

The Donald Years

**As Chronicled by the Small Town
Newspaper Columns**

of

Robert John Andrews

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Prologue

Dear Eve,

It took me a while to realize I was writing these columns for you.

I'm grateful to live in small town where a small town newspaper allows a small town pastor to share his thoughts, questions, worries, barbs, humor, and hopes. There's a large joy in the small. The ordinary reveals the extraordinary. It also works for the small town newspaper because local columnists don't get paid. It's enough for the privilege of offering words to be read. It is, I figured, part of what I'm supposed to do as a Minister of the Word. Tough to escape the calling, let alone the destiny.

Words matter. Words last.

Dear Eve: your grandmother and your grandfather won't last. We hope we'll see you grow up into the smart and beautiful young woman we electronically see in this (strong willed) eleven month baby prone to dance and giggle. Odds are, we won't. We'll be a fuzzy memory. We'll be a photograph or two. We understand. It's the way of it. We won't last.

Our words, however, will last.

These bizarre years of your history, birth, and present, we believe, are crucial years for your future, your country, your world. We want you to have a record of what your grandmother and grandfather believed. In our own way, we fought the good fight for your sake and for all those grandbabies yet to come.

Loving you, always yours.

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2016

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
“Letter to Candidates”
Friday, 20 May, 2016
Word Count: 750

Dear Presidential Candidates:

I'll try to be concise; but since I'm a small town preacher, concision doesn't suit. It's your turn for a rambling letter. Over my years I've written to Obama, Carter, Bush, Reagan, Nixon, even John Glenn. I'd have sought elected office myself were it not for my pastors inspiring me by their ministry in civil rights and anti-Vietnam war efforts. They taught me how "if the church is not prophetic, it is pathetic." Hence: I'm in the justice-love, suffering business.

I write because we need each and all of you to encourage our nation by voicing nobler and pragmatic aims.

Five years ago I traveled my cross-country Miata road trip sending back to my town newspaper dispatches of what I saw. I was appalled, then saddened by the desperation of my back-road fellow countrymen and women: from Archer City, Texas to Lone Pine, California; from the Salton Sea to my own cousins in San Marcos desperate to keep their nursery from bankruptcy despite the water rationing. My own family business, started in the depression, now is shuttered, a victim of today's market.

I keep traveling about, most especially here in the coal belt of northeastern Pennsylvania. I begin to understand the verdict that is this pathetic and inevitable campaign. We better pay attention to what disturbing and vitriolic forces have been stirred up. This campaign is a judgement, a symptom; please, not the cure! On Main Street there is rejection, disenfranchisement, fear, struggle. We shout the sin of nativism. Of course, black men and women, along with modern equivalents of the Joad family, have been suffering this for decades. Now that blue and white collar men are riled up, we take notice.

It isn't as if returning to coal is ever going to happen. Besides, what coal profits are being realized aren't dropping into the pockets of the workers in Shamokin. The multi-national corporate whores prosper. Nor is it likely that union assembly-line workers in Detroit earning \$40 an hour is going to happen again.

Worse: shares of Twitter, Facebook do not an economy make. They produce no durable commodity that can bolster a nation. New industry from the new sciences that can revolutionize our nation must. Stimulate worthwhile jobs!

Watching the PBS series on our National Parks sparked in me an appreciation how once upon a time a fellow from Danville could pack up and head west and start a new life. Where is the geographical opportunity today? Nowadays, the new frontiers are cultural, educational, spiritual, technological. Hence: far more complex. What is a young man from Shamokin looking for opportunity to do? That is, if he still wants opportunity. A friend here who doctored amongst the Navaho taught me about what happens when you view yourself a conquered people. You react as a conquered people. You submit, self-destruct, or snarl!

Come to the front lines and tour us directly.

I performed a wedding in Mahanoy City and traveled Route 61 to get there. You want a bus tour to show how much you care? Travel that route. Notice the closed shops, the storefronts begging for leases, the houses you can purchase for \$15,000 because no one wants to live there.

Last week I traveled up Route 11 from Berwick to Wilkes Barre. Come and sniff the fear, the anger, the frustration of dying towns boarded up. It ain't the floods killing the towns; it's the drought of real, durable economy. Please: a new Pizza joint in town won't save us. Our prosperity cannot depend on our children shining shoes or catering to tourists. Increasing the minimum wage won't cut it. That was designed as entry level. Our problem is that too many moms and dads in my world depend on entry level jobs to sustain their families. Even in my church world our growth is indexed to demographics. The only places thriving today are in the new suburbs. Not us who are rural, city, old suburbs, small town.

Poverty is a chronic disease, as aptly described by Dr. Bruno last week in this newspaper. Poverty's symptoms include abuse of child and wife, children with rotted teeth, childhood illness from toxic stress.

Where is Woody Guthrie when we need his lyrics? Resurrect his songs. Where is a Presidential candidate who can invoke the spirit of "The Grapes of Wrath" when we need her or him? If none of your candidates can become our Roosevelt we will deserve our Mussolini. Today is a new dust bowl, with internet.

Danville News Column
Robert John Andrews
Friday, 29 July, 2016
"Battle Flag Battles"
Word Count: 750

When I was eight years old I thought it cool to play Civil War and run around my neighborhood waving the Confederate battle flag. My Uncle Al bought it for me because of my fascination with the Civil War. I was ignorant then. Were I to run around waving the battle flag today, I'd be just stupid.

Now, don't get into a premature snit. I have more of right than most in talking about the Confederate battle flag. There's nothing proud about it, nor the heritage the flag represents.

Most who wave it, wear it, attach it to their trucks are just phonies, pretenders, posers who think it is somehow cool to shout the Rebel yell. Studying history is one thing, playing war is eight years old stuff. Waving it to be in your face defiant is just immature.

Hey, you good old boys of Pennsylvania: you aren't Southerners. I emphasize the 'boy.' You come from a state where 27,000 Pennsylvanian soldiers died fighting against slavery and for the preservation of the Union, half dying from combat, half from disease. 427,286 served.

Besides, I have every right to say this that most of you don't. Why? Because I'm a direct descendent of one of the original plantations in what became Charlestown, South Carolina (the Cainhoy plantation on

the Wando River). Later, my grandmother's grandmother moved to Greenville to help her husband establish our family plantation there. Two of my great-great uncles fought in a South Carolina Regiment.

Meanwhile, my great-grandfather served in the 154th New York Regiment, wounded at Chancellorsville fighting against slavery. My grandmother's favorite uncle from Brooklyn, Lieutenant Napoleon Valentine, rode with Sheridan as part of the Lincoln Cavalry, the Union's finest cavalry unit.

Sorry, my Southern branch, I'm far prouder of my Yankee heritage. My Southern heritage fought to keep their plantation slaves, probably dozens of the 3,950,546 slaves in 1860. Slavery's death toll? About 10 million souls. Slavery is our American holocaust. That is what this flag represents. We today still reel from slavery's abomination.

I'm ashamed of it and everything it represents. Sure, it is a part of history and ought be viewed in that light, just as we must the Nazi swastika.

Ignorant is remaining uninformed about the history of this symbol, a symbol of our nation's curse of slavery, a symbol resurrected by racists to oppose the civil rights movement, rallying the KKK and George Wallace and other cross-burners to persecute, lynch, deny civil rights to fellow citizens. The battle flag represents the sin of advocating white supremacy. And don't accuse me of political correctness. This has nothing to do with being politically correct, although I do regard political correctness as simply having manners. My renunciation of the flag has everything to do with history, facts, and human decency.

Ignorant is playing at being rebellious rednecks. Ignorant is not realizing the term 'redneck' doesn't mean what most folks assume; it has everything to do with Scotch Presbyterians who wore red scarves as sign that they were Covenanters opposed to English oppression. Simple ignorance is to think it cool to display the battle flag. Really stupid would be to stand on the Malcolm X Boulevard in Harlem and display the battle flag. Equally stupid would be to enlist in our modern Army and show off your Confederate battle flag in the barracks. You'd learn real quick what others think of this symbol, likely with two black eyes and bleeding lip.

Hey, you good old boys: do you realize the battle flag is tantamount to wearing a swastika armband in Israel or waving the banner of Al Qaeda or ISIL at the 9/11 memorial?

On Friday, July 15 I visited for the second time in my life a genocide memorial. My first was the holocaust museum in Jerusalem when I was in eighth grade. I saw soap made from boiled Jews. The other week I toured the Genocide Memorial and Museum in Yerevan, Armenia, reminding the world of atrocities committed by the nationalistic Young Turks against the Armenians more than a hundred years ago. Children were tied together and drowned, babies bayoneted, young women sold and shipped off to Saudi Arabia as sex slaves, their faces tattooed to mark them as property. Over two million were murdered.

The ISIL banner, the red flag and crescent moon of the young Turks, the Nazi swastika, and the Confederate battle flag – each is a shameful reminder of what happens when people judge other people as less than people.

Danville News Column
Robert John Andrews
Friday, September 9, 2016
“Taking the Pledge”
Word Count: 750

The lady phoning me sounded surprised I hadn't heard about Franklin Graham's Decision America tour. Frankly, it took me two minutes before I realized who she was talking about. Franklin Graham just isn't among the top ten on my play list, religiously speaking. Elton Trueblood? Yes. John Mackay? Yes. Harry Emerson Fosdick? Yes. Will Campbell (who called himself a seventh day horizontalist)? Yes. Odd: those on my list are all dead.

Franklin is making an earnest effort to hold a prayer rally at each of our nation's fifty state capitals because, as he says, "America is at a crossroads, and I believe we should take every opportunity to stand up for the things of God and His Word." Good for him. Though, it seems to me we've stood at crossroads ever since the Declaration of Independence. A cute thing about crossroads is that they never are simply a choice between turning left or right. I teach our confirmation class: whenever confronted with an either-or decision, choose the third or fourth option. This approach does seem more Christologically consistent.

Franklin is due in Harrisburg next Thursday. Good for him. I listened to the lady on the phone and said I would check out the website to learn more about this tour. I get nervous whenever religion smacks of taking partisan political sides and voices one party as more Christian than another. Franklin's daddy realized this when he repented of being a shill for Nixon. I might have more enthusiasm for Franklin's Tour if his website didn't list a rather cribbed summary of our presidential candidate's positions. Of course, Franklin paints only their positions rather comments on their morality or integrity, language or track record. When I enter the ballot booth, I'd sooner vote for an honest atheist, Muslim, or Hindu than a fraudulent Christian. It shouldn't but it does amaze me how one branch of us Evangelicals is sucking up to one candidate and thereby violating everything they hold dear.

Plus, you really don't want the IRS to relax their prohibition on churches from being politically partisan. You really don't. It gets insidiously dangerous whenever we preachers confuse our opinions with the Word of God. Our job isn't to express parochial views but to help the congregation listen to Jesus and be challenged by what Jesus says.

Our job as church is to be more conscience than cheerleader, more the advocate reconciling conflicting sides for a higher good. I know, I also believe in Santa Claus. I also believe that following November's election of our new President, the various belligerent and resentful factions writhing about our country will shake hands, congratulate the other for winning, and, learning the lessons of this bizarre, embarrassing campaign, will unite for the common good. Yes, I also believe in the Easter Bunny.

So far, over 97,000 souls have signed the Decision America pledge. I just had to find out what this pledge involves, even though, outside of me pledging myself to serve my Jesus, I also get nervous whenever required to stand and pledge myself to anything lesser than God. Presented with a loyalty oath, I know exactly what I would do with it. Which also explains why I declined a Colonel's offer for him to help me apply to West Point. I also never joined a fraternity. I wasn't about to shine anybody's shoes, let alone tolerate being hazed. Compliance just isn't in my genes. You can ask God about that. God and I have been arguing for decades.

So what is Franklin's Decision America pledge to God? Here it is: "I pledge to honor God at home—by living biblical principles, striving for purity in or out of marriage, and pursuing godliness in all my relationships; I pledge to honor God in public—by standing for biblical principles and serving those in need; I pledge to honor God with my vote—supporting, where possible, candidates who will uphold biblical principles, including the sanctity of life and the sacredness of marriage; I pledge to pray fervently and faithfully for America; I pledge to be registered and to vote in every election—local, state, and federal—supporting, where possible, candidates who uphold biblical principles; I pledge to engage in my community with God's truth and prayerfully consider running for office."

Golly gee: if I were the pledge-taking sort of fellow, I really could sign this Decision America pledge. I agree with it entirely. Franklin, however, may not like how I might apply his words.

Danville News Column
Robert John Andrews
"Minds, Hearts, Spleens"
Friday, October 7, 2016
Word Count: 750

When was the last time you heard Cicero referenced during any newscast? Even the anchor was surprised and delighted. Thank you, David Gergen for this rare moment, a glimmer of bright gold shining amidst the muck. The muck was the analysis of the presidential debate. To quote Gergen: *"[Clinton] struggled with making emotional connection...how her hands didn't and her body language didn't invite you in, didn't establish a relationship with the viewers... you know, they famously said about two of the greatest orators in history, Cicero, when you heard Cicero, he made you think. When you heard Demosthenes, he made you march. And she made you think. And she could use a little marching music."*

In public speaking there times to ask the audience to think and times to stir the heart, times for reason and time for passion. The finer public speakers, from pulpits to campaigns, do both to raise up the audiences' minds and hearts, our intellect and our commitment. The speakers to beware are the ones to who speak from the spleen to agitate spleens.

Which highlights why this campaign has been disheartening. I want to say "unbelievably disheartening," but, alas, it's all too believable. Most to whom I have grumped my grumps agree whole-heartedly.

Martin Luther King, Jr, preached about the qualities of the complete life: our life's length, breadth, height. How our preoccupation with the length of our life is what we rarely get beyond, that is, our goals, ambitions, achievements, our own welfare. How our life's breadth, it's social expanse, is when our life gets fuller because there are very few things more worthwhile than in doing something for someone else. How it is our life's height that completes us; moving beyond humanity and reaching up to the God of the Universe whose purpose and will become ours.

