

Wednesday March 6, 2013

De-cluttering our mental bulletin boards

By Jim Taylor

For a while, our community had a bulletin board outside the neighbourhood store. Anyone could stick up a notice. But no one ever took a notice down.

So there were notices for yard sales, babysitting, dog walking, car repairs, gardening services, concerts, weddings, hairdressing, skin care, tree pruning... The notices kept piling up. Each new notice had to be pinned through three or four old notices still stuck to the board.

The whole thing became a bewildering chaos. Nothing stood out. There was just a mass of brittle sun-stained paper, curling at the edges, rustling in the breeze like autumn leaves.

Turned off by chaos

As I grow older, I have increasing difficulty coping with chaos.

When multiple conversations swirl around me, I tend to turn my ears off. When too many meetings beckon, I inevitably miss some of them. I don't multitask well -- I can't talk on the phone while I check my e-mail while I scan the newspaper while I make coffee while I look for my glasses....

My mental bulletin board gets too full.

On that community bulletin board, I sometimes saw people riffling down through the layers, trying to find an announcement or advertisement that they remembered seeing once.

It used to be there. Therefore it must still be there, somewhere.

Still stuck in the past

And I wonder if that's why some people -- not necessarily older people -- remember what used to be on their bulletin boards, even if it has long since been covered over.

I'll use church examples, but I'm sure the same happens elsewhere.

My generation remembers when Sunday schools overflowed with children. The Sunday school notice is still on the board, somewhere. But dozens of competing notices have gone up -- for soccer leagues and shopping malls, weekend work shifts and televised sports, video games and golf courses...

Still, people insist, "We need to bring the children back."

There almost seems to be resentment towards new notices, as if they had no right to cover up the way things used to be. When the United and Anglican churches jointly published their new red *Hymnbook* in 1971, people lamented the old blue 1930 *Hymnary*. When *Voices United* came out in 1996, they wanted to keep using the red *Hymnbook*. When *More Voices* offered a livelier selection of music, they clung to *Voices United*. When the next book comes out -- whenever that happens -- they'll wax nostalgic for the good old songs in *More Voices*.

My church celebrates communion by intinction -- dipping the bread in wine (actually, grape juice). Some people object that it's not hygienic to dip one's bread -- and perhaps one's fingertips -- in the wine. They want to restore individual glasses, in trays passed from person to person.

But those trays were originally a radical break from slurping from a common cup. The grape juice too was an innovation, prompted by the temperance movement's opposition to anything alcoholic.

Each layer of notices covers over the previous ways of doing things. Whether it's church or science, medicine or economics.

We need to tidy up our bulletin boards occasionally. And clear out stuff that has passed its best-before date.

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YOUR TURN

First, a word about spam. I've been getting a lot of e-mail recently, purportedly coming from me to myself. If that means that someone has burgled the mailing lists for my columns, I'm sorry. We're trying to track the origin of these spurious e-mails, so far without success.

So let me just say this – if you get any e-mail from me or from “softedges” or “sharpedges” that isn't either a regular column, or a direct response from me to a note you've previously sent me, don't open it! Trash it!

If I choose to write to you, collectively or individually, I will try to make sure that the subject line clearly identifies my reason for writing.

“I don't know how to break it to you,” Carl Freeto wrote about last week's column, “but you did not ‘discover’ that law of social truth! For as long as I can remember I have been told ‘You cannot legislate morality!’

Carl went on, “I have a theory that as soon as a law is passed, it's too late. I guess the best we can do with law is try to protect ourselves from the persons our society has left out or brutalized with other laws...

“It's evident in the Hebrew (and, let's face it, in Christianity and every major religion) that efforts to formulate law and then act it out in order to get right (maybe in order to get our way) with our God. What's radical in Jesus' life is that he makes the very distinction you mention and promises us that in this world living love instead of law is punishable by death.”

The column reminded Mary Elford “of something someone else said. There is no dark, just the absence of light. There is no cold, just the absence of heat.”

Then she wondered if “There is no law for good, just a law for the absence of bad?”

Steve Roney agreed that virtues such as generosity cannot be made mandatory: “This is self-evidently true, because if you do it because you are required to do it, no moral choice is involved. This is the issue of free will.”

