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The words do matter

By Jim Taylor

A mere year ago, universities across the country winced as media reported the kinds of songs their first-year students sang as part of their frosh orientation.

It started with a video showing students at St Mary's University in Halifax singing joyously about underage sex. Most of the media excised the more offensive lines in the lyrics: "SMU boys we like them Y-O-U-N-G! Y is for your sister. O is for oh so tight. U is for underage. N is for no consent. G is for grab that ass."

Politicians, school administrators, and student leaders expressed shock.

Then about a week later, students at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver got caught singing the same song. Students claimed that the song had been used for 20 years. Their Frosh Week organizers didn't prevent it from being sung – they just told students not to sing it in public places.

A booth set up outside the student union building advertised a local nightclub to students by blaring out these lyrics: "I'm only here for the bitches and the drinks..."

"Kids will be kids"

Predictably, there were two responses.

University officials and student leaders promised to investigate and to make sure it didn't happen again. When members of St. Mary's football team got the university in trouble again, by sending "hateful, racist and sexist" Twitter messages, the university suspended ten players – conveniently, after the football season had ended.

Meanwhile, others said things like, "Kids will be kids. We did the same when we were young, and it didn't hurt us. Besides, the words really don't matter."

I agree that we did the same when we were young. And I don't think I

was seriously damaged by telling occasional dirty jokes, or singing off-colour lyrics to popular songs.

Still, I disagree that the words don't matter.

When I went to university in the 1950s, engineering students at UBC belted out their song:

*"We are, we are, we are, we are, we are the engineers
We can, we can, we can, we can demolish forty beers,
So come, so come, so come, so come, so come drink rum with us
For we don't give a damn for any damn man who don't give a damn for us."*

Everyone knows the tune – it's the famous Battle Hymn of the Republic. Also known as John Brown's Body. And in many churches, by its opening line, "Mine eyes have seen the glory..."

It's a magnificent tune. And when I join a full-throated chorus of "*Glory, glory, hallelujah!*" the hair on the back of my neck stands up.

If the words really don't matter, though, shouldn't church congregations feel equally comfortable singing the engineers' version of the chorus – "*Glory, murder, rape and arson...*"?

Sliding below reason

The words matter, you see, because singing works subliminally. Singing bypasses the analytic brain centres and moves through the limbic brain, the more primitive basic brain. That's why, a psychologist friend explained, all brainwashing processes use songs, chants, and rote responses. Boot-camp recruits shout as they march. Religious cults use endless chants and choruses. Rock festivals numb the senses with deafening rhythm.

The late Pete Seeger always got his audiences to sing along. So that his messages of peace and justice could worm their way deeper into his audience's consciousness.

When we speak, we present only one voice. When we listen, we hear only one speaker. We can maintain a distance; we can reserve judgement.

But when we sing and chant, we become active participants. We belong to a group.

And that sense of belonging gives some members of that group the delusion that the group approves their behaviour. Locker room banter suggests that it's okay to punch your wife senseless, or for a football team to gang rape a girl. Tough talk in board rooms justifies firing difficult employees or kicking a dog.

Unacceptable behaviour

The words do matter. That's why many churches, for example, no longer sing some favourite hymns people remember from childhood. Such as "Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war..."

Or the Battle Hymn, which celebrates a Saviour who "hath loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword..." Is this the same Jesus who told his disciples to love their enemy, to turn the other cheek, who promised peace that passes understanding?

Social attitudes have moved a long way in recent years. From glorifying war to protesting against it. From open race and gender prejudice to legal equality. From denouncing pre-marital sex and recreational drugs as sins to treating them as relatively normal.

Of course, not everyone has changed. But even conservatives talk a more liberal line now than they once did.

Even so, when we sing or say words that express offensive sentiments, we reinforce thought patterns we like to think we have left behind.

If it's not acceptable in real life, it shouldn't be acceptable in jokes or songs.

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YOUR TURN

Last week, I ruminated on the implications of the Scottish referendum, in which, I suggested, the elderly had swung the vote in favour of staying within the United Kingdom.

Isabel Gibson wondered just how "united" a kingdom could be, "when 44.7% vote for independence? It's hardly a perfect analogy, but what sort of marriage would any of us have if roughly half of us wanted out at any given moment? Or if we both wanted out, roughly half the time?

"I understand that John Raulston Saul has recently published a book arguing that our culture incorporates many elements of First Nations' culture. Not sure whether he's right, but we could sure do with more respect for community consensus, as opposed to 'majority rules.' Too often, a simple majority is nowhere near good enough.

"As for the elderly making the decision for the young -- I guess today's

young can wait until they're old, and pay that favour forward.”

James Russell picked up some of the same themes, drawing my attention to an article in the Globe and Mail by Brian Lee Crowley: “I think argues, rightly, that breaking up an established relationship is a more profound act than starting up a new one. At start-up, your commitments are less and more obvious. Later, you build more and deeper on those early foundations and give and take more on established trust. There's more at risk in a breakup, and the more profound the act and its consequences, the more deeply we should consider it. It matters less whether we are young or old, and more how inclusive we are of viewpoints and time frames. What worries me these days is the tendency of governments to consider only the views of their supporters and potential allies rather than all of the electorate.”

Two readers questioned some of my assertions.

I had said, at one point, that “the Scots did not divide on language lines.” Penny Baughan asked, “Jim, have you ever tried to ask directions from a Glaswegian?”

At another point, I had praised the simplicity of the Scottish referendum question, compared to the Quebec question in 1995. Jorgen Hansen replied, “Don’t be fooled by simple questions. It is as if you sign an agreement then ask, ‘Please tell me what is in the agreement’. In Scotland and Quebec, questions such as what money will we use, will there be border patrols, will Ottawa or London continue to send us money, will we have our own army and police force, how will we share our debt with the sections of the old, will we have our old passports, will we be able to work in the separate parts, will we be part of existing trade agreements, and many more all go unanswered before the vote. Buy a new car then ask afterwards if there is guarantee; marry a partner and then ask if he/she has any money or can cook? Why not buy a house unseen and then complain that it has no roof -- later.”

Diane Robinson happened to be “somewhere near Ben Nevis” in Scotland when she read the column: “It’s been very interesting to chat with Scots both before and after the vote. Comments have included the following (paraphrased): ‘I’m relieved the vote was no. The yes side has been very aggressive’ (female, mid-60’s)

‘Happy with status quo’ (male, 75, receiving a pension)

‘I’ve done ok being part of the UK’ (male, 60)

'Couldn't afford the 18,000 pounds each person would have to contribute if the Yes side wins' (male, 75)

“In Glasgow the Yes and No sides held very vocal rallies the Sunday before the vote. In Edinburgh a couple dressed in traditional highland dress were telling people to remember the blood that had been spilled over the centuries by Scots fighting for their country's independence. Everywhere we've travelled there have been Yes and No signs posted. There've been more Scottish flags flying than Union Jacks.

“Even though I am second-generation Canadian my Scottish ancestral roots are strong. It has been amazing to personally witness this moment in Scotland's history. As evidenced by the comments I've heard -- and the activity I've witnessed -- I would have to agree that it has, largely, been the younger generation who have embraced the idea of an independent Scotland. Is the older generation, perhaps, afraid of change? Perhaps they have too much invested in the past?”

Mary Dean called the column: “good food for thought,” and thought the significance of the older vote might have implications here, “especially as it applies to the future plans for our churches.”

TECHNICAL STUFF

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Other sources worth pursuing:

- 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 "SeemslieGod" page, www.seemsliegod.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.