Friends, I contend Trump's conduct disqualifies him. I doubt he wants to be trapped by the Oval Office. Yet this is all the more reason for Clinton to do more than chortle with smug glee. She had better truly prepare for the next debate and anticipate the accusations, many of her own creation. She must clearly and humanely speak in a way that raises the campaign to a finer level. Please, listen to David Gergen: be Demosthenes. Call us to sacrifice, to the worthy march. Tell us and show us that it is

time to reject the sludge that has mired these campaigns and give reason for us to be challenged to unite, roll up our sleeves, and accept the hard work needed. Give us a reason to vote for you other than because Trump is wholly unacceptable. Once before I wrote how any President needs to solve Shamokin to earn Doylestown.

Thomas Paine summed up why we rely upon government in his manifesto, *Rights of Man*: “The more perfect civilization is, the less occasion has for government.”

If I were Madam Secretary, I would articulate what is required of us to foster our nation’s length, breadth, and height. I would outline answers to points of attack so that during the debate I could boldly say: “I addressed them last week so let’s spend this time getting on with what really matters about our nation’s future with vigilance, intelligence, justice.”

If: I’d list points of agreement between Trump and me.

If: I’d agree that I bear the scars of thirty years of public service and list which fights I have faced, lost, and won.

If: I’d forthrightly settle the innuendo of Benghazi, my emails, our Foundation in precise bullet points, identifying my role in them and lessons learnt.

If: I would describe, to the extent that it is public business versus personal business, the hurts, failures, joys, and successes of my marriage.

If: I would say how my mother taught me to apologize when I cheapen myself by insulting people rather than arguing issues; so I apologize for that slur about the ‘deplorables,’ while still refusing to retract the opinion that there are strains of un-American attitudes this campaign has exposed.

Last if: I’d say to those who seek leadership in perfecting civilization to lessen government, in fostering change, how with my Presidency the American people can look forward, because I’ve been active in public service for thirty years, to me recruiting into my administration the best, most trustworthy and forward thinking trouble-shooters and change-agents tasked to solve the problems we need solved.

I doubt we deserve better, but we sure need better.

Danville News Column
Robert John Andrews
Friday, November, 2016
“E Pluribus Unum”
Word Count 750

I cannot say I was ashamed of the United States during Watergate, but I was ashamed of Nixon. Actually, I was proud of the rule of law for it applies even to Presidents. Nor can I say I was ashamed of my country when President Clinton misbehaved in office (literally), because it was his misbehavior and not our country’s. I was, however, ashamed of my country when we invaded Iraq. I was ashamed of my nation throughout the entire Viet Nam fiasco. But I never have been so ashamed as when we elected Trump as President-elect. Obviously, the majority of citizens will disagree with me. That’s okay. I have a feeling that in time you will agree. Anybody interested in taking bets on how

long his government lasts and who will be the first to turn on him when he fails to fix their lives? Well, I had to accept the destructive presidencies of Reagan and Bush, so I guess I'll have to stomach this one.

Nonetheless, Trump will be my President and I will treat him with as much respect as was accorded President Obama. I'm being facetious, of course, given the racist jokes too often spoken about President Obama even from church members for whom I no longer have full respect. Actually, I shall try to treat President Trump with kinder words than I heard about Obama.

Similarly, I suppose the Democrats in Congress will no doubt treat Trump with as much collaboration, collegiality, respect, and decorum as the Republicans treated President Obama. We are reeling from the fruits of Newt Gingrich and his assault on governance by the abject refusal to treat the opposition party as equally interested in fostering what was best for our nation. We are reeling from our representatives failing to stay in DC and do their job, from them seeing the other party as enemies rather than as friends and colleagues, from them hustling for money, from them complicating legislation rather than voting on one bill at a time, from them frightened by how quickly millions of self-righteous AARP members bombard them by social media.

Trump is our creation and a judgment on our society. He's a symptom, a sign that somewhere along the line we failed all our people. Remember: Trump's election is very telling. It's about time we got painfully honest about who America really is so we can recover who Americans are meant to be.

Perhaps it also will be fun. I began my adult life protesting foolishness in government (Nixon); I guess can finish my career doing the same. Good thing I'm leaving the pulpit where I have to be polite. This is a wake-up call for us to refuse to be complacent, and we have been. No more racism, sexism, jingoism. Yes to immigration, Planned Parenthood, intelligent industry, care for our environment, sensible and safe regulations of Wall street and factories, strong defense, gun control, wise approaches to health care and costs, draining the swamp of terrorism by winning their hearts. Time for us to hit the streets. Too many of us counted on a compromised Hillary to carry our water. Time for us to grab all the buckets we can carry. We will hold Trump and his voters accountable. Besides, as my wife says, intoning her English side, we get what we deserve.

Yes, I'm ashamed of my country right now. It's fair and not name-calling for me to voice my feelings. We are a laughingstock in the world of nations. I'm going to fight for the America I love and fight against anyone who despoils her intrinsic greatness.

But I must avoid the easy kind of cynicism, blame, mockery, despair. We must love. I can and will disagree on issues. I intend to fight for the America I believe in. This election has given teeth, urgency, to my plans to visit sites Woody Guthrie sang about and send back columns because we need to recover Woody's passion for the common person, for common decency, for a common humanity.

I now wish President-elect Trump well. I will persevere in prayer for his administration. I want our country to succeed. My hopes begin with our community civic Thanksgiving service on Sunday afternoon, November 20. We'll gather not as red America or blue America, not as white America or black America, not as straight America or gay America, not as white collar America or blue collar America, not as Alabama America or California America. We is the United States.

Danville News Column
Robert John Andrews

“What, Me Worry?”

Friday, November 18, 2016

Word Count : 750

I was very proud to participate in the vigil against substance abuse last Sunday in Memorial Park. I felt it vital for me to voice how we need to be angry enough to say no more deaths, no more dealers, no more slavery, nor more rape, no more craven policies of the rich denying help for the addicted. I'll be proud again when after our Sunday afternoon civic Sunday Thanksgiving service I can prove the unity of our wonderful country by attending the evening event in Memorial park supporting our LGBT brothers and sisters.

Along with many undeserved gifts, we received a special gift during my retirement ceremony of a handstitched quilt from the ladies of the church.

Thank you, for quilts not only keep us warm in bed, they are metaphors for who we are as ourselves, family, church, community, nation, world. A quilt: different colored patches stitched together, more beautiful as an entire fabric.

That opioid vigil following the retirement ceremony also got me out of preening about me or worrying about my worries.

What, me worry? Maybe a few worries: climate change, oceans dying (goodbye Nemo), a nation divided by a dragon's tooth, cops ambushed, cops so untrained or scared or callous they are killing innocents, protests and violence, Metso moving out of town, worse -- another presidential campaign three years from now!

Of course, it's not as if we are living in Mosul. Or where churches in the bay area are opening up their parking lots at night for elderly homeless women – women forced to live out of their cars – so they can park together and be protected at night. Could be worse for us. Of course, if we really love, we are those homeless ladies, we are the children of Mosul.

Do we recognize how selfish worry is, how worry cheats us from appreciating each other, worry divides us from each other?

How do we respond to worrisome things? Sometimes by feeling ashamed. Sometimes by wanting to blame or retaliate against those you assume responsible for your troubles.

Or, you can figure out the message in the worry, the judgment in the worry, what your worry and what causes your worry means about faith, church, society. What worry shows, reveals, exposes...what malignancies cannot be denied. If you're grinding your teeth, plucking your mustache, wringing your hands, chewing your fingernails, there is a reason.

Choices: either wallow in the worry, or... Or, allow no more lies. Or, allow no more prejudice or harassment or hate crimes. Or, no more silence when people send or say stupid jokes or remarks, even when my college roommate whom I love as a brother sent my wife a text message circulating some stupid joke about a billionaire moving into house where a black man lives. I felt compelled by love for him immediately to reply, anything less would have been unchristian, cowardly, and shameful of me: “John, what in God's name ever gave you the idea that I would find this humorous?” I

added: "John, my brother, what Christian, what person of decency would think it funny and not insulting and racist?" No more of this garbage. No more, especially from friends.

Or, you young women: get angry about how society treats you...here's a fashion accessory for any fraternity party or beauty pageant: always carry a razor blade.

Or, act. Turn every worrisome problem or situation into something positive. March, protest, get into politics, turn the world, the church, upside down...do not stand for what cannot stand.

To wallow in worry is a waste, worry is a sin.

Or, use it, own it as an incentive to get your...motivation... in gear.

Is there any honor left?

Rather embarrassing for us to be busy worrying about what we tend to worry about. There is a text in my Bible I find compelling: "can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?"

After all, come now, what good is adding one day to your life if you are wasting your life?

What good is being frantic, desperate to squeeze out one more shallow day when you're not bothering living today!

I would rather die today -- give me a good death today --- doing something worthwhile rather than drone on bored, moldy, rusty, accepting, compliant, cowardly, useless, self-absorbed for years to come.

*How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!
As tho' to breathe were life!*

Danville News Column
Robert John Andrews
Friday, December 2, 2016
"A Special Season"
Word Count: 750

If you're smart, when someone asks you if you love them, say "no."

Guess what happens when you tell someone you love them. You lose yourself. You have to start acting loving toward them. You're no longer your own. It means you will, out of love, do things you don't want to do: cut your lover's toenails, clean your child's soiled bottom, hold hands when chemotherapy begins. Poet John Donne wrote: "Without outward declarations who can conclude of an inward love."

Love sure cramps your style, right? Bummer. If you say you love, you must show love.

How is old love different from young love?

Do you remember when you fell in love so desperately, so youthful, lustful, and desperate, you didn't think you could live without him or her in your life? When you age, it gradually dawns on you that you can live without him or her in your life, even when you don't want to. Must old age concede to an evaporation of the thrill, adventure, discovery of young love? Or does the passion simply become less reckless, less abandoned? I don't think I am ready for comfortable. When does bar-hopping at night get replaced by discounted appetizers late afternoon?

Someone sang once: "It is just all around, unplanned, unpredictable, all encompassing, at night in bed and when you wake up. Those days of no reservations or hesitations? You have to love yourself before you can love that special person, that special person who you may never find. If you are lucky... loving just happens and overwhelms. Thrill and adventure will never end, if you love a person's being and self."

Let us make it so that "snow on the roof means fire in the furnace!"

Now that I'm a pensioner, now that Social Security has mailed (yes, mailed) me official notification informing me what allotment I shall receive starting January, I'm in a brooding mood. One loony aspect about being a pensioner is that now I can bore you with "I remember when." I can drone on with "lost in let's remember." Is this how every generation feels?

I remember when a bottle of soda was a treat.

I remember waiting for a letter.

I remember having to ride my bike to the library to explore Dewey Decimal if I wanted to find an answer.

I remember when we discovered the defroster sufficiently warmed up a baby bottle, how on holidays never a gas station nor McDonalds was open.

I remember when you got full size Three Musketeers at Halloween, when a few old folks (amongst whom I'm now registered, thank you very much "Logan's Run") would distribute pennies after they ran out.

I remember when "The Wizard of Oz" was broadcasted only, only ever, on Easter Day, ramping up anticipation. How long did it take you to realize the farm hands were Scarecrow, Tin Man, Cowardly Lion? It took me three Easters.

I also remember when The Million Dollar Movie could be seen three times every day for the entire week (a jackpot when it was a gripping science fiction thriller like "Them" -- "shoot the antennae, shoot the antennae!!!!").

I remember the debut of Boris Karloff narrating "How the Grinch Stole Christmas" on TV, singing along: "you're a mean one, Mr. Grinch".

Careful now, Bob, lest nostalgia spiral you into a seasonal funk.

My goodness, it was all so special. Special because it was all so infrequent, inaccessible. You had to wait. Yes, patience required. You had to wait. Especially with lovers. Has it become less special today or just different special?

I still recommend, as a sign of modern times, how the ideal Christmas ornament would be a person flattened to death by the Black Friday sales rush. Come on now, the real war on Christmas (sorry Hannity) isn't the liberal media (whatever that is), the real war on Christmas is waged by Walmart, Best Buy, Macy's. My wife describes Hallmark Christmas specials as about beautiful white people whose troubled Christmases predictably, insufferably, end up happy white Christmases (pun intended).

I've been enchanted recently with the 'Advent Conspiracy' movement for awakening something special: Worship Fully, Spend Less, Give More, Love All.

Still, I do wonder what is special today to young people. What will they remember as special? I really want to hear from young people: what do you find special, astonishing, surprising, that for which you get so ruddy with anticipation you jump and itch and cannot sleep at night?

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Friday, December 16, 2016

"Advent Conspiracy"

Word Count: 750

My college classmate and friend is the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the USA. During a ceremony last month at Hobart College when Mike was honored with the Medal of Excellence, Mike just had to mention how he and Pope Francis had a good discussion the week before. Presiding Bishop, nuts! I can pop the balloon.

Both Mike and I were preparing for seminary after college, him to Yale. We enjoyed several religion classes together. Over a beverage after one class, Mike started complaining about the doctrine of Virgin Birth. Given that we were college students, we, after all, were complete authorities on the subject. Mike continued his rant ridiculing, questioning this doctrine.

Forty-one seasons later and Mike received our college award for his service as a church statesman. His speech was more passionate hooping than lecture, challenging us to become the love we say we love.

After the formalities, when I had the chance to greet him, I shoved Mike with my shoulder and whispered: "So how are you doing with that Virgin Birth thing?"

And Mike laughed. Mike shook his gray head. Said Mike: "I think we got more important problems to deal with than that." We laughed familiarly.

