaciers...

And for forest fires that ignite mysteriously near a place where tourists stop.

\*\*\*\*\*

Copyright © 2012 by Jim Taylor. Non-profit use in congregations and study groups encouraged; all other rights reserved.

Please encourage your friends to subscribe to these columns.

To send comments, to subscribe, or to unsubscribe, write to [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca)

\*\*\*\*\*

## **YOUR TURN**

David Gilchrist offered an enthusiastic “Amen” to my column about circumcision.

“I couldn't agree more!” David wrote. “A cousin's daughter e-mailed me about ‘the beautiful experience of being present at her nephew's circumcision’; and I'm afraid there may have been a touch of anger in my reply, suggesting that the baby no doubt did not share her description of the experience. I have never heard from her since. When my daughter married a very fine Jewish young man, the only thing I felt terrible about was the mutilation of the two grandsons. And I have not been able to bring up the subject, as I don't want to jeopardize our relationship. But I have every intention of letting those two boys know how I feel about it if they have sons themselves. I am saving your comments to pass on to them, if the occasion arises. Circumcision should be banned by law, unless medically required.”

Ron Owens saw some humour in male mutilation: "Jim, you failed to repeat perhaps the most serious problem with circumcision: 'I was circumcised when I was born, and I couldn't walk for a year!'"

Irmgard Thiessen thought I should send my column to the German government: "Germany has a law that circumcision can only be done by a doctor not a Rabbi, Priest, or Imam. Reason: Too many complications had happened, since Moslems often circumcise after the age of 6 and 8, causing harm. German Rabbis and one in Jerusalem complained. Of course the German Parliament promised to reconsider this law."

The subject seemed to invite personal reminiscence. So Wade Jensen wrote, "When our son was born in Kelowna in 1998, our doctor flat out refused when we raised the issue of circumcision. She directed us to various studies that established what an impact it would have on the level of our son's enjoyment of sex as an adult.

"She also encouraged us to do further research on our own. We were surprised to see that, contrary to your comment that 'we do it because we've always done it', historically the practice has been restricted to Jews, Muslims, and slaves. Even in the mid-1800s, the only Americans being circumcised for non-religious reasons were slaves (it was thought it would reduce their tendency to wander -- somewhat like fixing your dog!). By the late 1800s, it was touted as a means to reduce the evil practice of masturbation! It only became routine in North America in the 1940s, and has never been routine in Europe, where circumcision was avoided lest one be identified as a Jew.

"So, the non-religious use of circumcision has really only been widespread in one area of the world (North America) and even then, for a very brief period of history."

Another writer confirmed some of Wade's research: "This topic touched a nerve with me. Born in 1941, I wasn't circumcised because my parents didn't want anyone to think I might be Jewish. I guess the news of the fate of European Jews was spreading. Anyway, I was a bit embarrassed in the high school showers. In later life I was glad I had not been 'mutilated'. However, when our boys were born in 1965 and '68 they were both 'done' because it was expected.

"I'm pleased to say that our one grandson has not been circumcised although our other two have been as their father is now Jewish. I've been in my doctor's office on a Friday morning when he does circumcisions and heard the babies' screaming. I once asked his nurse about it and she thinks it is the thing to do. I don't agree but won't get into an argument about it.

"I was pleased to read in your article that it is no longer covered under the medical system but am dismayed at the number of parents who still believe it is the right thing to do."

Bill Stewart felt the whole story had not been told: "I wonder how many of these circumcisions result in infection or other medical trauma that the baby would not have experienced had the operation not been done. Worse, how many died from complications of the procedure? Would the Vancouver doctor who claims to have done over 30,000 in his clinic release this information to you? Since Jewish and Muslim males have to be circumcised, how many [infants] die for the religious beliefs of their parents?"

