

It's Not the Cake's Fault

—Peter Stockland—

Kyle Bennett, *Comment* magazine's reviews editor, stirred up a fuss among readers last week with an essay scolding makers of a popular board game for designing it to provoke bad temper, hostility, and greed.

Bennett was, many responses went, a mug, a bug, a mope, a dope, a know-nothing know-it-all unable to understand that a game is just a game. Worse, he was guilty of making some readers, in the immortal words of Elmer Fudd, "vevy, vevy angwy" for his misguided missive.

Of course, it was the readers who missed the irony Bennett was using to make exactly the point they accused him of missing, and who manifested the real behaviour he was critiquing: the cultural habit of blaming externalities for our own internal inappropriateness.

In an age where information has become almost exclusively binary—zero or one—irony must be handled vevy, vevy carefufwuy lest you drop it on your own foot. I must admit that my first reading of Bennett's piece left me thinking he was either wrong in what he was saying, or right because he meant the opposite of what he was saying.

Taking the latter, rather dyslexic, approach on a re-reading convinced me that he was saying what needs to be said. We are a culture that, in the jargon, plays the blame game incessantly, not just when our amusements go awry.

The Janus face of the 21st century sees virtually everything as "my choice, but not my fault." We are people compulsively obsessed with our freedom to choose everything—and our insistence on not being wholly responsible for anything.

We are far too sophisticated to claim that the Devil made us do it. After all, he's not the boss of us. But there is the devil to pay when what is chosen turns us into chumps. Fault must be found with whoever or whatever conspired against us to make our choices defective.

The cost of this libertine determinism to our interior lives—to what was long ago called our character—is frightening. It goes beyond exacerbating, in Thomas Cranmer's exquisite phrase in the *Book of Com-*

mon Prayer, our "manifold sins and wickedness." It prevents us from seeing the truth that would truly set us free.

Several years ago, for example, a woman I love dearly chose to embark on a weight loss program. The program required, as such programs invariably do, the purchase of paraphernalia. She lugged the gee-gaws home and laid them out on the kitchen table as proof of her commitment. Her son, happening by, asked how much it all cost. She quoted a figure with the tone of one who has just made a very wise investment.

"Why not try self-control?" the son said. "It's free."

Now, it might not have been the most tactful, never mind helpful, of remarks. But the dear woman's reaction was one of grievous wounding. How could anyone say such a thing?

It was a similar, if less hysterical, reaction to the one I got years ago when the so-called obesity rights movement first started making noise. I wrote a column saying many of the obese could help themselves, by simply shutting their cake holes. Again, I admit, perhaps not the most delicate of formulations. But the wrath it provoked invariably ignored the fact of its truth. One woman caller simply screamed disconnected obscenities into my tender ears. I actually put the receiver down, got a cup of coffee (skim milk, please), and returned to my desk to hear her still yowling.

The point here is not to pick on the overweight or the under willed. I use these examples only because our approach to something so basic as eating provides a clear illustration of our insistence on blaming externalities for interior shortcomings.

We will say that cake makes us fat. And we will eat the cake anyway. And we will refuse to acknowledge the truth that the very premise is untrue. Cake does not make us fat. Eating too much cake, refusing the free gift of self-control, makes us fat.

Blaming the cake for what happens when we refuse that free gift makes as much sense as blaming the cutting board on which it sits. Or as Kyle Bennett argued more subtly in his *Comment* essay, most of the things we get fussed about are accidents of our own design.

The Repentance of Thieves and Murderers

—Brian Dijkema—

Fidel Castro is a thief and a murderer. And he may be returning to Christianity.

The long-time Cuban president is responsible for the dispossession of millions of dollars worth of land, cars, cash, and other material goods once held privately by Cubans. He is also responsible for the more heinous crime of dispossession of the dignity and lives of countless Cuban citizens. Hundreds of men and women endure squalid prison conditions because of his policies. Churches, trade unions, newspapers, political parties, free courts, and other green shoots of independence, pluralism, and liberty have been cut down to the nub or choked by Fidel Castro, his brother Raul, and their geriatric posse of communist true believers.

Fidel Castro is the type of person about whom Psalms 52 and 53 appear to be written.

