

Sunday January 8, 2012

Men are dangerous

By Jim Taylor

Canada rarely rates international headlines. Our news value ranks somewhere below Belgium's.

But the mid-December story about a jealous young man pursuing his former girlfriend, forcing her vehicle off the highway near Claresholm, Alberta, shooting all four occupants and killing three of them, and then shooting himself, penetrated even the coddled cocoon of a cruise ship in the Caribbean.

The day before, in Belgium, a man armed with grenades and an assault rifle attacked Christmas shoppers, wounding at least 125 and killing five people, including himself.

That also made it to the cruise ship.

Other incidents spring to mind.

Over the New Year's period, an Iraq war veteran allegedly killed a park ranger at Mt. Rainier, in Washington State. In England, an 18-year-old black teen was stabbed to death at a Boxing Day sale, apparently in a quarrel over who got to steal a prized pair of running shoes.

Here in Kelowna, the top news story of 2011 was the trial and conviction of a local man who abducted, raped, and strangled a 19-year-old girl and then dumped her body in a ditch.

One year ago today, Jared Lee Loughner opened fire outside a Safeway in Tucson, Arizona, killing six people died. To everyone's amazement, Democratic Representative Gabrielle Giffords survived a bullet to her head.

Last summer, Anders Breivik bombed government buildings in Oslo, Norway, killing eight. Then he opened fire on unarmed youth attending a political retreat, killing another 69 people. The same month, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Roderick Danzler shot and killed seven people, including his own daughter, before killing himself.

The common factor

Do you notice a common factor in all these incidents?

No, it's not guns, although I could certainly rant about firearms making it easy for deranged gun-toters to yield to their murderous impulses.

The common element in all these killings is men.

I'm forced to a conclusion -- men are dangerous.

Of course, that's stereotyping. And all stereotypes have exceptions. Not all men are dangerous. But stereotypes exist because they contain a germ of truth.

What the Christian church calls the Incarnation presents Jesus as a male. I doubt if the Incarnation was intended to prove that God is male. Nor that Jesus' maleness was necessary because no one in that patriarchal culture would have paid attention to a mere woman.

Rather, I wonder if its purpose was to demonstrate that it is possible to be a man without being dangerous.

The converse of the stereotype is not necessarily true -- that women are not dangerous. Some women certainly have been. Indira Gandhi, Maggie Thatcher, and Golda Meir all started wars. Joan of Arc led an army. And the Borgias were hardly women I would trust to mix my drinks.

But the ability to name a few exceptions doesn't invalidate the male stereotype. The sheer number of men throughout history who have launched wars, slaughtered losers, killed rivals, tortured opponents, raped civilians, and pillaged neighbours, far exceeds anyone's ability to enumerate them.

Thus the inevitable conclusion -- men are dangerous.

Not just white men

Michael Moore wrote a book called *Stupid White Men*. He shouldn't have limited himself to white men.

None of the Middle Eastern dictators toppled by popular uprisings last year were white, but all were men: Tunisia's Ben Ali, Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, Yemen's Ali Abdullah Saleh, Libya's Mohammed Qaddafi... Syria's Bashar al-Assad soldiers on, for the moment. Africa's bloody civil wars have all been led by men – Charles Taylor in Liberia, Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe, Idi Amin in Uganda, Kabila and Mobutu in Congo...

And I have little doubt that a Montreal man will eventually be found guilty of conspiring to drown his first wife and three teenaged daughters. Their car was pushed into a canal because the girls had disgraced the father's family honour by wearing miniskirts, talking back, and dating boys.

Similarly, I'm sure that men will be found responsible for the rampage of shootings in B.C.'s lower mainland over the Christmas weekend, and for the gangland assassination of Jonathan Bacon here in Kelowna last summer.

Men are dangerous.

Adapting to a new world

Yes, I include myself. I would be ashamed to have anyone know how many vengeful or libidinous impulses skid across my mind before I banish them. Perhaps that goes with the male Y gene.

I see the same tendency to react with physical force in my grandson, aged four. Except that he hasn't yet learned that he can control his reactions.

If we males expect to have a future of any kind of future in a world where we are no longer automatically the dominant gender, we'll have to start teaching self-control to other males from birth onwards.

Otherwise, we will end up as useless as medieval chain mail suits.

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YOUR TURN

By coincidence, Isabel Gibson wrote her own blog on the significance of January 1. "So you'll know that you won't get any argument from me about the artificiality of New Year's Eve and the calendrical year," she wrote in a letter about my New Year's Day column.