Such is the advantage of years, scars, failures. What you judged incredibly significant when unseasoned, often isn't when you get older and (perhaps) wiser. Most doctrines are meant to be savored not debated. If you're going to butt heads, do it over something worth dying for, living for.

Our church book club's December selection has come at the right time. Krista Tippett, author of "Becoming Wise," offers such nuggets: "cynicism never is generative, I can disagree with your opinion but not your experience, spiritual inclinations lead us out of ourselves, repair the world by bringing together the hidden light inside all persons and events."

Her approach, propitiously, could be cleverly conspiratorial as Danville argues prayer in public schools – her approach wiser than despising, deriding those unlike us.

Here's my question for those stalwartly defending state-sanctioned school prayer: when actually did you last worship in church? "But we are a Christian nation!" So they shout.

No, we are not, neither constitutionally nor given our nation's average Sunday church attendance.

Parenthetically, we Presbyterians were among the first to oppose State-Sanctioned School Prayer. Why? To protect the integrity of religion!

Oh dear. Mightn't it be far better if we would ask the kids to handle it rather than us adults interfering and pressing our agendas? The kids might teach us to love and respect those not like us, even us hypocrites, even, perchance, a school board member who violates the district's anti-bullying policy.

"Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me" How wrong that is: we kill with words more often than we murder with a Glock.

I'm torn as to whether my Jesus is laughing more or crying more because we have taken something as beautiful and personal as prayer and used it to bash and insult each other. Isn't this the real war on Christ (forget on Christmas)?

Christmas for us Christians is best a seasonal gift for refocusing on matters most human. There are more important problems for us to deal with, saith Bishop Mike.

This explains why I've been converted recently by the 'Advent Conspiracy,' a movement started by some trouble-making preachers to recover an authentic Christmas: Worship Fully, Spend Less, Give More, Love All.

These annoyingly gospel-thumping leaders of the 'Advent Conspiracy' challenge us to see the lie that presents bring happiness. What brings happiness is the love they try to express, assuming that is what is expressed. What brings happiness is the giving heart, the giving body, the giving soul.

This season is far more than a time to spend (spending) at the shopping mall, far deeper and richer than celebrating the happy silliness of Jesus' birthday.

You want to give a real gift this season?

This season calls us to act in rebellious hope, confident of a world already pregnant with all that our Jesus embodies.

This season calls us to a "gracious listening," replacing arguments bent on fighting over who's right and who 's wrong with conversations where we dare share "what is at stake in human terms for us all."

This season calls us to accomplish something beautiful in a world bent on confusing power with happiness, a world bent on fostering ugliness, a people bent on exploitation.

This season wants our readiness to see goodness.

Danville News Column
Robert John Andrews
“Christmas in a Laundromat”
Friday, 30 December, 2016
Word Count: 750

She was eighty-five years old and it was the first time she had ever been to a Laundromat. Mostly because for most of those eight-five years she enjoyed a prosperous life. Plus, she always had lived in her own very nice home. At least, until recently when she and her husband suffered an economic reversal.

Once rich (at least a million dollars invested in the stock market) they now struggled. The market, once the home of investors had become the haunt of too many speculators. Their income tanked. Her eighty-seven year old husband finally conceded to accept Social Security. They had to. Real estate taxes on their home were way too high. They couldn't afford to keep the home in which they had lived for sixty one years and raised their five babies. So they sold their home and moved into an efficiency apartment in the neighboring town.

The efficiency apartment was much too small for a washer and dryer let alone all the accumulated stuff of sixty one years, so she collected her quarters and had no choice but to buy one of those little old lady aluminum trolleys, and then wheel her laundry down along the worn hallway carpet to the elevator, struggle to pull it through the heavy double doors of the apartment complex, drag it along the cracked sidewalk, pull it over the curb, and wait to cross the busy road, toward the Laundromat across the street.

In eighty-five years she had never before used a Laundromat.

She avoided going to the Laundromat during the times she noticed when it was really busy. She wanted to do her laundry early in the morning when she thought no one would be there. If she were pressed, she had to admit that she was scared to go. She was an old white woman and ninety-nine percent of her neighbors were minorities. Her turn to be the minority.

She was wrong when she thought no one would be there. When she entered, pulling her little cart behind her, there sat a large black man seated on a bench near a washing machine rummaging through several black plastic bags. She tried to avoid making eye contact, but the man didn't let her do that. He grinned and nodded at her when she began to open her coin purse and count out the quarters to operate the machine.

She wondered anxiously how long she'd have to stay in the Laundromat with this stranger, this man. As a way of avoiding him, her eyes darted about looking at all the tacky Christmas decorations the owners had put up, for it was December. She thought about going back to her apartment and return later but was afraid that when she'd come back her clothes would have disappeared.

He grinned again at her.

She smiled back at him, weakly but politely.

He gestured toward his ears but then shrugged. With a wave, he called her to come closer to him. She hesitated, but, rather than possibly get him upset, she drew closer, however reluctantly, and sat down in a nearby plastic chair.

He then pulled out a notepad and scrawled in awkward printing that he was deaf. He grinned again.

You might have thought that her defenses would have relaxed then but they didn't. Having spent years doing a lot of work for the church, she an expert in good deeds, seasoned in doing charity, her suspicious arose: "okay, what's he angling for?"

But that wasn't what he wrote next. He smiled broadly his yellow teeth and wrote: 'Hello. You're new. Need help?'

He remained seated because he gestured he suffered bad knees.

She pointed to her own sore knees and then at her sore back, both made sorer by the chill, and nodded agreement with a smile of her own.

While washing machines washed, the barriers between them washed away. Soon enough he was teasing out old photos from his thick and worn wallet and showing her pictures of his wife and his son. He communicated that he was sad because his son had died a few months before. A tear pooled in his eye.

Christmas in a Laundromat.

Christmas has a way of happening especially when we're not ready for it.

When it was time for her to pull her laundry trolley back to her apartment, he communicated to her "Merry Christmas" by pointing at the Merry Christmas sign along the wall above the washing machines. She smiled and mouthed in return: "Merry Christmas."

2017

Danville News Column
Robert John Andrews
Friday, January 13, 2017
“Lest We Forget”
Word Count: 750

A photographic spread of my profile-in-history will reveal scads of blemishes which embarrass me. Dumb things I’ve said. Immoderate things I’ve done. Worse, good things I’ve failed to do. Itch, scratch, squeeze. I fear I’m a far better man when expected to be responsible, which makes me suddenly recognize I’ve been oddly tick-like, sucking from others my life’s purpose. I need your cascade of contact. Hello retirement’s isolation. And Captain Kirk smirks: “Hello Captain Dunsel.”

I also have learnt that if I beat myself up for all my mistakes and missteps, I’d be too bloody and bruised to move in the morning. But that neither condones blithe disregard nor dismisses my failings. My flaws and weaknesses require the gutsy work of honesty, valuing criticism, naming and owning my sins of commission and omission, then using them, even appreciating them, to create a better future. Transformation.

Thank goodness I’ve been encouraged by persons prone toward loving-kindness and new chances.

Still, it’s dangerous to whitewash wrongs, lest we reduce muscular hope into lazy silence. To forgive and forget is utter nonsense and utterly unhelpful. Deeper, tougher, resilient, is to forgive and remember. Never ought we let ourselves get deceived from neglecting, overlooking wrongs, distracted by shiny objects.

We remember so we can be held accountable plus hold others to account, especially those entrusted with responsibility as public servants.

Does the American public have the attention span of a Labrador retriever? Our black Labrador loved circling about the backyard chasing whatever caught her attention: squirrel, bird, cat, squeaky toy, her tail.

You’d think the U.S. public would get tired chasing about willy-nilly, ignoring truth whenever dissembling politicians misdirect us by denying they’re politicians. Well, politics is the hard business of the possible for the public good. Politics is a noble, honorable profession, a virtuous calling. I suspect we instead have elected a salesman-in-chief who impulsively says anything to make a sale. I cannot even label him a liar because he’s such a pandering chameleon he lacks fixed principles. It’s almost comical, surely surreal. Our petty adolescent-in-chief acts so delusional he probably believes what he blurts when he blurts it. It’s very hard to be judged immoral when you are astoundingly amoral. I love a mystery but not plain foolishness.

Feet to the fire, lest we forget.

Let’s remember when he said the National Enquirer deserved a Pulitzer and disdained evidence in favor of tabloid propaganda and bizarro-world innuendo.

Let's remember he's a serial adulterer with a cowardly contempt for women, minorities, immigrants, disabled. It takes courage to listen, learn. Would you want your daughters in the same room with him?

Let's remember his narcissistic need for attention, his juvenile delight in chumming the crowds.

Let's remember his apparent absence of any substantive faith excepting his idols of control, pride, money, his Christianity a sham (which makes the sycophant drooling of the conservative evangelicals so embarrassing).

Let's remember his jutting chin and braggadocio breast-beating refusal to reveal tax forms. Why? Image. Might they expose how indebted he is to Russian "investors"? Look, the red stripes of Old Glory are coloring both white and blue. Are these stars fading into sickles?

Let's remember how the U.S. intelligence agencies nearly got it right about Iraq and Saddam. They fed reasonable information to the President but the cabal of Cheney, Rumsfeld, Rove squashed it, filtered it, adjusted it to fit their grasping narrative.

My prayer is that as he lifts his hand in sacred oath and assumes this hard business and burden of historical responsibility (not privilege) he will pull up his big boy pants, turn from his own words and misdeeds, and turn toward becoming a real man.

All of which explains why I'm proud that dozens of great local women are bussing down to Washington DC the day after the inauguration as part of the Million Women March to voice solidarity, strength, and support for common decency. I'm proud of these women heeding the call to remember what really was said, lest we forget, dismiss, and silently, sheepishly, fail to hold our leaders to account and to higher standards.

Noisy marches are part of our grand American tradition, from Civil Right days to suffragettes, from Coxe's Army (led by a fellow reared in Danville) to the Bonus March by abandoned Veterans. I proudly recall my own participation in such a rally -- along with over 100,000 of us swarming the mall to protest Nixon's second inauguration. Fun, fun.

Feet to the fire, lest we neglect.

Danville News Column

Robert John Andrews

Friday, 27 January, 2017

"Circuses and Books"

Word Count: 750

We've said goodbye to plenty of friends lately. Some divorced. Some died. Some moved. Shifts in interests, activities, values. An old lady in a nursing home once winked how your rooms get smaller the older you get. Thank God for new friends who've arrived, though the scale seems to be tipping in favor of loss rather than gain. Life hurts. Changes, changes.

With the announced closing of Ringling Brothers Circus after 171 years of elephants, tigers, clowns, high-wire acts, isn't there a message in there? Changes, changes. If you hang on too tight, you choke it. My wife recalled taking our daughter to a local, small, hard-luck circus - one ring, probably sponsored by a

fire company -- and her decision never to see one again. The circus broke her heart. Viewpoints change. What used to be exotic to kids has become in today's world dreadfully banal. These are kids who face-time with friends on the other side of the globe. How can a circus compete today with Cirque du Soleil, Las Vegas, the dazzle of Youtube? Circuses have gone the way of butcher shops, soda fountain counters, smoking in restaurants. How can a circus today compete with our improved value on the rights of animals?

Life is concurrently funny and sad.

I've been meaning to ask an old friend who's gotten bitter and mean lately: when was the last time you read something or even watched something, something of worth, something of gulping splendor, that moved you?

Last June I attended a Writer's Workshop at Princeton Seminary. I wandered the building looking forward to rummaging through the stacks of the bookstore. I couldn't find the bookstore. I talked to a receptionist. She said there is no bookstore at the Seminary anymore. What? Given electronic books, a bookstore evidently is irrelevant. I laughed at how incredulous that seemed, especially since it took twenty-two boxes to clear off my church office bookshelves, pack up my books. I surveyed the empty shelves and laughed, wondering what will a young pastor successor do to fill all these shelves? How can you exegete a scripture passage with Kindle? I need ten books spread out across my desk for omnivorous cross-referencing. I also still prefer fountain pens.

Whatever does remain the same? I've lately been consuming books about Woody Guthrie and what inspired his folk songs, his protest songs, his Dust Bowl ballads. Woody successfully portrayed himself as a down-home, home-spun Okie. The reality was that he grew up middle-class prosperous, until the boom ended in his hometown of Okemah, Oklahoma. The boomers came, the boomers left. They stuck the wells into the ground and skedaddled. His father fled to the next boom in Parma, Texas. Another flurry of well digging, money for the corporations, then up and gone. Another town left despoiled, gutted, gone, raped. Is there anything you can bank on? Coal, iron, steel, gas?

Woody noticed that although thousands of the Dust Bowl refugees were forced off their farms due to wind, dust, and environmental carelessness, tens of thousands of the refugees were tenant farmers, sharecroppers, forced off the farm because of debt. The big boys bought up farmland, raised rents, drove the poor folks into deeper poverty, evicted them. Where would they find work? Thousands got duped into driving Route 66 with promises of picking in California. Who lied to them? The moneyed men. The greater the labor pool, the lower the wages. Populism without social responsibility is mob tyranny. Beware.

Sound familiar? It's always been like that. Look around. Once upon a time, there was King Coal. Iron mills hammered out T-rails. Machine shops paid good wages. Merck was dependable. Changes.

Little wonder Woody Guthrie's motto was: "Take it easy -- but take it."

What is required of us today is what has been required of humankind throughout history, from the Dust Bowl to our first migration from the continent of Africa into Sumeria, from that first person to test the ice bridge of Bearing Strait to that European Jew sailing beneath the Statue of Liberty. What is required of us is adaptability, mobility, ambition, resilience. Where do these qualities come from? It begins with skill training. Next, with spiritual reserves as well as family support. Then with faith in a purpose

larger than ourselves. It begins inwardly with a capacity to credit suffering as opportunity. It is sustained with a desire to work and the chance to work.