But rumour has it that Fidel is contemplating a return to his old faith. As with most news from Cuba, it's difficult to determine the veracity of these claims, but an Italian newspaper quotes his

daughter Alina as saying, "Today he is more interested in the fate of his soul than the future of Cuba."

Let us hope and pray that this is true. Let's hope that he embraces the true fidel.

Because while it might be true that he is more concerned for the state of his soul than for the future of Cuba, it is also true that a full reorientation of his soul towards God and his rejoining of God's church would be a tremendous development in the future of Cuba.

For many, including his groupies in Canada, Fidel is the very embodiment of the successful people's revolution; Fidel is Cuba. The reason why Cubans in tandem shout "Viva la revolucion, Viva Fidel!" (and more recently "Viva Raul!") is that Fidel has consciously cultivated a cult of personality in which his history is equated with the history of the Cuban communist state.

His return to the church, even on his death bed, would be one of the biggest cultural changes in Cuba since Fidel launched his revolution. It would be a clear sign to all Cubans that the story told by the church—the one institution which has been a resolute force for

Change the Record

—Ray Pennings—

Last night, the City of Calgary convened a meeting with the city's faith communities. It's an inspiring case study on how Cardus tries to achieve its mission.

Officially, the meeting's purpose was "to re-connect with our Centre City faith-based organizations and to seek further feedback on The City's Centre City Plan." That plan, adopted by City Council in 2007, calls for the doubling of residential density in the downtown core, or 40,000 additional residents in the next thirty years. But it makes no mention and considers no consequences of the 26 faith institutions which currently are part of the city's downtown, as these two Cardus studies from 2010 and 2011 noted.

Municipal consultations of this sort aren't typically well-attended, so officials were enthusiastically overwhelmed, although scrambling to accommodate, the assembled crowd. The evening began with a short formal presentation which combined into twenty minutes Municipal Planning 101, 125 years of Calgary official plans, and a summary of the most current Plan. I found it telling that the last long-range plan for the city core, approved in 1966, featured three priorities for the downtown: a walking mall (Stephen Avenue); a +15 system of walkways (the series of second level bridges which connects downtown office towers); and a C-Train system (the name given to Calgary's LRT transit). Anyone familiar with Calgary today will recognize these features, highlighting that while Official Plans never accurately predict the future, they have a powerful influence in shaping it.

The rest of the time was in facilitated smaller discussion groups. The formal questions triggered stimulating conversation on a broad range of issues relating to faith and our common life together in a fast-growing city of 1.1 million. Some of it was specific—the application of parking by-laws, incorporating worship space into facilities built for other purposes, bonusing the allotment of worship space in approving development plans—and some more general. There was concern for how the marginalized might be best served in a gentrification process that seemed inevitable, recognizing that the economics of obtaining downtown space meant that churches with a longer history in the city faced different challenges than younger congregations. We spoke of how faith communities might not only serve the community but also be reflected of the community. Time was up before the conversation was done.

The results of this meeting will be compiled into an official report by Calgary municipal staff, and the process of amending official city documents to deal with the concerns raised may or may not proceed, given the vagaries of contemporary politics. But a formal report is not the real significance of last

freedom in the face of the repression, and which has been a source of intellectual and spiritual energy to all those "demanding the effective recognition of their inalienable human rights"—is a truer story than that told by the state. It would be a clear indication, as Oliver O'Donovan notes, "that if we once dare to ask what lies *behind* politics and its justice, we must find ourselves face-to-face with heaven and hell."

Who knows whether Mr. Castro is as concerned about his soul



Feb. 7, 2012

Photo: Ray Pennings

night's meeting. Seeing Calgary's city plan changed to respond to our concerns would be nice, but that isn't the measure of our mission.

Cardus' vision involves changing the public conversation. It's about putting forward research that is credible enough that even opponents have to answer the arguments raised. We try to get beyond group-think and the "safe" conversations we often have with those we agree with. It's easy to swap internal jargon and rile each other up as to how the "other guys" don't get it. It's harder to change the broader public discourse.

The issue gets more complicated when you try to speak honestly from your deepest held faith convictions. Secular orthodoxy insists that anything that sounds like faith should be privatized. Overcoming this marginalization is a long-term proposition.

In the summary provided by one participant, "It's important that the contributions of faith institutions are no longer overlooked but officially recognized by the city."

