

BROCK'S BANTER: Pink Shirts & Motorcycles

By Brock Weir

Sometimes a week comes along when there are few things to talk about. Some issues might not seem particularly interesting, whereas other times there is a bumper crop of things to talk about and it is, to borrow from potato chip parlance, hard to pick just one.

The past seven days fall into the latter category.

First, at Town Hall, we have the long gestating birth of an election wedge issue with the Joint Operations Centre, a project which costs anywhere between \$19 million and \$26 million, depending on which Councillor you talk to.

Then there was the formal approval of the long-awaited Community Improvement Plan to bring along a much needed boost to Downtown Aurora businesses which passed with relative ease. (See, folks, avoiding a 6 ? 3 or 5 ? 4 vote at the Council table is really possible if you put your mind to it!)

Elsewhere, as I write this after the Academy Awards, we have the Palin-ization of Mayor Rob Ford as he goes Hollywood ? taking Hollywood & Highland by storm ostensibly to promote the business of Toronto, but ultimately throwing himself into Jimmy Kimmel's lion's den.

We then have the crisis of Eastern Europe where Russia has swiftly scoured off any welcome patina left over from Sochi to set foot into the embattled Ukraine, bringing the rest of the world into the debate, but on and on it goes.

This week, however, I would like to focus south of that battleground to another one going on in Eastern Africa. I have been reading in wide-eyed horror all too often, but particularly over the last week, about the sense of ?justice? in Uganda against its gay and lesbian citizens.

The more I read, the more vivid a memory becomes of one otherwise inauspicious day I spent in Africa in 2007. I spent the bulk of that summer in Rwanda as part of a group of Carleton University students doing internships at a variety of media outlets in the capital Kigali, and the cultural capital of Butare.

My group was stationed in Kigali in a nice residential district a short walk to the Rwandan parliament. I can't remember where exactly I was headed on this particular day, but while waiting near the intersection by our house, I was approached by a man on a motorcycle.

He was easy to spot because, aside from our own little house, the reality was the majority of our group were visible minorities; therefore, a white guy in a flashy outfit, riding a motorcycle while holding a sky blue jerry can was not something which passed unnoticed.

Perhaps he spotted me trying to covertly take in this unlikely scene, but the motorcycle came to a red, dusty stop at my feet.

?Hi,? said the man.

?Hello,? I replied.

?Nice day, isn't it?? he continued.

?It beats yesterday,? I said, referring to heavy rains the night before which knocked out power for a while.

?I'm on my way to get gas,? he added, unprompted by any question on my part.

What followed from him was a monologue.

Gas, as I quickly discovered, was only one objective of his journey.

?You know what happened to my gas?? he asked.

Several punch lines went through my mind, but before I settled on one, he began to spin a yarn about one of his house staff (word sanitized for public consumption) absconding in the dark of night with his red jerry and being gone without a trace for the previous two nights.

?I'm going to hunt him down and kick his ass,? he told me before telling me he was a minister.

Yes, this man was in Rwanda to spread the word of God. Describing himself as a ?Southern Baptist pastor from Chicago,? he and his wife, he expanded, were leading a church to ?help? Rwandans find what they needed in the scripture.

Perhaps I was standing there dumbfounded, but, again, without prompting, he began to expound on his Church's philosophy.

?We don't like women wearing pants,? he said, gesturing to a young family heading into a local café. ?We want women to be women and men to be men. Women wearing pants is an abomination.?

I was intrigued, as this did not have any realistic application in any particular Christian denomination I was aware of. And then ? watershed.

?What do you think of the f?gs?? he asked.

?Excuse me?? I replied, sputtering at the brashness of the question. After all, I am Canadian.

?There are too many f?gs in this world. This is one of our teachings. ?The f?gs are criminals in God's eyes and they are going to burn in hell.?

Mentally, I was backing away but, like watching a train wreck, I was simply unable to turn away.

Then, he finished with the kicker ? ?I've talked to a few of the people in your group and we would really like all of you to come to one of our services?

Gee, with an offer like that, how could we refuse? As hard as it might be to believe, we managed to do just that ? partly thanks to some convincing arguments offered by one other person living with our group who, after living in a very conservative small town in rural Ontario, finally found the courage and comfort to be himself in this unlikely place.

That night, it struck me that in Rwanda, a country which through the magic of film and books might seem to a great many people to be a country just riddled with strife, civil war, and genocide that this man was, at the end of the day, the most unpleasant person I had the displeasure of meeting.

So, as we read about condemnation and the naming of names in Uganda, I wonder how much of this stems from a culture of hate being brought into this part of the world by twisting the word of God for their own purposes, consequences be damned.

Students across York Region participating in Pink Shirt Day last week (See Page 5) to eradicate bullying and hate, regardless of the reason, and all other ill-effects these things can cause in the wider environment was heartening and a pleasant antidote to these disheartening stories.

The philosophy behind the day is to raise a culture of an intolerance of intolerance, spawned by Nova Scotia students in response to one of their own for wearing a pink shirt to school.

If we're lucky, hopefully some of these students who embrace this message will take it out into the wider world to help repair some of the damage wrought by previous generations ? including that of the guy on the motorcycle.

CORRECTION

The Auroran would like to make a correction regarding last week's article, ?Council green lights 3.75% tax hike ahead of March approval.? The article outlined criticisms of the Aurora Historical Society made by Christopher Watts, who was a delegate to the February 24 Budget meeting. In his critique of their fundraising efforts, specifically with meeting the objectives of their Trillium application outlined in the 10th paragraph, Mr. Watts actually said Council's grant to the Society would be awarded on ?poor performance.?