Change isn't always progress. The progress part is up to us.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

24 February, 2017

"Taxation Relaxation Part I"

Word Count: 750

Ad hominin attacks are the 'soup du jour' of political discourse today. Is anybody else tired of offended folks pointing fingers at you? God bless a professional, free press! The season of insult and playground taunt is upon us. Insult isn't intelligent debate. Winning doesn't make you right. Losing doesn't make you wrong.

I offer a two part series advancing a disinterested response to President Trump's promise at the recent National Prayer Breakfast to "destroy the Johnson Amendment." The erroneously labeled crowd of evangelicals applauded. Why erroneously? Evangelical refers to a wide spectrum of Protestant theological and social beliefs grounded in the Bible, including liberals, conservatives, the pragmatic, those central, and the rest of us who are just plain aghast, whimsical, and paradoxical.

The segment of the Christian population who chaff under this amendment deserve to be heard. Why do they seek the amendment's destruction? Why? They decry it as an example of the intrusion of government to police the freedom of speech of pastors, a muzzling of churches campaigning for certain political candidates fearing retribution by the Internal Revenue Service revoking their non-profit status.

Credit Lyndon Johnson for enacting this law in 1954. Lyndon Johnson chaffed when running for re-election as senator from Texas. His opponent financed a non-profit organization to distribute leaflets against him. According to the IRS, the act decrees that such non-profit organizations "are absolutely prohibited from directly or indirectly participating in, or intervening in, any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for elective public office."

Reverse it: do you want denominations to take partisan political stands, demanding that as part of their religion their members ought vote for approved candidates?

How then does that differentiate America from the theocracy of Saudi Arabia? Destroying this Act further demeans and balkanizes the church. The litmus test of membership wouldn't be loving Jesus. Membership would depend on how you vote, not faith. Real Christianity proclaims: Jesus first not America first. Jesus is Lord, savior.

Gooses and ganders. If the amendment is revoked, what applies to Baptists applies to Synagogues and Mosques.

The church protesting that she is above meddling in partisan politics is like a street-walker protecting her maidenly virtue. To wit: candidates invited to speak during worship; bulletin inserts listing social and moral positions of the church with checkmarks next to names of candidates who conform to the moral and social positions the church leadership think are Biblical; voter-registration during services;

preachers in the pulpits endorsing particular candidates as true Christian candidates whilst avoiding naming them directly.

Nudge nudge, wink wink.

As a retired preacher, I never thought the folks in the pew wanted me to tell them for whom they should vote. What has muzzled me in the pulpit has been not the Johnson Amendment for fear of violating my congregation's non-profit status; what has muzzled me has been me wanting to do my job. Fidelity to scripture is what has fortunately muzzled me. There is the difference between a sermon and a speech. What has muzzled me has been fear of violating the responsibility of the pulpit and the trust of my congregation.

Is a pastor's freedom of speech abridged by the Johnson Amendment? Nonsense. We pastors talk too much as it is. What restricts pastors in the pulpit is obedience to the Word as best as we can grasp the revealed Word. Often I've had to express a Biblical truth I've found contrary to my own scruples.

Preachers must be political to the same degree that the prophets and the apostles were political, bringing Biblical perspectives to bear on current events and current moral and social concerns. That's the preacher's job, responsibility, privilege. With scripture as our lodestone we are obliged to question, articulate, challenge faith, personal piety, matters of social justice.

Of course, the issue that arises now is: whose Biblical truth? There are some of us preacher types who insist there is only one true inerrant Biblical truth and I congratulate them for their certitude and their eagerness to impose their certitude upon the rest of us whether we want it or not. Fact is, there is scant difference between the fascism of the right and the fascism of the left.

Let's recall the story of the clergy visiting Abraham Lincoln who prayed for God to be on their side. Lincoln's reply? Pray instead that we remain on God's side.

That's the fundamental difference the Johnson Amendment protects.

Next column: why churches should be tax exempt.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

March 10, 2017

"Taxation Relaxation Part II"

Word Count: 750

Why are churches exempt from taxation?

Let's destroy that silly fiction immediately. Churches aren't exempt in dozens of ways. Churches as entities under the jurisdiction of government pay plenty toward government: fees on clearances, payroll taxes, Social security taxes, taxes on properties not exclusive for worship, in-kind subsidies in subsidizing free meeting places for Scouts, Polls, Women's Centers, hosting public events and emergencies, parking for ceremonies .

And as valuable as churches (among other non-profits) are in bringing moral, cultural, spiritual, educational, charitable, economical benefits for the well-being of a community (imagine a town bereft of the contribution of churches), more telling is the legal rationale for non-profits to remain protected as non-profits.

Churches, along with other non-profits, simply aren't in the business of profit. We are not commercial enterprises. Nor are we subsidized by the government. Government money doesn't contribute to our maintenance. Voluntary donations do. Profit is not our reason for doing what we do.

The book *"Why Churches Should Not Pay Taxes"* by Dean Kelley argues: "Other entities, which are not in the wealth producing category to begin with...do not need to explain why they are not taxed any more than do the birds of the air or the rivers that flow to the sea. . . . [Taxing them] would be pointless, since they are not in any meaningful sense producers of wealth."

Kelley further warns about the double-taxation that would result from the loss of non-profit status and making them taxable institutions: "To tax them again for participation in voluntary organizations from which they derive no monetary gain would be 'double taxation' indeed, and would effectively serve to discourage them from devoting time, money, and energy to organizations which contribute to the up building of the fabric of democracy."

This may shock you but the real incentive fanning the desire to Trump-dump the Johnson Amendment that restricts non-profits from partisan politics is, drum roll please, money. Destroying the amendment allows congregations and denominations to take direct positions on candidates and far more than pastors talking about who to vote for. It allows the churches to become a direct 'Political Action Committee,' and that is just what Christ intended, right?

The removal of the Johnson Amendment allows for deductible charitable donations to churches to become conduits for fundraising for candidates. Church becomes a franchise for campaigns, selling in the temple. You could donate to the church for partisan political purposes and still claim the deduction as a charitable deduction. Shilling our souls.

Beware the unintended consequences from revoking this act. The weave that is the fabric of church will unravel. Those unintended consequences get your every time. Pass the removal of the Johnson Amendment and donors will lose their tax deduction for charitable contributions.

If you intend the further trivialization of the church in the United States and increased national polarization, applaud President Trump's promise to destroy the protection afforded non-profits by this Johnson Amendment.

The practice of the civil church, the state religion, has been tried before with dire results. Check out the imperium of the Roman church. Check out Islamic control in Iran. Check out what happened in Germany when the churches agreed to remove the cross and replace it with the swastika. Neither the church nor the cause of Christ fairs well when the church does more than kiss the hem of the king.

Talk all you want from the pulpit about for whom to vote, take all the partisan political positions you want as a local church or denomination, just be ready to lose your non-exempt status because you no longer deserve it.

The benefit of this discussion is that it brings to bear the whole reason church is church.

A proud moment in my pastorate happened during the campaign of George W. Bush versus John Kerry. My choir director and her husband Chuck were very committed young Republicans. Stacey was invited to sing patriotic selections to greet Vice-president Cheney when he visited Wilkes Barre to campaign. At the very moment Stacey was singing the 'Star Spangled Banner' another of my church members was being arrested in New York City for chanting protests against the Iraq War, with Liz ending up locked up in pens along the Hudson River with other protestors.

The following Sunday Chuck and Stacy sat in a pew behind Liz, where together they passed the peace of Christ to each other, they prayed together, took communion together, listened to scripture together, and together sang hymns of praise.

Danville News Column

Robert John Andrews

"Less Isn't More"

24 March, 2017

Word Count: 750

The other Monday my wife and I enjoyed date night and traveled with friends to the Kirby Center in Wilkes Barre where we enjoyed Garrison Keillor of "Prairie Home Companion" fame sing, tell stories, share a few good poems and several bad jokes. Here's one old chestnut he told:

God created woman. And she was good. And she had two arms, two legs, and three breasts. God asked woman what she would like to have changed about herself. And she asked for her middle breast to be removed. God removed her middle breast. And it was good. She stood there with her third breast in her hand and asked God what should be done with this useless boob? ... And God created Man.

Okay, Garrison Keillor was talking about me.

There is a story I once read of a man who met a fool one day. The man was on a quest to fill an aching and lonely soul. He sought that fountain from which he could drink and if not recover the passion and thrill of his youth could at least induce a stupor of forgetfulness, not unlike the lotus. But as he searched he stumbled more and more, for with each step searching for this love to fill him he became clumsier and clumsier. His clumsiness caused him to trip and stub his toe, to bloody his shins and conscience, but worse, to damage and hurt others to whom he turned to fill himself, thinking them the answer. Only then when anger and hurt became abrupt did he gradually realize it wasn't his place to use others in the guise of being kind or playful. That is when the fool in the mirror turned up his mouth in a sad smile of recognition, as a tear dribbled down his cheek.

A very wise nurse once told me how so many women (especially women) come to her family health clinic and share with her how they wrestle with the hurts, the mistakes, the choices they have made. Some do find comfort when she tries to remind them that it's likely they did what they thought best at the time. It often is a matter of forgiving ourselves and trying to make better choices. It isn't as if we choose to do wrong or harm. But we do -- confused, desperate, sad, lonely, hurt as we ourselves are. So many of her patients simply try to do their best given a lot of lousy options.

At least her clinic remains a good option. For the time being, that is.

Funds are drying up. Her non-profit clinic has gone from \$30,000 in annual support from Federal Health Center grants down to \$4,000. They do their best to make up for the shortfall with fundraising, with United Way support, with insurance payments. She described how some of her patients are proud when they finally get a job that provides health care coverage. Their problem is that they end up having less coverage and high deductibles than when they depended on Medical Assistance. They can't afford the marketplace.

Many of her patients have been with her since teenagers, thanks to Title V Maternal and Child Health Services block grants, and now are women in their forties working low paying jobs. Her clinic, kept open at hours necessary for these working women, remains their primary confidential care center for breast exams, Pap smears, birth control. Men too, as many as 700, use her center especially for STD testing and treatment. They have nowhere else they can afford. She likes being able to help prevent the spread of disease.

Funds are drying up especially given fools and boob s dismantling the Title X Family Planning Program, while the need for care is increasing. Odd too, because if you really want to decrease the number of abortions in this country, don't decrease the funding that enables such clinics to provide contraception and birth control services as well as prenatal care and counsel. With more and more teenagers choosing to raise babies born out of wedlock, her center provides loving counsel, guidance, referral, support to these young mommies.

Part of the economic cut-back has eliminated her facility helping schools offer vital sex education.

Please note: the less health care you provide early in life the more health costs increase later. No joke.

There is an old maxim that 'less is more.' That doesn't apply to family health clinics.

"It's a mess," she sighs. "There is no leadership."

Danville News
Robert John Andrews
"Canoeing Cancer"
Friday, April 7, 2017
Word Count: 750

For a guy fighting leukemia he sure keeps busy figuring out how he can help others in the years to come. He aims to contribute. Maybe that's because he is fighting leukemia.

His name's Ted. We are seminary classmates. We played seminary softball together, therefore we both are prone to brag. Ted, in addition to covering third base, also taught Greek. I just played short-fielder. Ted and Sue retired to upstate New York partly to begin rigorous experimental treatments that require him traveling to Boston. Ted said: "97% depend on 3% who go through clinical trials for medical hope." He figured since he could, he should. "How could God use me? I should be part of the solution." It's what you do for others. Some classmates played at being pastors. Ted's the real deal. Most of us busy ourselves hurting others. Happiness: not from getting but giving.

We spent one morning touring the Baseball Hall of Fame. Driving home, I mentioned how a buddy hated his cancer but how he admitted his illness made him a better father, a better husband. Ted replied: "not sure it's made me better but it's made me focused."

I wouldn't want cancer, but I'd like to be a better man.

When Ted pointed out to me his favorite inductee in the Baseball Hall of Fame, what he said made perfect sense. His favorite is Rick Ferrell. Ferrell earned his plaque not for his bat but for his mitt. I quote: "When I was catching for the Washington Senators, every game was an adventure because our four best pitchers (in 1944-45) were knuckleballers. When they released the ball, they didn't know where it was going and neither did I."

Ferrell disliked passed-balls. Just like Ted.

Life throws wild knuckleballs at you. You handle them with grace, grit, skill. You stab at them. You let them hit you so you can knock them down, especially when a runner is on third.

As old-timers will when old-timers get talking, we sipped some cider and talked about the church today, our careers, how much church has changed since we graduated 39 years ago. Surprise: both of us remain encouraged and excited whenever, we add, the church pays attention to a clever and mischievous Holy Spirit.

Ted listened with interest when I mentioned how I had begun visiting congregations as part of a religious series I'm writing titled 'First Impressions.' I do my best to visit without prejudice or assumptions. For example, one Sunday I attended what is termed a mega-church. My worship experience there was amiable, pleasant, harmless -- neither was it intimate nor particularly engaging. It seemed most of us were auditing a worship service that required little of us. My first impression was of a sermon that was nice for a power-point presentation yet thin gruel, prone toward platitudes. Plus, very few folks in the large audience bothered to sing along because the stage was filled with microphoned singers. Members even gathered up their coats before the close of the service to beat out the traffic.

How different from when I attended a tiny church and despite a much smaller crowd found it welcoming, warm, intimate, and the message offered hard content that demanded something of us.

Ted smiled recalling his years re-discovering Christianity when he served in Zambia. In Zambia, he described, they make the offering a highlight of the service to the point of friendly competition amongst the attendees from different regions. Out of their little, they were nourished by being challenged to give. I wish I had heard this thirty-eight years ago. Contrast this to our culture where we prefer to audit church on our terms. Church marketing books advise how any sniff of grubbing for money offends shoppers, newcomers. Yet, says Ted: "sacrifice is the oldest form of worship in the Bible."

