

Danville News
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"Safe and Secure Schools"
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Happy April Fools Day! I remember some terrific tricks played this day.

Witty: National Public Radio broadcasted a fake report about how humanists, carving out their own holiday as a riposte to Christmas, planned to celebrate Darwin Day -- Happy Darwin Day!
Predictable: a San Diego radio station reported that a beer truck jack-knifed and couldn't be towed until the contents had been drained. Over 100 persons arrived with mugs to help. Nasty: someone was given a fake winning lottery ticket. Unbelievable: Burger King advertised their Left-Handed Whopper where the condiments were rotated 180 degrees; thousands of customers ordered them. Juvenile: your zipper is down! Foolish: tell someone you can keep them safe.

Maybe this last joke isn't so funny. Regardless what we may try, no one can guarantee safety. In fact, one of my church confessions demands that we are called to act even at risk to our national security.

To its credit, the Danville School District is concerned about safety. At a recent Safe Schools Council the agenda dealt with fire alarms, camera systems, drug dogs, drug use, even a school resource officer (otherwise known as a police officer patrolling the school hallways -- which, given warned reductions in teaching staff, just might be a tough sell).

At one point during the meeting it was directed that it would be instructive to stage a series of community forums to discuss how we can keep our kids safe. To which a correction was raised: that really isn't the correct question. 'How' is simple to answer.

How can we make them safe? That's easy. A police officer in each classroom. Complete coverage by surveillance cameras, including school buses and lavatories. Security checkpoints at every door. Frisking. Curfews. Getting rid of those perilous playgrounds. Fingerprinting everybody who drives up in the SUV brigade to pick up their child. Better yet, keep them in padded rooms with lots of locks. And lots of rules. Oh yes, then recruit good students to make sure the other students obey the rules. Let's turn every school into Harry Potter's Hogwarts when Headmistress Dolores Umbridge was in charge, nailing all sorts of prohibitions on the walls.

I'm being flippant, of course.

Or am I?

So the question isn't 'how?' How's easy. The better question is 'at what price security?'

Our push for security is equally predictable and compelling. We're scared. We're protective. Worry worries us. Some kids mistake meanness for mischief. Violence corrupts their lives. The administration and staff have an obligation to insure our children a secure environment. If you lack the inner character and integrity to do right and good, you can bet the authorities will impose behaviors they define as acceptable. Dictators always begin with the noblest of intentions: let me solve your problems, let me keep you safe.

It's understandable this pressure to control, however lamentable. We have plenty of parents in pain and kids at risk (I admit a special affection for the kids in trouble).

But no one, no one -- not the school, not mom and dad, not God -- can guarantee safety.

Regardless how many surveillance cameras may be installed, surveillance cameras cannot make us moral persons. They simply shift the behavior elsewhere, where it cannot be monitored. More regulations do not make us better persons, merely docile for as long as we are required to be compliant. Rules gradually breed resentments.

Why must we assume we must decide between Big Brother or anarchy?

We take a lesson from the Women's Center. They have only two rules at their shelter for victims of domestic violence. They once required compliance with a silly laundry list of prohibitions, usually the result of some woman doing something she shouldn't have. Naturally, a taxing list of prohibitions requires exacting enforcement and policing. Instead, they now post two rules: 1) if it illegal out there, it's illegal in here; 2) do nothing to harm anyone.

What won't come under these two rules? Anything else becomes teachable moments. Rather than devising ways to control unhelpful behavior, they encourage good choices. The easy path is to assume responsibility for directing and managing their lives. Far richer and dangerously exciting is to equip them. It's the empowerment model: point out choices rather than spoon-feed solutions.

Rather than engineering conformity, they cultivate transformation.

One domesticates you, the other empowers you. One dulls you, the other sharpens you. One keeps you a baby, the other makes you an adult. One makes both of us fools, the other brings wisdom.