

Danville News Column
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"Pragmatic Peace-making"
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Seven friends will leave on the second Saturday in October for a mission trip to Nicaragua. I'm jealous. They're going to take part in a reforestation project. Save trees. Conserve soil. Purify water. Our religious friends in Nicaragua are smart enough to know that economic success for all is the secret to a healthy nation. For the first time in ten years, I'm not going. No flying into Managua. No chance to speak my clumsy Spanish. No mug in the back of the Land Rover. No sharing faith with our Central American friends. No pipe in a farmhouse in the middle of the Nicaraguan outback. I'm jealous.

A friend's wedding which I've agreed to perform has supplied me convenient excuse, but there is a more honest reason I'm skipping this trip. Fact is, I simply cannot afford it. If I cannot fund my own way 100% I won't go.

I'd like to go but my bank says otherwise. Debts say otherwise. A daughter's wedding for which we must budget says otherwise.

Being wealthy is no guarantee of happiness but being broke sure muddies the chance to be happy. Let's avoid romanticizing poverty. It's hard to be content when juggling bills or when you defer paying real estate taxes. It grates on you. Wears you down. You're on edge when needs exceed resources. You get frustrated when you eat hot dogs at home rather than a meal out. You feel defeated when you can't afford to buy a present for you're your wife's birthday. You get stressed when you only pay the minimum on your credit card. Strained and fretful finances cause many spats.

All of which brings to mind our current national mood. We resemble a boxful of rats snarling over one small lump of cheese. The anger, the vindictiveness, the frenzy, the willful ignorance, the posturing of ideologies, the misleading news, the rampant emotionalism kicking out reason let alone pragmatism. I may be unable to afford to travel to Nicaragua but I'm giving serious consideration to joining comedian Jon Stewart's 'Rally 4 Sanity' at Washington DC.

Back in 1972 my wanderlust lured me to visit Belfast, Northern Ireland. Industrial Belfast was hardly one of your more popular destination spots in those days. I disembarked from the Stranraer Ferry and immediately was frisked by a machine-gun armed British soldier. They asked my reason for visiting. I replied I was a tourist. They laughed and said, "You're jokin', mate." They didn't receive many tourists those days.

My real reason for visiting was to explore some of the efforts to effect peace between the Roman Catholics and the Protestants. One organization was called, Corrymeela, where they brought children from both religious traditions into a camp environment to become familiar with each other and erase hate and distrust.

When I finally stepped off the bus in downtown Belfast, I felt as if I had dropped into the pages of the book, 1984. British armored vehicles patrolled. Loudspeakers blared warnings. Every side street in Belfast was gated, admittance allowed only after more frisking. Cars were allowed to park along the curb only if a passenger remained inside – the intent was to prevent car-bombings.

I visited the Presbyterian Church headquarters as part of my own small journalistic effort, but I stumbled into the better story when I chatted with one of the armed guards posted outside the doorway to the church office. He told me with pride that he could spot a Catholic by their eyes.

Have we heard of car bombings lately in Belfast? Have we heard much recently of the Ulster Defense League knee-capping the Irish Republican Army, or vice versa?

Could it be that the religious reconciliation and peace-making efforts worked? Love and peace achieved by converted minds? Well, they may have helped. But what really brought armistice to the warring land of Ireland? Our better natures? No. Money in the wallet did it.

What happened? Ireland, both north and south, tasted prosperity. Employment increased, increasing dignity. Households -- orange and green, Roman and Protestant -- paid their bills, bought some nice things, felt good about their future, and banked money for their children and grandchildren.

Would we here in the United States really be battling over illegal immigration if fat paychecks were enjoyed by all? Being broke breeds emotional extremism. Would hotheads feud over health care or taxes or entitlements or social security if we could afford them? Would we be so nasty if prosperous?

I doubt it.

Rats in a box.