Ted recommended a book that inspired him professionally and personally, called "Canoeing the Mountains." It's based on the Lewis and Clark expedition to chart the waterway to the Pacific Ocean. The expedition was successful until they paddled the bend to the Missouri source and discovered the Rockies. Well now, we didn't plan on those mountains. What are we going to do with the canoes? The author suggests how it's how we handle "uncharted territory" that enriches, matures us, especially

when we haven't been trained for terra incognita. What traditions, plans, skills must we leave behind? What must we learn to adapt?

Friends: isn't most of what we face "uncharted territory?"

Danville News Column

Robert John Andrews

Friday, 5 May, 2017

"Waste Not, Want Not"

Word Count: 750

Picture 1,182,326 pounds of corrugated cardboard in 2016. That's lots of boxes. I got thinking about this one day when visiting the hospital and saw a bin stuffed with cardboard wheeled down a corridor. I wondered: Where does it go? Does the hospital recycle? Does it single-stream? How does single streaming even work? After all, because my township dumped its recycling program, I cart my cardboard (thin and corrugated), paper, newspaper, magazines, plastic, aluminum, bottles to a local recycler. Well, not all my bottles anymore. I was told there's no money in colored bottles so I only recycle clear bottles (which also has led me to start slumming by buying cans of beer rather than preferred green and brown bottles).

What about Geisinger's lawn and garden rubbish? Where does that go? I was told they have enough land for a dump site. Now we're cooking. Which brings us to wonder about all the waste at the Atrium or from patient's trays. Do they compost? 41,524 pounds of steel cans were gathered from the kitchen. A pet peeve when I served as a pastor was the 'fast food' thinking by careless members during church socials or coffee-hours. What is this 'fast food' thinking? It's more a 'fast food' behavior: that annoying dumping of half drunk cups of soda or coffee into the waste can. What a mess it makes, especially with cheap trash bags. I started to reduce the number of waste cans in the Fellowship Hall. Oddly, they kept reappearing. The more you set out, the more you fill.

I digress. The thought about all that cardboard waste got me thinking about all the other waste generated by a hospital. What about all the office paper, especially papers containing confidential information. Surely, that requires special handling.

Then I got even more curious. Everybody needs a hobby I suppose. Mine is trying to figure out what is behind curtains. What about all the bandages, blood, needles, catheters, sutures, and single use surgical instruments?

More interesting is: what happens to an amputated leg, knee-bone, or removed tumor? Being an amateur Civil War historian, the field hospitals didn't fret much about biomedical disposal. They would often cart them to a vast pit out back. Or the stewards would simply toss the limbs out the window for the pigs below the sill to enjoy. I guess that wouldn't go over well today. Besides, piles of limbs might take up too many reserved parking spaces.

I was curious so I asked. Geisinger was professional enough to answer. I recently sat down with two of the leaders at Geisinger responsible for disposing of the trash in a smart and safe manner. Tons and tones trash is processed at Geisinger. Plenty more is disposed through skilled vendors. Pathological waste is frozen at the powerhouse before being shipped out for incineration. A surgeon friend taught

me how some religions require the limb preserved by a mortician so that when the person dies that they may be buried intact.

The blue-wrap used to insure sterilization feels like fabric but actually is plastic. It's collected before the incision, melted, re-melted into recyclable pellets. Corrugated cardboard gets compacted and recycled. Trash is single-streamed-- some destined for recycling, some for the landfill. Hazardous waste is steamed, chloroxed, tested, shredded, pulverized, sanitized, incinerated, stored. Office paper must be crosscut not ribbon-cut by certified and audited vendors. To insure security, locked collection sites will be found on the floors. The fewer the wastebaskets the simpler it is to monitor. Food waste? Buy smarter to throw out less. Expand grassy rooftops. Trees? More need to be replanted replacing the ones felled. Practicing greenhealth is more than a philosophy, it is a method and a website.

Next time you get your pills, check out the secure MedSafe collection boxes. The disposal of unused medications is an increasingly high priority and is being accomplished in collaboration with local pharmacies lest the meds leak into the water table or enter wrong mouths.

As the two professionals explained, it takes a team to "spend a lot of time doing the right thing." Reduce, reuse, recycle takes effort, cost, and intention.

So next time you see someone in the hospital pushing a bin full of cardboard or removing the red bag from your room (916,896 pounds in 2016), thank them. Thank those laboring 24/7 at the powerhouse. They too are helping to insure your good health. Imagine the mess we'd be in without these men and women doing their jobs.

Danville News Column
Robert John Andrews
Friday, 19 May, 2017
"The Right Thing"
Word Count: 750

My late father, an ardent Republican who admired Nixon until Nixon broke his trust and heart, likely would never have understood why I switched last election to Republican given my motives. I maneuvered my right to vote my choice. Best about being a rookie Republican, however, is how since November I've been invited to fill out surveys galore. The party bosses might be scratching their heads over my mischievous answers to their skewed agenda and biased questions. Example: I couldn't resist mentioning in one how more folks are employed in solar industries than in mining. Which industry should we promote?

Last week I received a solicitation to become a sustaining member of the Republican Party by writing a check. I laughed: not likely, especially given the content and tone of this letter, them appealing to me by disparaging any one not pro-Trump and using such language as: "dishonest liberal media; extremist, violent protesters; phony charges; radical allies; shaming patriots like Republican me; disgusting liberal actions, fight back for the truth; unhinged Democrats." And this is making America great?

How is their language any different from Clinton calling Trump's supporters 'deplorables?' When she said that I argued then she was wrong, disconnected, disrespectful, predicting she probably lost the election then. Wrong also are the crude insults by Colbert. Satire? Yes. Malice? No. The Democrat's

taunting song in House chambers was as mean-spirited as the smugness of the old white guy party in the Rose Garden toasting their health bill non-victory.

Is anyone else sick of it?

An article on “Turning Negative Thinkers Into Positive Ones” by James Brody in the New York Times spelled out how meditations focused on compassion and kindness resulted in an increase of positive emotions, affecting positively our “plastic brains.” Makes us healthier too. Dr. Barbara Frederickson in her book listed activities that foster positive emotions: do good things for other people; appreciate the world around us; develop and bolster relationships; establish goals that can be accomplished; learn something new; choose to accept yourself, flaws and all; practice resilience; practice mindfulness.

Sane prescription for personal well-being. And definitely for contemporary politics.

Last month a reporter asked comedian Samantha Bee if a problem facing the Democrats and their chance to win over Trump’s voters are smug liberals. Well, sure it is. But what about smug conservatives? You ever watch the faces of the folks behind Trump at one of his rallies? Little girls gleefully pointing thumbs down at his denunciation of the main stream media? By the way, since when is Fox News not main stream media? How do they get away with that delusion considering their viewership? Then again Trump mocking Elizabeth Warren as Pocahontas is matched by Warren’s invective (although, Pocahontas was a tragic yet significant figure in history – the name should be considered an honor).

There’s enough smugness for all.

Have you over-heard the old guard at the donut shop mock celebrities and Hollywood? They are as self-righteous as the celebrities who sneer at them. Warning! Hubris will always get pricked, deflated. If you aren’t humble by choice or temperament, you will get humbled by events.

There’s enough negative smugness for all.

I have read how “in an atmosphere of security and trust, persons are likely to be more ready to change. The child who trusts the mother lets go and takes the first unaided step.” I add how trust is needed for change and for growth and betterment.

You sane politicians, you Kasichs and Caseys, Dents and Coons: set a collaborative agenda and model mutual respect, truth-telling, prudence, temperance, courage, justice, creating trust. A collaborative health care repair gives you the chance to practice virtue, honor, positives.

Younger generation: enter and take over politics. We Presbyterians view politics as noble, divine, the greatest good. We affirm that government work and public service is the highest calling a person can receive from God. It sure ain’t about ego, ratings, power, or demanding fealty.

My parents taught me something that I have tried to pass on to my own children, to my confirmation classes. It is what I try to coach boys of a U-12 soccer team I have been privileged to assist by assisting the coaches. I love the boy’s enthusiasm, banter, and wild hopefulness. The message? Never focus on winning, for that is selfish, foolish, petty. Focus instead on doing the right thing and doing things right.

There's the secret: winning never is as important as doing what's right.

And not just in soccer.

[The Woody Guthrie series took place over these months]

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

"Disrespecting the Flag"

Friday, 27 October, 2017

Word Count: 750

Many of us who survived the sixties remember how the United States flag was treated with disrespect. Many persons showed little regard for the sacrifices of those brave soldiers who fought and died for the principles of our nation that our flag represents. In the sixties we grieved the way our flag was trampled by their contempt for every virtue and human right our flag symbolizes.

I refer to President Nixon who abused his office. I refer to government lies about the Gulf of Tonkin, misrepresenting the mistake of Vietnam. I refer to the FBI who violated the constitution to undermine the leaders of the Civil Rights movement.

Who treated the flag with greater respect: Daniel Berrigan protesting the war or the Joint Chiefs of Staff? Who honored the flag more: Martin Luther King, Jr., or President Nixon? Seems to me one was assassinated for fighting for American values, the other resigned in disgrace from our country's highest office of trust.

Fundamentalists who call themselves Values Voters remain hypocritically silent about the danger of idolatry of flag and nation. Please look up the term desecration. You can only desecrate that which is holy and sacred. When did a flag become sacred? The ideals, yes.

How exactly do you determine who is a patriot? How do determine who is a friend and who isn't? A real friend cares enough to protect you, criticize you, challenge you when you make mistakes, walk with you, pick you up when you are broken, stand with you through hard trials, helps you do good.

Do you stand at home when the anthem is played? How can fans renounce football players kneeling yet wear flag caps, flag shirts, and drape their coolers in flag blankets? Since when did unsavory flag commercialism become patriotic? I daresay Kaepernick honors the flag more than white nationalists. Those athletes kneeling are showing more respect for what our flag symbolizes and what our national anthem professes than our president and the disrespect he shows every day for our United States constitution and principles. He's insecure and inept, bereft of character; we must pray for him. He's jealous of real men like Obama, like McCain. By their fruits...

For theological reasons that would bore most people, I haven't been able to pledge myself to the flag since sophomore year of high school. I'll stand lest my act embarrass those around me but there is no way I can pledge fealty to something less than ultimate. For me the pledge to allegiance contradicts the 10 commandments. Let's see if Roy Moore can figure that one out. Besides, my theological convictions give incentive and urgency for me to engage and support my country, my community as a

patriotic citizen for a cause higher than mere nation. With this I salute my Reformed heritage that reminds us that governments and nations are meant to serve a higher purpose.

Much confusion reigns about the origin of the quote "America is great because America is good." It is attributed to Tocqueville, but that's questionable. Eisenhower used it, so too Reagan, Clinton, Biden, in all its variants. But it lives as an axiom because it suggests a pragmatic divine truth: goodness precedes greatness.

Goodness could be a lighthouse for the Democrats searching for their purpose. Imagine if all our resources used to promote national greatness were translated into resources for goodness. Hearing about the genocide afflicting Myanmar got me thinking about this.

Imagine. Caring for refugees, protecting the oppressed, lifting up the down-trodden, promoting social justice, creating and cherishing good works and beautiful deeds, kindness, worrying more about why there are protests than debating the manner of the protest,

Imagine us upholding what the Reverend Harry Emerson Fosdick referred to as Christianity's practical central principles: the sacredness of personality; the inescapable membership of all [humanity] in one body; the absolute necessity thereof of goodwill not as an ideal but a working principle; the need for individual regeneration if we are to have a regenerate society; the call to seek first the kingdom of God on earth that is the welfare of all if there is to be any welfare for each; and the reality of God above all nations, races, classes, calling for one human family.

If this is our focus we will have more than a chance of surviving this current age; we can cultivate a new world renaissance. It begins with goodness. As Fosdick preached: this is no fantasy, just try living on the opposite principles.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Friday, 3 November, 2017

"Gun Show Lessons"

Word Count: 750

Despite my facial hair and full gut, I felt like a stranger in a strange land, which turned out fine because everyone was polite. Fathers were there with their kids. Couples wandered the aisles. Guys rode Jazzies too. It was a nice community event, me venturing outside my normal habitat. That's healthy. We all should do that, getting out of your 'bubble.' I attended the Gun Show at the Bloomsburg Fair Grounds. I did try to remove any presumptions or prejudice. How can I expect to be treated fairly if I treat others unfairly?

Guns are foreign to me. I've only shot a rifle twice in my longish life, both times merely a .22. The first time was at summer camp, the second time out of a farmhouse window shooting groundhogs. I was an accurate shot. Still, when it comes to guns I'm a dunce. In fact, when I first moved to Pennsylvania in 1978 and noted on the school calendar Big Game Day, I couldn't figure out what big game. Our Octorara high school didn't even boast a football team.

In addition to the Gun Show displays of historical pieces, hunting rifles, shotguns, AK-15, Kalashnikovs, handguns, crossbows, there were vendors selling all sorts of accessories, ammo, posters, caps, T-shirts, paper targets. The tick-tack-toe and poker paper targets seemed clever.

Actually, it was this ancillary aspect to the Gun Show that interested me more than the weaponry.

What could I have purchased? A variety of knives, hatchets, axes, and bayonets. Military rucksacks. Camouflage clothing. Holsters. A pink T-shirt emblazoned with the taunt, 'Infidel.' Other T-shirts pronouncing, 'Liberals Suck' or 'I Don't Kneel.' Another T-shirt said: 'Traded My Wife for a Gun...Good Deal.' Posters included a picture of Monica Lewinsky, saying: 'Hillary -- Close but no Cigar.' Another showed a picture of Anderson Cooper with the legend, 'CNN Sucks.' Yes, for \$10 I could have purchased a 'Make America Great Again' ball cap. Cute was the replica of a hunting permit, boasting instead: 'Terrorist Permit.'

