

Danville News Column
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"The March of Folly"

They toss out common sense. They ignore facts. They turn deaf to critics. Who? Governments mostly. When institutions act contrary to self-interest. Historian Barbara Tuchman termed it the 'March of Folly.' Governments get stuck in ruts and refuse to budge from stupid behaviors.

If Troy, for example, had listened to the warnings of Cassandra and Laocoön, they never would have hauled the Trojan Horse inside their walls. Or if our Congress had listened to those who warned that the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was based upon a lie, we might never have escalated the folly of the Vietnam War and wasted so many lives. How different might Christianity look today if Pope Leo's pride hadn't tried to silence and condemn Martin Luther?

But governments aren't the only ones drummed into joining this march of folly. Any institution can do it: the Gate House, banks, schools, churches.

There is a solution. It is called being willing to listen and learn. The wise man knows his limits. The wise man merits criticism, especially from those from whom he doesn't want to listen. Which is why it is vital to make sure our brightest and best enter military service or become politicians.

Let's credit President Obama's recent trip and those overtures in Egypt. If we don't listen to the Iranians, it is rude for us to expect them to listen to us. Neville Chamberlain's tragedy wasn't meeting with Hitler; it was in being timid, tolerant, and trusting.

There is no such thing as a dumb question. You might remember your teacher quoting you this when you would mumble in embarrassment how you didn't understand something. Teacher is right. All questions are good. Ask away. Keep fresh. I sure don't want to become one of those old geezers whose "ears get to be as dull as their feelings." Get the facts, Jack. Open your eyes and ears, bub. Unless we ask questions, we suffer the punishment of stagnation and irrelevancy we so condignly deserve.

I've a project in mind that requires me to shut up and listen. I did something similar three decades ago. In my first pastorate, my friend and neighbor wanted nothing to do with church. One day I asked George why. What he said pried open my mind. I began to look at my church through his eyes. I did something similar when I came to Grove. I asked around town what were non-member's perceptions of our congregation. Now when old friends come visiting, I ask them not to tell my congregation they know me, then I grill them afterwards. How were you received? It isn't always flattering.

I need my assumptions rattled. I forget how my world view differs from yours. I take it for granted that people connect with my references, such as Neville Chamberlain or the Tonkin Resolution above. Christians might be surprised that few people today appreciate where sayings such as a "cross to bear," "an eye for an eye," "prodigal son," or the "Good

Samaritan,” come from, let alone mean. It is interesting becoming a minority.

Which is why I am planning to offer a series of reflections this fall and winter during morning worship on opinions received specifically from young adults: voices from a new generation. I want to hear from them how they – especially those who couldn’t give a hoot about church – view my religious world. What are their questions, perceptions, and comments about Christianity, church, spirituality, the Bible?

I’m even toying with idea of myself and maybe other pastors gathering regularly in public spots for chances to listen and learn from others about these matters. Starter questions might prompt the conversation: When you think of Christians or Christianity, what comes to mind? When you think of church, what comes to mind? If you attend worship, why? If you have decided not to attend worship or become part of a church, why? If you grew up religious and no longer consider yourself religious, why the change? What does the Bible mean to you, if anything? How do you understand God? Do you care about spiritual issues? Do you see a difference between religion and spirituality? Have you tried church or churches but been disappointed by them? What brings meaning to your life? We need to hear from you. You can email me at GroveHears@aol.com or write me at 332 Bloom Street, Danville.

We have two ears and one mouth, advised someone. Anatomy should instruct me. I should talk half as much as I listen.