Judyth Mermelstein had some answers for Bill's questions, as one of the Jewish readers of my column. "Over the years (and despite some squeamishness on my part) I've had occasion to see several ritual circumcisions of Jewish boy babies. This is usually done in the parents' home rather than in hospital, and by a \_mohel\_ rather than a doctor. I've no idea what a \_mohel\_ charges these days but he is a ritually-trained specialist who uses a special razor-sharp tool to cut the foreskin quickly with as little pain as possible. It's over in a second but, as with a razor cut, it hurts afterward so traditionally the child is given a little brandy and soon stops crying and falls asleep. In my widely-extended family over half a century, I have not heard of even one case where there were any complications.

"There are many boys and men who, whether through carelessness or by reason of their circumstances, do not wash themselves often or thoroughly enough. Penile cancer is very rare and would not justify circumcision. Sexual transmission of disease is another matter. A study years ago found women whose mates were circumcised showed lower rates of HPV, which can also cause of cervical cancer. A 50% reduction in HIV/AIDS transmission is highly significant: while rates are far lower in Canada than many parts of Africa, the disease is common enough in the less-hygienic end of the sex trade.

“The truth is that a circumcised penis is easier to keep clean and cleanliness does prevent many ills. However, even if that were not the case, religious Jews and Muslims would not go against what they see as God's commandment simply because Christians don't think it's needed. A ban would simply drive the practice underground, for the same reason that female genital mutilation still goes on despite the laws against it.

“I'm rather conflicted on the issue myself. I feel awkward about condemning the female procedure outright and condoning the one for males. On some level I feel all children should be spared the pain and the imposed prejudices of their parents. Then I look at the number of sexually promiscuous males with poor personal hygiene and think of the women they sleep with... There are no easy answers, are there?”

There are still some letters coming in about the September 2 column, on holding corporate managers accountable for negligence that results in death or injury to their employees or their customers.

Ted Wilson wrote, “You can't expect governments to crack down on corporate crimes such as negligence . They are corporations too and just as guilty of the kinds of offences you describe as any other corporation.”

Similarly, a woman who asked to be identified simply as “Jane” wrote, “I feel compelled to comment on the story of Harsharan Singh Bal's mother, who died in a car crash when her employer had packed 17 farm workers into a van, without seat belts. I think it is grossly negligent and appalling that only a \$2,000 fine was paid (or perhaps charged but not paid?) as punishment.

“In a similar context, I can't help thinking of modern school buses that, at least in Ontario, can pack in and carry one or two classes of kids (depending on the size of the child, 2-3 per bench style seat which might mean 50-60 children), and none of the seats are equipped with seat belts -- except of course the driver. Why is this the case, when there are such stringent rules regarding child safety restraints in cars? Why would the school board not be required to provide the same level of protection as a parent? Does that not indicate that children are less valuable in a school setting? There are so many on the bus, does it matter if a few are injured when the rest will surely survive an accident?

“If that isn't also an appalling example of gross negligence I don't know what is!”

\*\*\*\*\*

## PSALM PARAPHRASES

I have started including a psalm paraphrase for the coming Sunday with my Soft Edges column, on Wednesdays. Why not on Sunday, you ask? Well, partly because psalms seem to me to fit better with the general mood of Soft Edges, which is more likely to deal directly with faith-related matters than these Sharp Edges columns. And partly because Soft Edges is about 250 words shorter than Sharp Edges, and so including the paraphrase on Wednesday won't make the e-mailing quite as long.

That does mean that if you want to receive the paraphrase, and are not on the Soft Edges mailing list, you'll need to subscribe. No charge, just send me a message, [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca). Or you can subscribe automatically by sending a blank e-mail to [softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca).

\*\*\*\*\*

## 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](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca).

To subscribe or unsubscribe, send me an e-mail message at the address above. Or you can subscribe electronically by sending a blank e-mail (no message) to [sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca). Similarly, you can un-subscribe at [sharpedges-unsubscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:sharpedges-unsubscribe@quixotic.ca).

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](mailto: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](mailto: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

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, [www.seemslkegod.org](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsrap@shaw.ca)
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com](mailto:isabel@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](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

\*\*\*\*\*