The opening question last night was, "Where were you all seven years ago?" I don't doubt that every person attending last night would have been more than welcome to say seven years ago what they said last night. Why didn't they? Some didn't know about the process. Others were present but did not have the words they use today to articulate their concerns. Some were preoccupied with the short-term issues and hadn't prioritized thinking about the future of the city and how the contribution of faith institutions needs to be articulated. Others may have just taken it for granted.

In the past few years, Cardus has convened meetings, consulted with stakeholders, commissioned research reports, contributed to the editorial pages and other media all with a view to stimulating a public conversation in Calgary. We initiated and convened a public dialogue. Last night, that conversation continued, moved forward by diverse voices of the community, many of whom have never heard of Cardus. A good many probably missed the kind shout-out that City staff gave to Cardus for its' work. It doesn't matter.

"Drawing on more than 2,000 years of Christian social thought, we work to enrich and challenge public debate through research, events and publications, for the common good"—in Calgary, and everywhere.

as his daughter says he is? I know that many of my Cuban friends—those who have suffered—simply want their freedom. I'm sure many of them will still pray Psalms 52 and 53. But, let's also pray for Mr. Castro's repentance. Cuba might now be a socialist paradise led by an unrepentant dictator. But even dictators on their death beds, like criminals on Golgotha, can choose another, better, paradise, where repentant thieves and murderers are welcome.

The Vanity of Foxes

—Robert Joustra—

Atop my bookshelf sits a stuffed hedgehog, in perpetual birthday euphoria, named Archilochus. Among the more fecund maxims of his namesake—a Greek poet of the seventh century B.C.—is the now famous: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." Isaiah Berlin split intellectuals into these two groups: foxes, who know a great deal about many things, and hedgehogs, who know one big thing. These furry mammals of the life of the mind have stuck in all sorts of interesting ways, not least of which the well esteemed Hedgehog Review.

Last fall, a stone's throw from Parliament Hill, Father Raymond de Souza made a case that launching journals, and writing and editing them, is the work of foxes. He didn't say foxes. But he did say it "requires a certain boldness of spirit. Another word for that is vanity. You can't be a columnist without being a little bit vain. It is an extraordinary thing to think on a weekly basis that the nation needs to know what it is that I think. It's a bold thing to do."

"It is," he said, "a kind of boldness which presumes to have a kind of expertise on just about everything."

But it seems to me that the fox, unless he is a very ignorant fox, knows—full well knows—that in the knowing of many things, he may be a jack of all trades but master of none. The fox is not fooled by the presumptions of others. Every time a fox speaks, for every utterance of opinion that passes lips and keyboard, a concomitant folly and humility must attend. There is every chance, probably a very good one, that a master will correct—every likelihood he will be made to look wrong, foolish, or even intentionally and maliciously false. The fox is a gambler who knows he will not always win.

Peter Stockland trains foxes. He holds court with an aspiring skulk of foxes, and tells them how to learn, think, and write in a way that is simple, pointed, and fun.

In that training, he holds one grand Orwellian phrase above all else: do not tell lies.

The fox is a liar. Surely the fox is a liar. 600 words in a newspaper, 500 words in a blog, 400 words in a policy brief, all of it must reduce some knowledge, some perspective, some truth to a halfness, or a quarter. White lies and non-disclosure are simply understood. It's not malicious, we say, it's the format; it's our attention span.

But Peter is a Catholic, and I've learned to be suspicious of Catholics when they use words like lies and truth. God always seems to get smuggled in, and not the comfortable abstract-God of foundational philosophy, but the kind of relational, sticky God that incarnates, gets physical, gets touchy.

"Truth, and the love which it reveals, cannot be produced," says Pope Benedict in *Caritas in Veritate*. "They can only be received as a gift."

All Catholics, all Christians, says de Souza, know one big thing. There again is this boldness, he says, "that is absurd, but also somewhat legitimate." In 1965, when Pope Paul VI went to visit the United Nations, he said that "the church's competence to address the nations of the world was because it was an expert in humanity."

One big thing. Which is why I think Peter's Orwellian truism isn't just about doing cleaner research, hiring fact checkers, and parsing bias. In Peter's way he isn't telling us to read more, focus up, or get a doctorate. He is telling us to know God. All people, foxes and intellectuals of any stripe, who receive that truth, know one big thing. That thing changes everything.