

Sunday March 23, 2014

Misplaced sympathy

By Jim Taylor

It has been a hectic week, news-wise. Russia flexed its muscles like an imperial Czar to annex Crimea. Canada's finance minister and Alberta's premier both quit their jobs. A television station's helicopter crashed and burned in downtown Seattle. The last Canadian troops from Afghanistan returned to Canada.

And yet I can't remember a single TV newscast that failed to include a story about the disappearance of Malaysia Air's flight 370 – a story based almost entirely on guesswork.

Is it ghoulish fascination with suffering? A morbid curiosity about mystery? Or simply a reaction against too much information about everything else?

About the only thing that's absolutely certain is that the plane is no longer in the air. It took off from Kuala Lumpur after midnight on March 8 with only eight hours fuel. Even if it had landed somewhere to refuel, by now it would have been tracked by some country's radar systems.

Overactive imaginations

Perhaps what horrifies us is the fate of the innocent victims. Our minds picture fuselages disintegrating at high altitudes. People screaming in terror. Bodies flying through the air....

We may never know what happened to Malaysia Air 370. But we have a couple of precedents -- Air India 182, blown up by a terrorist bomb over the North Atlantic, in 1985; and Pan Am 103, blown up over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988.

Neither disaster left any survivors.

I don't mean to minimize the tragedy. But I wonder if our imaginations exaggerate the suffering of those who died.

An explosion at high altitude would kill many of the victims instantly. The rest would have had, at most, five minutes of agony.

The human body freefalls through the sky at about 125 mph, 200 km/hr. Even from nearly seven miles above the earth's surface – 35,000 feet, 10,700 m -- it would take barely four minutes for a body to hit the ground. Or the water. At that speed, earth and water are equally unyielding. Death would be instantaneous.

In reality, most of those free-falling bodies would probably have lost consciousness in the first minute, either from oxygen deficiency or sheer shock.

Although it sounds callous to say this, the innocent victims of Malaysia 370, Pan Am 103, and Air India 182 probably suffered less than the equally innocent fatalities resulting from most car accidents.

Admittedly, not all of the 227 passengers and 12 crew were innocent. Someone who knew a lot about flying a Boeing 777 turned off its communication equipment. That has to be intentional.

Facing death

But what about the panic in the cabin, as flight 370 bored through the blackness for seven hours?

Unless someone made announcements over the PA system, it's at least possible that the passengers may not have known there was anything wrong. On a night flight, many would be sleeping. Turns during flights are not

unusual. In darkness, it's hard to read the geography far below. The first intimation of trouble may have been failure to land at Beijing by dawn's early light.

But what if they did know? What if they realized this flight might be to their final destination?

I've never been in that situation myself. Twice, perhaps three times, I've expected death just seconds away. Obviously, I didn't die. But I remember how calm I felt.

But the passengers of United Airlines flight 93 faced that situation, on September 11, 2001. Cell phone messages imply that far from panicking, they organized themselves, coolly and efficiently, to overpower their hijackers.

My friend Ralph Milton was on a flight suddenly turned back to Kelowna because of a bomb threat. He remembers being terrified initially. The flight attendants, he said, kept reassuring passengers with fixed smiles through clenched teeth. Nobody did much talking. And then, he reflected later, "the terror gave way to a kind of peacefulness...I found I wasn't afraid of death. In the middle of that fear, I found peace."

We can only hope that the occupants of flight 370 found a similar peace.

Bereft of information

The people who most need our thoughts, prayers, and sympathy are not the victims but their distraught families and friends. They have now spent two weeks in limbo. Or purgatory. Certainly in suspended animation. They will probably spend years more in that state.

They don't know anything. They're not being told anything. Each new scrap of evidence -- often misleading -- makes their pain worse. Some still believe that loved ones will be found alive. Others, as one man said, "are slowly accepting the worst outcome."

If we have sympathy, if we have prayers, we should direct our caring towards those who are bereft of both hope and information.

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YOUR TURN

Okay, I stepped into a swamp of alligators with my comparisons of independence movements in Quebec and Crimea.

Rob Brown felt I had omitted one key consideration: "The one item that you missed is that Russia has, for many years, been encouraging the people of the Crimea to 'come back to Russia.' I get that information from a long-time Canadian friend, now living in Ukraine (but not Crimea) with his Russian wife. Who is the 'third-party government' which has been calling Quebec to leave Canada and join it?"

Bob Stoddard: "You did not mention one very important difference when comparing Crimea and Quebec. The difference are the policies of the US and Russia. The US would absolutely oppose any action by Russia in support of Quebec because it is 'on our border - our sphere of interest'. Yet, the US does not understand and/or objects to Russia's concern and opposition to the encircling of its borders by the U.S."

Art Gans noted, "I believe Quebec is a distinct society within Canada. Crimea is a different story. The Crimean Tatars, who are all that's left of a semi aboriginal population after Stalin's massive deportations of Tatars to Siberia

prior to WWII, are pretty solidly against Russia. Many of the Russians in Crimea are there as a result of Russian and Soviet-era military activities. And Khrushchev gave Crimea to the Ukraine to ensure that Russia would be able to maintain their Black Sea naval base at Sevastopol.