The glut of Zombie stickers and posters surprised me. One vendor sold baseball bats wrapped in barbed wire as seen in the TV show, 'Walking Dead.' It was this zombie apocalypse fascination at the gun show that fascinated me. Then I got the connection.

Forgive the pun but it seemed the Gun Show targeted three audiences: First, the true sportsman who enjoys skeet or hunting and respects the sport; Second, the person interested in personal safety (purse size pistols were available, even chartreuse); Third, the militia crowd. I get the first two audiences. A true hunter respects hunting. But I don't get the militia crowd, whether around here or out with Cliven Bundy in Nevada combatting the government over land rights, at least until I connected the dots. All that Zombie stuff. All that anti-liberal stuff (at least their prejudiced view of what constitutes a liberal). All that 'Defending Mine' mania.

They are intimidated.

For me the TV show that epitomized my youthful era was the original Star Trek, depicting an age of equality, health, prosperity, where adventure centered on exploration of the new and different. I still carry this Trekkian view that life is optimistically bright and hopeful. Today the TV shows that epitomize us are pessimistic, angry, violent, self-righteous shows about defending yourself from a hostile world: 'Walking Dead,' 'Preacher,' 'Damnation.' We are victims fighting hated enemies, yet these threats to our manhood aren't outsiders, they're among us, each other.

Quaker writer Parker Palmer describes five Pathological Monsters that represent the darkness we carry inside ourselves, three of which are: 1) an insecurity about worth and identity where you see your worth dependent upon external roles, where insecure you tries to bolster your ego by reducing others of their identities; 2) seeing the universe as a battleground, hostile to human interests; 3) fear of life and its chaotic, messy, unregulated ways.

These three offer no healthy way to live. The opposite of faith? Fear. These hapless, hopeless monsters poison our humanity, our personalities, our relationships with others, with society. They fuel this defensive, frightened militia mania inside us each.

These monsters can only be transformed by a spiritual journey downward and inward: 1) becoming secure in the knowledge that our identity is determined by us as beloved children of God; 2) trusting

that this remains God's world and God wills harmonious goodness for all of us; 3) realizing chaos "is the precondition to creativity," necessary for chances for making positive change, internally and externally.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Friday, 10 November, 2017

"My Diggers"

Word Count: 750

The main reason I like being involved in organized sports is because I dislike organized sports.

I especially find traveling soccer teams a waste of time until the players attend ninth grade. Why drive beyond Williamsport to play a portion of a seventy minute match? Two of us adult players recommended years ago to abolish teams and have the kids dropped off at the soccer park twice a week. Parents go home. The kids choose a marble to select their team. They play for two hours, six on six. Lots of touches. With this model we'd have the finest school team in Pennsylvania.

Our Diggers U-12 soccer team was playing the unbeaten team in the league. All we asked our boys was to keep the other team from scoring for ten minutes. If they could do ten minutes, they could do fifteen minutes. They did, plus. The other coach was livid, yelling at his boys. They officially lost but were champions the way they competed against these older, bigger, veteran teams. Our rookies? Smaller, younger, less skilled, most fresh from AYSO soccer. But what they lacked in soccer maturity they possessed in heart, grit, drive.

My boys U-12 soccer team makes me so proud
The best team they played today thought we'd be cowed
Since when are winners decided by the score?
They played their hearts out with vim and vigor
Despite being newer, smaller, and younger
Their spirit makes them giants and soccer wonders
The final tally might say they hadn't won
But my boys are champions for what they have done

Rough and tumble TJ took over midfield and animated the team. Casey: his gas-tank revving on the wing. Friscia as goalkeeper ate dirt hugging the ball against the other team's attackers. Ivan and Will on strong defense kept shouldering them outside. Little Ethan: a terrier unleashed. Gavin took on players twice his height and made them pay. Lucas filled space sending the ball to the box. Chase chased, and caught. Daniel galloped. Big-foot Brandon. Connor pressed back post. Mark split-passed them. Junior scampered like a squirrel. Carter's footwork fooled them. Conlin grinned with every cross. Jeremy butted them off the ball.

After TJ was substituted so he could get a breath, I pointed out the tripod camera that the other coach had placed on the sidelines so he could film and study the match. TJ also thought it was a bit obnoxious for U-12 Club soccer.

I remarked how it would be a shame if somebody would make a hard pass that would go wide and hit the tripod. It would be a shame if a player would happen to crash into the tripod. TJ, equally mischievous, grinned.

As of Sunday, our season ended with 1 win, 8 losses (2 close). But that depends on how you define winning and losing. Winning a game, an election, an award doesn't make you right. Losing doesn't make you wrong.

My Diggers kept coming back. They wouldn't quit. They learnt the game.

Here's a stupid remark: "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing." Much wiser: "it's not that you won or lost but how you played the game."

Sure it's fun to win, and if winning is your business, as in professional sports, it's the bottom line. In combat too.

The rest of us? We rarely win anything. Most of us fail often. Best things that happened to me were my failures in love, in work. Who gets better winning all the time? With each game they played, our U-12 boys improved their skills, learning to run to space, making a clean pass, one-touching, staying goal-side on defense, crashing for trash.

We talked at practice one afternoon why the English Premier League calls the score the 'result.' Why? Because the score is the result on focusing on more important matters such as playing well and playing right.

More and more I am becoming convinced -- as a father, husband, minister, coach -- to focus on shining, doing our best, not getting obsessed about the outcome. Besides, the "ends are preexistent in the means." Our task is to do what is good and what is right and that is more than enough to ask. Which is a wonderfully refreshing and a great relief. Why? Because what we don't have to worry about is what will happen. Our job isn't to try to anticipate or calculate or manipulate the outcome.

Life isn't outcome based. Just do your job, thank you very much.

Danville News Column

Robert John Andrews

Friday, 24 November, 2017

"Am I Harvey?"

Word Count: 750

What is the difference between romance and harassment, I asked. She replied immediately: "Consent." Being an amateur about women, I needed to know more. I wondered: "What makes consent consent? When is consent mutual and when is it the result of pressure? There's got to be some data and metrics available. What is the difference between what Al Franken did and what Roy Moore is alleged to have done? Isn't Trump the Chump's criticism of Al Franken's misbehavior and his demand that Franken be held accountable for such misdeeds a tad hypocritical (ironic, comical, tragic)?"

She smiled the way women smile at male dolts.

One thing this dolt is beginning to realize is that Harvey Weinstein's exposure (pun intended) as a serial abuser signals that we are evolving culturally, emotionally. We're improving in our awareness, although

the new awareness requires redefining roles and relationships. Still, we must realize we are benefitting from the empowerment of women who have declared: "Enough is enough."

We are evolving. It wasn't too long ago in America that women owning property was illegal. Any inheritance went to their sons, otherwise her husband's brothers. It wasn't too long ago women were denied suffrage – no vote. I remember an old school teacher telling me that it was expected when you married you resigned from teaching. Yes, once upon a time upper class women went to finishing school rather than obtain academic degrees. A woman's identity was dependent upon her husband. She was regarded a baby-making machine. Or an apparatus for male pleasure. Women weren't really regarded as persons -- they were either prostitute or pedestal, temptress or princess. Not too long ago (within memory of many of you) you never imagined women holding political office. I still boast that my first vote in a Presidential primary went to Shirley Chisolm.

But I am bothered by all this. I hope most of us males are bothered to the point of apprehension. How clean are we? When have we acted like Harvey?

When I look into a mirror
I see something I fear It isn't me
I see
Staring back is Harvey
How often I too
Have others used
Only to serve me
Stealing their humanity
Trust betrayed
Power's charade
Examining my intent
Am I any different?

Am I? Has what I considered flirtatious behavior been received as harassment? I'm feeling gun shy. Perhaps plenty of us fellows are feeling gun shy. Embarrassed even. When have we acted toward women as improperly and inhumanly as a drunken fraternity boy? Frat boys call it scoring, right? A contest to win? This in contrast to the discovery of lovely, pure, exciting, joyous romantic overtures and surprises? When haven't I acted the gentleman? All women deserve loving respect. Yes, those passions can be tough to bridle and tame, similar to all natural forces. Fire controlled and harnessed warms homes, cooks meals. Fire untamed, rampant, burns acres of vineyards. Water harnessed can turn turbines and produce electricity. Water untamed floods towns and destroys islands.

So be it for passions, for good or ill. But the key tip-off about whether it is romance or harassment, whether natural sparking or abuse, is not consent but who wields power. Rape, I've been taught, uses sex to dominate, control, exercise power. Sex becomes a weapon. You inferior, me superior. That's true evil, using others, demeaning others as instruments to further your own ego, your self-centeredness, your own desire to be the Alpha male. Which is curious because when you behave that way, you prove your inferiority.

Perhaps Harvey, Al, Donald, Roy, me, and other predatory Neanderthals are shoving us toward the next evolutionary stage, toward a finer, respectful, and loving humanity, less consumed by power and domination and more interested in goodness and sincere love.

We could be on the threshold of finally becoming human together.

What Harvey will never know
Is experiencing heaven here below
In the beautiful soul I have known
The joy of woman's love truly shown
Love is more than who you take to bed
It is who you wake up with instead
A friend holding hands while you walk
Strolling, enjoying the romance of talk
A kiss, a wink, her eyes flashing bright
Bathed in her spell sunset and morning light
The times shared of laughter and tears
On shared pillow with her face near
Contented, pleased, wanting more
Days and nights for her to be adored
The thrill of introducing her to others
Saying to them, "This is my lover."

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
"They Are Our Children"
Friday, December 1, 2017
Word Count: 750

If only, if only...

Do they have to grow up?

Can't we protect them forever?

Can't they always stay as babies?

If they did, then we'd still be changing diapers.

No.

They must grow up and experience both joy and pain otherwise they'd never know the freedom of choice, even when the choice is a very, very bad one.

When a suicide happens we try to teach that it is a selfish choice. The survivors cannot blame themselves. That it was a permanent choice because of a temporary cause, an unfixable action for fixable reasons. It cheats potential. Suicide never is acceptable. It denies reconciliation. It leaves your family and friends roiling with guilt, blame, anger. You might think by suicide you escape, but they cannot. There's nothing noble about it either. And if your aim is to get even with a parent or ex-lover, it's a very irrevocable choice for revenge.

Telling is how a vast number of suicide survivors report that the moment they jumped off the bridge or pulled the trigger they regretted their decision. Listen to them, please.

Suicide never is painless. Following the self-murder of a high school student a neighboring pastor mentioned to me that his youth director wanted to hold a candlelight vigil in the student's memory. Even though the student didn't belong to his church, the youth director thought it would be a healing gesture.

No. It might have seemed like a healing gesture but it also was (however well intentioned) gravely misguided. You don't do it. We may conduct a funeral service for the loved one but we stay away from glamorizing suicide. You can mourn the person, grieve the death, but you must avoid honoring the manner of the death. This is especially true with young people lest those who feel isolated, sad, lonely, desperate, begin to romanticize that this is how you win love or attention. Glamorizing suicide puts others at risk. It is impossible to celebrate any suicide.

This explains why prudent school districts disallow memorials in the memory of students who have committed suicide. They also rightly remove those tokens and mementoes the kids will place on their friend's locker. If the person were their friend. The death of a young person tends to attract gawkers, those who need to be seen mourning, those who want to appropriate the drama.

No wonder we need more than truth, for truth without love, without compassion, becomes a brutal idol.

In our tears, I hear my Jesus whispering between his tears.

What are the risk factors? Depression. Anger. History of abuse. Drug or alcohol use. Previous attempts. Guns in the home. Social isolation. Crisis in sexual identity (we suffer tragically high rates of suicide among young homosexuals).

Watch out especially when someone who has been very agitated, exhibiting the risk factors, suddenly becomes very peaceful, even starts giving away possessions. They've made a decision. It is likely they've made a very bad decision.

We have a message to the wounded, lonely, and hurting: You are good. We know this from your smile, the way you cared for others, the way you giggled when a baby.

Since when is your life your own anyway? We refute the false presumption that your life belongs to you. Your life belongs to God, it belongs to us also. You have purpose. What happens to you involves us. We are linked. Today I ask us to choose: choose redemption.

Let's make America good. They are our sons and daughters. Save them. Respect them. Dignity is as needed as food and water. We can do better with providing good choices. Schools, school boards, churches, clubs – let us do better by them and their parents. Love never is a finite commodity. We can offer refuge from the stormy blast, a safe haven. We can help them see they are precious, that someone sincerely cares for them. We can offer that supportive network that erases a spiraling sense of isolation. We can give them that chance for them to express their hurts, worries, pain without judgment.

We can offer them a place where they can honestly talk about their feelings, even their thoughts of suicide. We can believe, love. We can together hope.

From Leo Tolstoy: When you love someone, you love the person as they are, and not as you'd like them to be.

Yes, it remains true that where there is life there is hope. Far truer is that where there is hope there is life.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
“Crossing the Brooklyn Bridge”
Friday 8 December, 2017
Word Count: 750

There were ghosts all around, though I did not see them.

They were, after all, ghosts.

George Washington and his trusty Marblehead boatsman John Glover stood near me as I stood along the shoreline of the East River at the site of the Ferry crossing. For me, it was the last week of November, 2017. For them, it was a desperate August of 1776. These two generals were overseeing the secret evacuation of their remaining troops. The victorious British had forced them to take defensive position at the Brooklyn Heights. 9,000 Continental soldiers to fight Howe's 20,000. A surprising fog arose at dawn to conceal the last of their escape. When the British did advance, they found the Heights empty, the American troops retreating through Manhattan to fight another day. I stood where a defeated Washington stood.

I turned and saw Walt Whitman strolling toward me down Fulton Street making for the Ferry crossing. He did not see me for he was scribbling some words on a piece of paper: "And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence are more to me, and more in my meditations, than you might suppose."

Last, I saw my great grandfather, David Henry Valentine, laughing with his older brother, Napoleon, as they set out on the elevated promenade of the newly built Brooklyn Bridge stretching 5,989 feet. It is 1883. Then on a brisk constitutional to take care of business in Manhattan, Napoleon recounting a funny tale when spying for Sheridan as a scout for the Lincoln Cavalry he bluffed his way past a Rebel soldier on picket duty.

Once before I felt this warming surge of belonging, standing among familiar ghosts. It was in Scotland years before. I stood admiring the heather and I felt at home.

Now we too walked the wooden promenade where my family had walked when they lived in Brooklyn, my grandmother growing up on a farm in Bedford Stuyvesant. Her family would have seen this great bridge built over the decade it took. They would have seen the caissons sunk to dig below the river bottom to lay the Tower foundations, 44 feet on the Brooklyn side, 78 feet deep on the Manhattan side. They would have admired the granite blocks of the anchorage and the thick suspension wires to secure the roadway. The two Towers reached 276 feet 6 inches above high tide, the tallest man-made structures in the United States of the time.

Washington Roebling, carrying out his father's design, insisted on an elevated central promenade so that the people could enjoy the fresh breezes, a brisk outing, and the fine views of both sides. The cars motored below. Our view unobstructed. Governors Island. South Street Seaport. Upstream at the less flattering Manhattan Bridge. The Statue of Liberty, Liberty Enlightening the World with her torch, keystone shaped tablet symbolizing the rule of law and inscribed with July 4, 1776, her rear heel raised because she is moving forward. Our own goddess of freedom, our own 'mother of exiles.' She holds aloft the torch for she is our national lighthouse.

Taking our turn to join the ghosts to cross from shore to shore, we heard various languages besides English, the Bridge a favorite destination for tourists from around the world. Just watch out when they stop to take a photograph. Make sure you stay off the lane reserved for the speedy bicyclists We smiled at the 'locks of love' lovers both local and global would latch onto the bridge, imitating a custom in Paris. Our love is as locked as long as this bridge lasts. We toss the key into the river.

All my life I had observed Manhattan from Jersey. Holland Tunnel, Lincoln Tunnel, George Washington Bridge. Now I was treated to an entirely different perspective and a more beautiful perspective, especially at night sparkling with all the bridge, harbor, skyline lights. It took me a while to adjust to viewing the city in this new light. I'm the better for it. What a blessing it is to receive new perspectives.

Despite suffering from the bends due to his inspections of the work in the lowered caissons, Roebling observed and monitored the construction of the bridge from his house or from his home in Trenton or when recovering in Newport. His penciled mathematics for each detail of the engineering was impeccable and flawless.

The Brooklyn Bridge is a great bridge because Roebling built it well. Greatness is the result of doing it right.

2018

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Friday, 5 January, 2018
“Bob for Congress”
Word Count: 750

I’m ready. If drafted, I will run. If nominated, I will accept. If elected, I will serve. I’m speaking about the 11th Congressional District whose seat soon will be vacated when Lou Barletta overreaches himself against Casey. I’m sure the lads seeking to fill the seat at the May 15 primary are decent chaps; still, might Montour Democrats back me? I only need 1,000 signatures by March 6. I tried to contact our local Democratic Party to offer my political services but all I could find on the statewide website was a name that, alas, is reached solely via Facebook. Ugh.

Have I have any experience in politics? Well, more than our President. I did serve as Student Council President in Junior High when my ambition was to enter the noble profession of politics before being detoured toward the pastorate. I even got kissed by Karen Cherington who won as Vice-president expecting her boyfriend to win as President. He didn’t. I did.

My campaign song? All stanzas of Woody Guthrie’s “This Land is Your Land.”

‘Make America Good’ is my mantra. It’ll look snazzy on buttons and fedoras (my preferred headgear -- the only time men should wear ball caps is when they’re playing baseball). As I’ve written before, greatness is a consequence of doing goodness. You cannot make anyone or anything great. That’s as dumb as making excellence a goal. Excellence isn’t a goal, it’s the baseline for how you do things. Pardon me, I digress from throwing my fedora into the political ring.

I’m currently a card carrying member of the Republican party but I only switched parties in 2016 to counter Trump’s primary momentum by swaying Pennsylvania toward a candidate of reason, morality, and integrity: Kasich (and don’t you wish now the majority in Pennsylvania had done the same). Jim Webb was my guy from the very beginning (and don’t you Democrats wish now the majority in Pennsylvania had done the same). Come on now, admit it: Hillary was a pathetic choice. But nonetheless, as P.J. O’Rourke said when he reluctantly agreed to vote for her: “She’s a liar of the normal sort unlike Trump who’s an abnormal liar.” Bernie is your oddball uncle.

Somebody’s got to mount the parapet brandishing a broken bourbon bottle (my friends listened to the Beatles, I to journalist Barry Farber) to defend our nation against the Mussolini-like behavior in the White House that is pro-racism, anti-American, anti-democracy, anti-free press, anti-Christian. Who? Me.

Do I have backers and donors? None whatsoever. Not a dime. Nor am I very tolerant at kissing up to donors. I may not be able to afford campaign commercials but at least I’m totally un-beholden.

Am I skilled in finance and taxes? Haven’t a clue. I’m still trying to figure out how to balance my checkbook. But knowing my short-comings, I know how to ask the right people who are smarter than me.

Are there any scandals in my past? I wish. Not so much scandalous as clumsy. Though I will confess that at Hobart College I inhaled. Once. I found out immediately I'm allergic and have sipped fine whisky ever since.

Do I have positive positions? Certainly. Can't run or vote based on being negative. But rather than hustling with slogans or sham solutions I offer my ability to ask the right questions and refuse either/or decisions. As I taught my church confirmation classes: whenever forced to choose between A or B, choose C or D. Take for instance our abortion debate. I know of no one in favor of abortion. I know plenty who favor helping women with this difficult choice. Check out the average age of these women. So if you really want to reduce abortion rates fund Planned Parenthood and help provide medical care and family support. Post twenty-weeks? How often does that happen? I quote a neonatologist of my acquaintance who grieved political attempts to legislate and regulate medical decisions.

Key is that I know how to rely on my Mammalian brain to ask questions, list facts, tease out the evident decision. This in contrast to relying on your Reptilian brain that only reacts, only survives, only devours. Our Mammalian brain looked upon the internet as a gift to spread knowledge, share ideas, information, thoughts, gain wisdom. What happened? The Reptile brain took over and what is the internet used for mostly? To shop, watch porn, tweet, insult, twitter.

I'm ready for office. I'm not sure if the office is ready for me.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
"Cursed Energy"
12 January, 2018
Word Count: 750

While interviewing my college classmates for a radio show, my friend Harry told me a story. Harry has served as a social worker for the New Haven school district for over two decades. A teacher was mugged, her necklace stolen. From a jewelry perspective it wasn't anything precious. From a personal perspective, it meant much. Her mother had given it to her before she died. The teacher wanted the necklace back and asked Harry to talk to a high school student whom she suspected had mugged her. Harry wouldn't have been surprised if he had. He was a rough kid. Harry created an occasion to talk to the young man and told the teacher's story. Two days later the necklace appeared on the teacher's desk.

My friend Harry perceives the world in terms of energy, positive and negative. Yes, Harry also loves Star Wars. May the force be with you. As a social worker he wasn't about to assume that from this incident the young man underwent a life changing moment, but he felt there may have been at least a flicker of positive energy. Perhaps, Harry hoped, the young man will look back on the incident in years to come and remember that once he did something decent.

Maybe. Maybe not.

While Harry and I chatted at the kitchen counter, I recounted a kindred story. There was this famous surgeon from Atlanta who had been invited to speak at an Ohio medical conference. The surgeon came from one of the older families in Atlanta. The host surgeon, wanting to treat his keynote guest royally, invited him home for a formal dinner. After drinks they sat at the dining room table, well laid with the

host's finest china and silverware. It was posh and sumptuous. The surgeon began admiring the fancy silverware. He looked up and asked his host where they obtained such finery.

The host answered: "Well, it's a family legend. My great-grandfather served with General Sherman in the campaign through the deep South and brought this silverware back with him from the war. We've had it for years."

The surgeon shoved his chair back and stood up. "This is my family's silverware looted by the Union Army." He stormed out and immediately returned to Atlanta.

I finished, adding: "The worst part of the story is that the host never offered to return the family heirloom to the surgeon."

Harry shook his head. "It's locked energy. Locked energy turns negative. He missed his chance to turn it into something positive. Now the silverware is cursed."

I'm reminded of a former mayor of Hazleton who ran a congressional campaign by decrying the influx of Hispanic immigrants to the city, denouncing the burden inflicted on the police, on the welfare system. He declared these new immigrants a curse.

I'm reminded of a more recent mayor of Hazleton saying: "I think it's good for the community; it helped Hazleton establish itself again and it added life back to the community."

An article later reported how "Hazleton is younger and bigger than it's been in decades. And vacant storefronts downtown have been filled by new businesses. It's a main street transformed. Latin music pours from bodegas. Bustling Mexican restaurants compete with pizzerias. And Spanish mixes fluidly with English to create a Hazleton Spanglish."

Where are you suffering cursed energy?

Grudges, jealousies, suspicions, hatreds, unresolved conflicts, the inability to say you are sorry, grace points missed, ruts solidifying, hamstrung by regrets, reacting to negatives with negatives. Stuck. Locked energy.

How about your lusts and loves? Friendships? Failures? Kids? Work? How you spend your days? Who you dream about? Ecstasies attained, indelible. Can you be grateful even if never experienced again, lost?

Such is the curse of mountaintop experiences: valleys also await.

How about North Korea? Health Care? Immigration? Tax reform? Afghanistan? Russian meddling?

Are we trapped by locked energy?

A poem by Portia Nelson (useful as an Alcoholic Anonymous story) tells the story of a man leaving his house in the morning only to fall into a hole in the sidewalk. He swears, dusts himself off, climbs out, and walks on bruised. The next morning the man leaves his house, falls into the same hole, swears, dusts himself, climbs out, walks on a little more bruised. The third day the man leaves his house, falls

into the same hole, swears, dusts, climbs out, walks on even more bruised and bloody. The fourth day the man decides to walk to work a different way.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

"Lessons From Birth"

Friday, 19 January, 2018

Word Count: 750

Our kids weren't Disney fanatics. They were sufficiently old enough to avoid the cascade of Disney animated movies of recent decades. If I recall right, 'Aladdin' might have been our last family Disney film before the kids got too cool. Which means our kids are fonder of the older Disney movies such as 'The Sword in the Stone,' 'The Little Mermaid.' Elaine still cries to 'Dumbo' (baby mine). 'Jungle Book' was a favorite, the kids stomping around the house to Colonel Hathi's march. "Keep it Hup! Two! Three! Four!"

Luckily, one trip to Disney World was sufficient for them. They enjoyed a happier time at Sea World where our youngest daughter, Penelope (no surprise to anyone who knows her) caused a commotion. Penelope loved (and still loves) the stuffed Dumbo we bought for her on that trip. She insisted on carrying it everywhere, including Sea World where all the other little kids saw her holding her Dumbo and screamed, whined, demanded one too. None for sale there. Dolphins, yes, no Dumbos.

We obviously missed out on the newer decades of Disney films, but every now and then we sneak a peek and the child in us enjoys some of them: 'Finding Nemo' ("fin, noggin, duuude"), 'WALL-EE.' 'Moana' was a particularly surprising delight. Ancient Polynesia. The young princess, Moana, needing help from the silly demigod, Maui, the call of the ocean and sailing through the confining reef and breakers to voyage into open sea.

One afternoon while a friend was walking her dog and I was pruning my roses, she stopped to visit and we soon got chatting about her son and her granddaughter. We ended up talking about 'Moana' and how much her granddaughter loves that movie, the music, the exotic Polynesian characters with their tattoos, Moana the heroine who saves her people. A good story.

Well, it seems grandma (already sad because her son and his family live in Alabama near his wife's family) gave grandbaby a birthday gift of a doll of this wonderful Polynesian Maui. Grandma then grimaced. I asked why. She said she's uncomfortable with the values her son's in-laws are teaching granddaughter. Her son one day watched his girl playing with her dolls, lots of Barbies, and noticed for some reason how she kept Maui in the corner and didn't bring Maui into the fun. When asked why little girl quoted her grandfather's influence, explaining: "My Barbie only plays with white dolls."

Her Pennsylvania Grandma had given her a dark-skinned doll and her Alabaman grandfather was outraged. Can it get worse? Yes. Grandpa is an officer in the United States Air Force (but no gentleman).

Someone asked me recently if we are born good or born bad. I replied: "Both and neither, though I do lean toward the affirmation that we are good." The problem, however, is the problem of the self, our self-centredness that can take even the most beautiful of virtues -- such as love or motherhood or patriotism or religion -- and distort it, corrupt it, pervert it. The problem isn't that Hitler or those

terrorists who flew the airplanes into the Twin Towers aimed to do evil. The real evil was that they thought they were doing good. They thought they were doing right, being patriots, being righteous. War never is good versus evil; it's a contest between competing goods.

I believe we are good people who are damaged and ignorant. In my theological world, we name this: 'sin' – thirst for control (to be godlike). We are like a mirror which was created to clearly reflect divine light but our soul-mirror becomes smudged, cracked, splintered when we discover we are ourselves, apart. A perfect mirror reflects light perfectly. When the mirror is imperfect the light is lessened, distorted. Same with goodness.

Are we good or are we bad? I do know babies are born ready to love and be loved.

This is why President Obama quoted the South African leader, Nelson Mandela, following the sadness at Charlottesville, that travesty of God's broken children breaking God's heart.