"I'd be with you on changing the date for the New Year cutover, but who gets to decide? Sometimes, it's just easier to live with a low-consequence mistake. Maybe as it stands it's a good object lesson -- reminding us that we do things for irrational reasons and even (gasp!) in error."

Ned Hintzman felt the column was long on information, and short on consequence: "So what! Would changing the day really make a difference in the symbolism of new beginnings?"

Hugh Pett (who admitted to sleeping through the start of the New Year) corrected my assertion that without the sun, the oceans would have no tides: "Sorry, but tides are caused at least half by the Sun, the other half by the Moon. The Moon is very much closer, but the Sun is enormously heavier and therefore exerts significant gravity forces on the oceans even from 93 million miles away.

"Even if the ocean surfaces were totally ice, there would still be water underneath, which would move with the tides. Ice spread over such great distances is actually extremely flexible, so the few meters needed to have tides would occur as though the ice were not there."

I had been assuming that the oceans would freeze solid. Not so, says Hugh: "Jupiter's moon Io generates great volcanoes by flexing the rocky interior, and other (icy) moons of Jupiter and Saturn have significant tides, such that it is now tentatively accepted that Europa has a vast ocean under its icy crust, with tidal heating keeping it liquid."

Clare Neufeld: “Always enjoy these times of year, precisely because there are a rare few who reflect on these matters from a factual, sometimes historical (and sometimes hysterical) perspective.

“My ancestors, who came to Canada in 1874, (Gregorian), were often at a loss as to how to report or record their birth dates, with national Canadian, or provincial authorities, due to their use of the Julian calendar in their former homestay land (sometimes erroneously called ‘homeland’ when, indeed, it was but another several-century-old sojourn, but that’s another story).

“In one of our family’s genealogical books, the editor/compiler attempts to explain to readers, (now assimilated into Gregorian calendar use, and now quite unfamiliar with their grandparents’ Julian system), how to convert birth, wedding, and death dates.”

Charles Hill agreed with David Suzuki on what constitutes reality: “Uncertainty is terrifying to most so we declare we are in touch with reality: scientific, religious, social, economic. I would suggest that ‘reality’ is always subjective, based on a set of a priori unprovable assumptions.”

John Halford, from Australia (where the start of a new solar year comes in June) raised the point that there are different reasons for declaring a year’s beginning. For example, he asked, “Why is it that our minister greets us with ‘Happy New Year’ - at the beginning of Advent?”

Steve Roney concurred: “As you say, a new year can start any time — it’s equivalent to trying to say where a circle starts. But why should New Year’s fall on the solstice? It makes sense for a nature-worshiper, like Suzuki, but we are not nature worshippers (right?). The significance for us can only be symbolic. The winter solstice is not all that powerful a symbol for Christians. It might be worth something to deliberately separate our New Year from the Solstice to make this point.

“Many new years also fall on the time of harvest or the time of planting, the beginning or ending of an agricultural cycle. That too is not very symbolically powerful since the industrial revolution.

ABOUT MY BOOKS, ETC.

I have a few copies of a book my father wrote exploring Christian theology through Christian art.

The problem with art, of course, is that it cannot put an abstract concept on canvas. An artist cannot paint an Incarnation or a Resurrection without putting real humans, in real situations, into the picture. The expression, therefore, has to be grounded in a particular culture and society; the infinite and universal has to be represented in finite terms.

My father – who once took art lessons from members of Canada’s Group of Seven – spent much of his life after retiring as principal of the Vancouver School of Theology, seeking out the ways artists through the centuries had attempted to deal with this dilemma. I’m probably biased, but I think that in examining the ways art portrays theological concepts, he explained those concepts better than most theological texts.

The book is *Seeing the Mystery: Exploring Christian Faith through the Eyes of Artists*, by William S. Taylor, 94 pages. There are only about 20 copies left in the world. Most of the illustrations are in full colour.

If you would like a copy, write to me – Jim Taylor, 1300 6th Street, Lake Country, BC, Canada, V4V 2H7.

Unfortunately, I can’t send these out on the honour system, as I do with my biblical paraphrases. I will have to charge \$30 Canadian to include postage, paid in advance.

TECHNICAL STUFF

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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

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For other sources worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslikeGod" page, www.seemslikegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Model T Websites." a simple (and cheap) seven-page website for congregations who want to develop a web presence <<http://www.modeltwebsites.com>>
- 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.