Steve also challenged the notion that goodness can be achieved by social conformity: “Conformity for its own sake is always immoral. To conform is to surrender one's conscience.”

The column made Nenke Jongkind “aware of is some of the metaphors we blithely use: best bang for your buck which was used in the sex trade; pull their chain or jangle their chain which must have something to do with the slave trade. There are probably many others we use thoughtlessly that reference something that we would oppose if we but understood the reference.”

Fran Mayes wanted to clarify significant distinctions between what various religions proscribe, or require: “While I don't believe in cutting pieces off non-consenting babies, male circumcision removes a piece of skin. Female genital mutilation removes a healthy functional organ and has multiple drastic ‘side effects’. It represents a devaluing of female bodies and sexuality.”

Charles Hill wondered if the fact that in some countries, religion itself (or some specific forms of religion) are prohibited. “In many countries there is legislation against specific religious activity,” he noted, “and it is enforceable.” Applying my rule, he wondered, does that make religion itself bad?

“I'm thinking mostly of Radical Islamic countries, Iran and probably Pakistan. It is evident that the Coptic

Christians in Egypt are very worried.”

Bill Franzman raised a point that I had not made clear: “You say ‘If it can be legislated against, it’s probably bad. If it can’t be enforced, it’s probably good.’ Does that mean that prostitution and drug use are good? Because neither one in my opinion can be fully enforced...”

In fact, I suspect that no law can ever be fully enforced, 100%. But my key point, which I think Bill may have missed, is that “good” and “bad” do not depend on whether the law itself can be enforced, but whether we can create a law that would attempt to enforce a particular standard. Yes, we can legislate against prostitution and drug use. We can legislate against fraud and theft and violence. We cannot legislate “honour your father and mother.” Or “Turn the other cheek.”

Enforceability does not change either the intent of the law, or the negative value of the act the law seeks to prohibit.

PSALM PARAPHRASES

The Fourth Sunday of Lent calls for Psalm 32:1-11. Here’s a fairly short paraphrase.

- 1 Happy are those who have nothing to hide;
- 2 Even happier, those whose slate has been wiped clean.
- 3 I used to lie awake fretting about what I had done.
- 4 My conscience tormented me.
I was terrified of being exposed.
- 5 So I went to God, and confessed.
I made no excuses for myself; I didn't hide anything.
- 6 And God forgave me.
What a relief it is to share a gnawing secret!
- 7 Forgiveness is like a cool drink on a hot day,
like a warm fire in a blizzard.
God's grace renews my spirit;
it gives me a second chance.
- 8 God says, "I will teach you how to take charge of your behavior.
- 9 You are not like beasts of burden;
they need bridles and bits to control them.
- 10 But you have a mind; you can think.
You can anticipate consequences before you act."
- 11 Experience isn't always the best teacher.
Learn from the wisdom of ages, then live joyfully.

For this and other paraphrases, you can order *Everyday Psalms* through Wood Lake Publications, info@woodlake.com or 1-800-663-2775.

HYMNSIGHT

My friend Ralph Milton, who published his Rumors newsletter for many years, has something special for you. It’s called HYMNSIGHT, and it’s for any church that currently projects the words of hymns and prayers, or plans to.

Ralph writes, Since retiring, I have rediscovered my old love of photography, and found creative use for my pictures in the life of First United where Bev and I worship. Our entire liturgy is projected, so that people read responses and sing hymns from screens. I use my photos to add color, vitality and depth to all the hymns and most of the liturgy.

In the course of this, I have developed slide sets to go with 600 hymns, plus about two thousand slides, in both the standard screen and the newer wide screen shape. You can use all of them, in any way you wish, without permission, and absolutely free, as long as it's non-profit and church related.

All you need to access the website is go to:

<http://www.hymnsight.ca> www.hymnsight.ca

In addition to all that visual material, there's a comprehensive "how-to" manual for those who are new to the idea of using projected visuals in church, and for those who have already begun.

HymnSight provides a set of suggested visuals to go with each hymn, but the words to the hymn are not there, mainly for copyright considerations.

Please take a look to see if this service scratches where you itch. If you think it's worthwhile, please let some of your colleagues in ministry know about it. And if you know of a website that could benefit from a link to HymnSight, why not add it?

Blessings,

Ralph Milton

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- 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.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at jimt@quixotic.ca, or send a note to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca
