

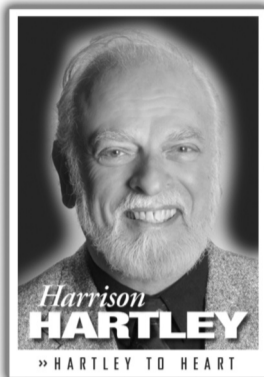
Holiday Greeting Sign Stolen to Preserve "Meaning"

**On Wednesday 11/25/2009, the St. Joseph (MO) Skeptics Society placed a holiday sign in the civic Krug Park display. By Sunday, it had been stolen and the Society website hacked and trashed, necessitating a temporary shutdown.*

Saint Joseph follows a tradition observed in many places during the Christmas and New Year season by allowing private groups of all kinds to use public space for the presentation of their good wishes. They use signs, banners, figures, and many, many lights. Naturally, in a country where the major religious tradition also drives the main holiday, there's no surprise in finding religious overtones in these greetings, and why not? As long as they are presented so that they don't offend people of other cultures, faiths, and beliefs, and as long as they avoid the appearance of theocracy (that is, of government promoting one belief system over others or prohibiting some in favor of others), there can be no serious objection.

And yet, some people do object. Some object because they perceive government promotion of religion when what is really happening is common tradition asserting itself, and others object because they think they have some kind of mystic claim on the times, believing,

apparently, that they have a divine appointment to protect the "meaning" of Christmas. They don't become quite so worked up over New Years, but perhaps they're tired by then, and New Years has always been more associated with worldly practices (football, food, and a little libation or two... or three) and may not be worth the effort. But Christmas is, exactly because of its "meaning."



Well, certainly: a Mass said in honor of Christ. Not that the tradition hasn't changed; Southern Baptists, Methodists and other Protestant groups don't say Mass, but the links

are pretty tight. Most religious groups who claim a relationship with Jesus celebrate the day in His honor, but not having that relationship shouldn't preclude others from celebrating the overall spirit of the time either. (Rabbi Myron Meyer used to say that many of his Jewish congregants celebrated by standing in front of their empty store windows after the Christmas sales and singing "What a friend we have in Jesus.")

Unfortunately, what seems to happen in the minds of some believers is the establishment of a territorial imperative; a descent from the better effects of worship and Christianity into primitive tribalism. Christmas is "theirs" and anybody

with a different take on what it means or how it ought to be celebrated is attacking not only "them" but everything worthy and decent in the universe from the Holy Trinity right down to the Salvation Army bell ringer. Christmas becomes a time of "us" versus "them" instead of a time for charity, joy, and generosity; a time of division, argument, and separation rather than a time of courtesy, pleasant conversation, and fellowship.

These poor people are like the pair described by Mark Twain who cut each other's throats because they had gotten into a theological argument over what would happen to them after their throats were cut. There probably isn't any reason to discuss it with them either, for as the inimitable Roy Coy used to say, "Where there's no sense, there's no feeling." A person who is quite certain he or she knows just how God wants everybody else to live probably isn't going to listen to some lowly mortal, particularly over such important subjects as the "meaning" of Christmas. But there's a paradox here. If the "meaning" of Christmas is an attribute of the entire "meaning" of Christian doctrine, how can violating that doctrine honor it? Whoever stole the St. Joseph Skeptics' Society sign must think it can, though it's hard to see how anyone could object to the message: "Be good, for goodness' sake." Perhaps the thief's anger was directed not to the message, but to the messengers; people he/she/or

they don't know and probably don't want to know.

A pity. After all, who are these skeptics? Ordinary citizens; nurses, teachers, carpenters; some profess no religious faith, some question it, some have a faith, and some differentiate between "belief" and "knowledge" and engage in a continuing examination of both, but their common attribute is a willingness to talk with those of differing views, and the purpose of their sign was not to denigrate the holiday but to add a dimension to it. Thanks to the sign thief (or thieves), the dialog was cut short... in clear violation of the Eighth Commandment (or Seventh, for Catholics and Lutherans): "Thou shalt not steal."

Stealing the sign also violates the excellent Christian principles of openness and generosity ("Love your neighbor as yourself and do good to those who spitefully use you") and the advice of James: "...be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger, for a man's anger cannot promote the justice of God. Away then with all that is sordid, and the malice that hurries to excess..." [James 1:19-21]

The Skeptics who placed the sign would almost certainly concur (particularly with the advice against malice that hurries to excess), and though they would like to have their sign back, they are nevertheless on record as wishing everyone a happy holiday season, and for standing by the advice to be good... for goodness' sake.

Maybe I should quit smoking...for my toe

Let's go back in time this week. The year--1987.

I had a good-paying job in Kansas City and commuted back and forth. My mom was an unemployed waitress. So I decided to build a restaurant for my mom to operate. The one in her small hometown had closed a year or so earlier.

Things weren't easy. I couldn't get a bank to back my project, so I paid cash to have the building built. I didn't have enough money to get the inside done, so I did a little each week with my paycheck.

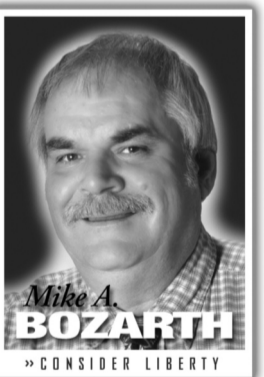
Digging the water and sewer lines with a shovel was a tough project, but when I got it done it was a source of pride. I had done it with my own two hands.

One night I was showing my project to some friends. I told them of the "back room" where the freezer would be. I opened door to lead them back and fell into the four-foot deep hole I had dug for the water and sewer line. I broke my left big toe.

It was pretty painful, so I sent to see our family's physician--Dr. Rob Schaaf. He was my mom's and also my grandparents' doctor.

He told me there wasn't much he

could do about the broken toe, but I received a 23-minute lecture on how bad it was to smoke cigarettes. (That didn't really help my broken toe).



I have nothing but respect for Dr. Schaaf's professional opinion. I knew he was right about cigarettes then, as he still is today.

But... Grandpa used to brag that he had out-lived five doctors who had told him if he didn't quit smoking it would kill him. He smoked. He chewed tobacco. He drank. He loved fried and greasy food. I remember him

using bacon grease like margerine on a slice of bread. I saw him pick potatoes, turnips, onions--you name it--wipe them off on his overalls and eat them raw--dirt and all. All those bad habits did finally catch up with him and killed him. He almost made it to 94. (And Dr. Schaaf became his first doctor to outlive him).

Grandpa smoked, chewed, drank, ate unhealthy foods, but lived a long life.

I'm 54 and have never been hospitalized. I've only called in sick to work six times in my life--and twice I was just playing hooky. Another two times my sickness was self-induced (I had a bad hangover). Other than being overweight, I'm pretty healthy.

Still, I know tobacco use is bad.

I certainly wouldn't recommend a friend start smoking. And I definately think we should do all we can to keep young people from using tobacco.

But with the static I've been getting in the media lately, I'm finally thinking of quitting. But not for my health. Maybe if I didn't smoke, I could make a more effective case against smoking bans.

The latest chapter started with my questioning a \$2 million federal stimulus grant before the City Council to get people to quit smoking. I said if someone didn't realize smoking was unhealthy, they were like an ostrich--with their head in the sand. I did see merit in discouraging under-age tobacco use.

Next came an editorial in the daily newspaper, followed by on-line comments and two letters so far.

One argument against smoking bans is that with the current rate of people quitting smoking, the issue simply won't matter in another 20-25 years. There won't be many smokers left.

Individual rights and property rights are the main reasons we should not enact smoking bans. We should be able to choose our own actions--however unhealthy they may be. We certainly don't want to outlaw everything that is bad for us. Some won't willingly give up chocolate or ice cream.

As a libertarian, I believe my rights end, where the next person's rights begin. This justifies smoking being banned in public buildings, such as City Hall, the Courthouse, libraries and such.

I hear non-smokers complain about smokers' smoke violating their rights. I understand and share those concerns.

But when it comes to privately-owned businesses, such as bars, restaurants, casinos, pool halls, bowling alleys and such, then the decision should be made by the business owner.

What about the rights of owners of commercial properties? If they didn't receive tax money to build or start their business, why should they be told what to allow, and what not to inside their building?

I do believe in honesty. I am working on an ordinance I'm calling a "Truth-in-Smoking" policy, where all businesses will have to post on their door if it is non-smoking or if smoking is permitted.

I think that is a fair approach.

VERSE of the WEEK

Let him that is taught in the word communicate unto him that teacheth in all good things

— GALATIANS 6:6