“The ballots have no option for voting to remain in the Ukraine. It really is hard to hold a ‘free’ election when the streets are loaded with Russian troops, even if they are not wearing insignia identifying them as such. I am afraid there is a lot more to this situation than a comparison with Quebec would allow.”

Laurina Tallman’s family came from Quebec. She commented, “I don’t think any reasonable agenda for the rest of Canada or for Quebec would be furthered by separation. However, the rest of Canada is not neo-fascist and we have greater distance in time from armed conflict. Our economic circumstances have been less onerous than those in Ukraine and Crimea. Quebec does not have the strategic import for a neighbour, i.e., for the US, of the magnitude that Crimea and its ports has for Russia. Neither does Quebec have language in common with the US. And Quebec is not physically isolated from the rest of Canada the way Crimea is from Ukraine; Quebec’s separation also would tend to separate the Maritime provinces from the rest of Canada.

Laurina also quoted a Toronto Star article about the current government of (the rest of) Ukraine: “The empowerment of extreme Ukrainian nationalists is no less a menace to the country’s future than Putin’s manoeuvres in Crimea. These are odious people with a repugnant ideology... Are the Europe-aspiring Ukrainians who now vote to restrict Russians’ cultural-language rights even dimly aware that as part of the European Union such minority rights would have to be expanded, not curtailed?”

Steve Lawson made his own views clear: “First, I am a Canadian; second I am a Quebecer, because I live in the province of Quebec and have for the last 16 years. We cannot all be painted with the same stroke of a brush when trying to describe what Quebec wants. I am part of a minority, English speaking population and do not want what a particular political party wants, independence, for this province.

“Much as I would like to respond to each point you make of comparison between Quebec and the Crimea, I cannot, because there too many dissimilarities....”

Conversely, George Rose sounded as if he would be happy to see Quebec leave: “Unlike Russia (with Crimea), the rest of Canada has supported Quebec through hungry and hard times with tax dollars from more prosperous provinces for 200 years, to say nothing of the billions of dollars that have gone into industry in Quebec to bail out companies like Bombardier ... How many millions of Canadian dollars went into Quebec’s hydro dams, allowing them to sell low cost electricity to the USA? Quebec sounds like a spoiled child, who blames his/her parents for everything that goes wrong in their life, wants all the hand-outs, yet never acknowledges all the good things that have been done for them.”

David Scott wondered if there were two conflicting human urges going on: “Do these, and many other fissiparous movements, large and small, in our world today indicate something fundamental about human nature? What of other, all too often insufficiently countervailing, ecumenical --‘urge to merge’ -- movements?”

Judyth Mermelstein has roots both in Quebec and Ukraine: “Stalin took a heavy toll on Crimean Tatars, and those who managed to return amount to only about 15% of the population — it was Soviet policy to swamp them with incoming Russians (the same tactic the Chinese use in Tibet) and treat them like dirt. The region was indeed overrun by invaders many times from prehistory on, with the usual results, including hybridization in some areas and pockets of relatively isolated and inbred communities.

“My roots are northwest of there, up in the Carpathians, where the population was not so dissimilar: no Tatars that I know of, but lots of Ashkenazi Jews and Roma, a peasantry split between Russian- and Ukrainian-speaking, a Czech/Slovak middle class and an Austro-Hungarian elite...in which none of the groups could claim ethnic purity except the ones so inbred they hardly mattered. [My lot among them: it seems half that part of Europe

are my cousins one way or another!] The World Wars disrupted our area more than the Crimea, and my parents' village is now just inside West Ukraine.”

Judyth says of the Holodomor: “It ***was*** an attempt at genocide: Stalin engineered the famine to kill off the more-prosperous, less Bolshie Ukrainian farmers so as to populate the fertile region with Russians. The ‘eastern half’ are mostly Russians who got settled there after the famine.”

Like David Scott, Judyth pondered the motives that drive humans: “Nationalism has always been problematic, with one ‘nation’ jostling the adjacent one(s) for power and wealth. Once it was a matter of tribes and small city-states; later the units got larger and the ‘rules of war’ got written down, but that hasn’t stopped the human savagery that pits one group against another. Whether the excuse is ethnicity or language or religion, the party that’s stronger militarily expands at the expense of the other. Diplomatic protests and half-hearted economic sanctions aren’t much use against overwhelming force and sheer greed.”

I’m going to include one last letter connected to the column, three weeks ago, about assisted suicide. This letter comes from Margaret Carr: “I thought surely someone would mention A Living Will. I have a Living Will that relieves my children from making the decision of when to ‘pull the plug’. I have given copies to my doctor and my daughter who has the most experience medically and they know what I want at my end of life. If I have dementia and get pneumonia I do not want the pneumonia treated. I want no artificial ways used to extend my life. Quality is much more important than quantity!

“I am not afraid to die. I have sat with so many dying patients I know that it doesn’t hurt to die. I also know that it hurts sometimes to live. All a person in that position needs is to know that their family is ready to let them go; I have seen many patients hang on till they see that last family member and then just let go. They seem to need permission either from their family if possible or from the nurse caring for them.”

TECHNICAL STUFF

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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.