Mandela said: "No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite."

There is a cure for this disease of hatred. Don't grow up. But if you cannot avoid growing up, then at least learn better.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
26 January, 2018
"You Are Not Alone"
Word Count: 750

My retirement work lately has required hours helping facilitate the closing of the First Presbyterian Church at Williamsport, one of our old, once queenly, dowager churches. In my tradition we don't tell churches what they have to do. My task has been to help them properly carry out their decision to end worship, lock the doors, sell the building, distribute to worthy ministries any funds left over, mourn and grieve and celebrate the ministry of 135 years. Close the book, ring the bell, blow out the candle. Sing Requiem. Sing Te Deum. What increases my sorrow is how my parallel task is to prepare a process for other congregations closing their doors.

How many of our congregations are video stores in a Netflix world?

If you belong to a church and if your church were to die, what would the community lose by your death? Would anyone care?

This closing of First Presbyterian didn't have to happen. They bungled decisions – the talent isn't in the decision, the talent is in building consensus. Also, the congregation was fatigued and long past a sense of goodwill, hope, and joy. How I wish we (myself) had been more attentive five years ago in helping them discern what kind of future they might have fashioned. There are creative ways to respond to needs. First, however, we should have done our homework and figured out what were those needs. We rush to solutions without first asking right questions.

Whoever said congregations needed to be forever anyway? Why not short-term churches? Why not revamp the colonial model of larger congregations establishing satellite bible studies led locally, nourished by circuit rider pastors? How about churches without walls? House churches, café churches, churches devoted to a single mission, mindful that “mission is the gateway to church not church the gateway to mission?”

The more limits the more the need for creativity. Demographically, our area is quite limited. Demographics is destiny. Church work today often becomes the hospice question: how can we have the best possible today given the limits of today.

It is our own fault. Where have our prides, jealousies, habits, traditions, theological suspicions interfered with shared ministry. We failed to creatively combat our nation’s disease of comfortable self-interest. We expected the visitor to conform to us, not us learning from the visitor. Imagine you were a younger Christian and the church matriarch (we all got one) school-marms you by scolding: “Why aren’t you helping out with our rummage sale?” Would you go back to that church?

It’s not as if Christianity is in jeopardy. If we thought that we’d be what Parker Palmer calls functional atheism: thinking the solution and success is up to us. Let’s be honest, the church isn’t dying. Take a look at Ghana where there are more Presbyterians than you’ll find in both the US and Scotland. For us, Christianity became habit, institutionalized, ceremonialized. We elected to be nice and God’s judgement is that we have become so. For Ghana, Christianity is essential, daring, robust, radical.

What is dying is the church in which we’ve been comfortable for years. Perhaps we need to be uncomfortable. For I view this a wonderful judgment freeing us to get back to what we mean by church, by the ecclesia, the gathered community. When people admired the Grove Church building saying, “It’s a beautiful church,” I replied, “Yes, they are.”

One theologian describes us as beginning the fifth major revolution of church yet to be named: 1) Imperial Church; 2) Great Schism; 3) Reformation; 4) Cultural establishmentarianism; 5) ? I’m excited what will come next, for I see myself as mid-wife to a future I will not see.

For I also know, we humans need to belong to something more important than ourselves. We need to belong to a community that cares, who brings casseroles when babies are born and when we hurt or loved ones dying. We need to belong to a community grounded in a sacred truth that keeps us on our toes and off balance and less pre-occupied with ourselves and more pre-occupied with the well-being of others. We need to be cautioned about idols we prefer to worship. We need a means to look at ourselves and our society and be given a swift kick so we can be truly human. We need peace, hope, love. We need “bread not religion,” though religion can be the platter. We need a people who show us that we do not have to be alone.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Friday, 2 February, 2018
“Jambalaya Friday”
Word Count: 750

It was an offer too delightful to refuse, moments meant for the tasting, for the relishing, for the taking. The brochure arrived by mail offering a subscription for four performances of the American Ballet

Theatre at Lincoln Center: Giselle, Firebird, La Bayadere, Romeo and Juliet. We figured my wife could enjoy a night ballet with my Jersey sisters. Maybe even with me. I'm a Giselle kind of guy. Best, by purchasing three tickets for the series my wife could do what she used to in those younger years: take her daughters to the ballet. My mom enjoyed season tickets for the opera and she treated all her granddaughters as often as she could, with lunch at O'Neil's of course before the matinee. Fond memories. Time to do it again before it gets too late. A night or two at the Fitzpatrick Hotel. Have the concierge hail a cab for the ride over to Columbus Circle. Dinner, cocktails. We'll fly the west coast daughter in for the occasion.

But will our son in Berkeley be jealous that his sisters are getting this special treat? No. We'll fly him in for something better. It's called a Jambalaya Friday.

Since college days Friday always has been my favorite day – a day for party cooking. Got to cook things up.

First, rig up a television in the kitchen for us to watch while cooking our favorite 1950's science fiction movies: "The Thing," "Them," "The Blob." If we cook slowly we might have time for an episode of Doctor Who. The process, friends, is as savory as the product. It's our own kind of father-son ballet and we've been doing it ever since he was five years old when he helped me prepare our Italian dishes: handmade lasagna, ravioli, manicotti (the girls with mom).

Jambalaya Friday. Begin by slow boiling in a stock pot several ham hocks and a chicken roast. Dice up five strips of bacon and brown in the Dutch Oven. Add chunks of five onions and sauté till yellow. Add a chopped stalk of celery, crushed garlic, six green peppers (larger chunks), diced scallions, and parsley until the Dutch Oven is stuffed (I simply cannot cook chili or jambalaya in small batches). Add Worcestershire sauce, hot sauce, chili powder, basil, thyme, cayenne and cover while simmering. When the ham hocks and chicken are cooked, remove, cool, and shred, discarding the bones (or save for chicken stock later). Add the meat back to the stock pot along with small cubes of a ham and pinkie-sized fingers of andouille (the more the merrier). Add two 28oz cans of diced tomatoes and bubble without scorching the bottom. Into the stock pot next pour two bags of gooey okra. Last comes 3lbs of large size raw shrimp (at least). Must have tail removed. There's few things more annoying than eating jambalaya, gumbo, or Etouffee and you have to peel the tails yourself.

Once the Dutch Oven mixture and the stock pot mixture are well steeped and well stirred (I use a three foot wooden spoon for this purpose), it's time to ladle the vegetable mixture into the contents of the stock pot. Because I cook in volume, I bring out a second stock pot and ladle the contents of the full pot into the empty pot. The trick here is to count the ladles and then ladle half the count back into the original stock pot. Now you can simmer both thoroughly.

After seven hours you may serve on white rice.

Please note that I rarely taste test. I know if I cook it right, it'll taste just fine.

Jambalaya Friday.

I'm getting hungry. We are blessed with all these culinary options. A shame to miss tasting delightful moments.

Which brings to mind recent talk about immigrants and who we really want in our country (not that it really is ours anyway). Merit based gets mentioned. Which means exactly what? What's the metric for determining who merits coming here? My solution? We base all immigration on the quality of cuisine they can bring to this country. Let's see, from Norway: fermented trout, sheep's head, whale blubber. From Haiti? Creole Caribbean, mangoes and plantains, tropical French. We have a winner!

Stirring my stock pot, I fail to grasp why pundits refer to the United States as a melting pot. No. That's boring. What we are is a jambalaya offering a variety of tasty ingredients thick and rich with their own special flavors.

Jambalaya Friday. A good day.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
9 February, 2018
"Mirages of Marriage"
Word Count: 750

With Valentine's Day around the corner let me introduce you to a Marriage Matrix from the book, "The Mirages of Marriage" by William Lederer and Don Jackson. They sketch out four basic types of marriage, effective and ineffective. I'm no relationship expert myself (wounding, wounded) but I read.

Stable-Satisfactory Marriage: Admire this wonderfully harmonious and collaborative parallel union, where the couple, the Heavenly Twins, enjoy effective communication with no ambiguous or bargaining messages. Remember, everything you do or say (or don't say) communicates a message. There's strong trust between them fed by a confidence that allows each other freedom and autonomy. Jealousies are gone. Team solutions are created. Note: Stable-Satisfied marriages are almost hypothetical. It occurs in about 5% of all relationship, usually among those that have lasted 30 years or more or remarriages late in life.

Unstable-Satisfactory: Let's face it, life is unstable. We wobble. There are de-stabilizing behaviors, subtle or open aggression requiring more compromise than collaboration. Couples here practice bargaining and quid pro quos: He calls late because there's another meeting; She buys a new pair of shoes. Buried resentments surface. Couples send ambiguous, manipulative messages to each other, holding back what they want to say, if they know what it is they want to say, sometimes expressing sideways disappointments in each other, alternating between comfortable and frustrating. Here the relationship is at times hellish, other times heavenly, other times just married (lessons via pain).

For these "Spare-Time Battlers," despite this instability, there are enough pleasures and rewards sexually and socially and emotionally, those sincere gestures and gratifying loyalties, to keep nurturing the beneficial elements. Here the partners focus on more than a fantasy of romance but on the realism of being the best they can individually be, OWNING THEIR OWN HAPPINESS, so they can bring their best to this relationship in the hopes that their best will be reciprocated by their partner's best, but free from the expectation, desperation, or manipulation that it will be reciprocated.

Unstable-Unsatisfactory: In this relationship, these "Weary Wranglers," may love each other but they dislike each other. Thus, they busy themselves finding compensation elsewhere. People always will find

someplace somehow someway to be satisfied: from their work (often by success), in spending money, in toys, in the children, in another person also unsatisfied.

They may appear together but in reality live separate lives. Because they focus their energies elsewhere, this couple doesn't do much to improve their misery. That requires self-examination and changing themselves. Easier is to expect the other to change. They stroke their anger even as they inwardly avoid naming it as such. Here they get satisfaction in the mistakes and deficiencies of the other. Children become weapons or excuses. Communication for them is rarely positive. The jokes can be mean. Easier is how their anxiety and frustrations get directed at the other, finding it easier to blame them for their lack of contentment. You should see how he treats me... It's her fault for not doing this... The relationship is often one where they stick together to collect unpaid emotional bills from the past or because the disappointment they know is safer than the risk they don't know.

Where the tension increases is when the relationship is a-symmetrical, when one partner is more interested in a working marriage than the other.

Too many deceive ourselves into believing that if we only achieve stability we will begin to be satisfied. Isn't going to happen. Stability rarely happens. Who is stable? The trick is working on what satisfies: pleasures, rewards, honest communication, confidence, collaboration, wanting the best for the other, where, as Harry Stack Sullivan defines, the satisfaction or the security of the other person becomes as significant to one as is one's own satisfaction or security. Or more so.

Stable-Unsatisfactory: Now we come to the worst in this Marriage Matrix roller-coaster: the "Gruesome Twosome." Behind the smiles and protestations of how much they love each other, it's a marriage of bullying and domination, where stability is more important than the satisfaction. Stability is more important than admitting their true feelings about one another. They avoid admitting this by detesting the hostile outside world, this marriage frequently evidenced among those whose religion is defined by strict rules. Children of this union run for the hills.

Conclusion: Lederer and Jackson are not concerned about happy relationships. What concerns them are helping couples keep creating functional ones, establishing the context of mutual respect, tolerance, learning to communicate, minimizing liabilities and maximizing assets.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Friday, 16 February, 2016

"Don't Panic"

Word Count: 750

It was the first thing my son noticed. I'm so proud of my son. There on the dashboard computer screen of the Tesla Roadster were the words: 'Don't Panic.' My son caught the joke. Few did. It also happens to be my screensaver. It comes from Douglas Adams' "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy" book and BBC series (don't bother with the movie version). The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy is an encyclopedia of all things of interest in the galaxy, from the Babel fish to the Pan Galactic Gargle Blaster. Emblazoned on the cover of this electronic book (amazingly predicting the Kindle) is this comforting phrase: 'Don't Panic.'

Good to be comforted because there's reason to panic in this galaxy. After all, the book begins with the Vogon's demolition of planet earth in order to construct a galactic bypass. The earth was in the way, and, sadly, no one on earth bothered to read the demolition orders on display at Alpha Centauri.

Elon Musk is genius, jokester, and science fiction buff. God bless this immigrant for reigniting our fizzled passion for space exploration. Three, two, one...blastoff! His Tesla now orbiting the earth with a space suited dummy at the wheel. Elon's Falcon Heavy blasting off from Cape Canaveral. Lord, we have missed the adventure, the thrill, our souls reaching starward. Did you see how the boosters de-accelerated to their landing spots like every spaceship landing in every 1950 space movie? Fantastic!

I'll tell a secret: preserved in my roll top desk is my reel-to-reel recording of almost the entire Apollo 11 mission. Tranquility Base here, the Eagle has landed. This is the real stuff, the right stuff. Thank you, Elon, for bringing it back, for giving us a greater moment in this lesser age of lesser.

January 10, 1969: Vice-principal Schnitzer rejected my permission letter (which I had written, co-signed by mother) allowing me to skip school for the day to attend the ticker tape parade down Wall Street for Borman, Lovell, and Anders, freshly returned from their Apollo 8 mission and the very first orbital circumnavigation of the moon in outer space. Hmm, now, let's see: another Spanish quiz or a once-in-a-lifetime historical parade? My friend Bill Lasher accompanied me to Wall Street. We waved goodbye at the Vice-principal as we exited the building without permission. It was right to do.

In contrast to Apollo and Falcon Heavy, we get noise about some silly parade. Forgive me for my parody of "And to Think I Saw It On Mulberry Street" by Dr. Seuss:

When I leave home to go to congress
My voters always say to me
Citizens must keep your eyes open less you miss
You really must see what you can see

But when I tell them where've I've been
And what I think I've seen
They look at me and sternly say
You make the bizarre much too routine
Stop telling such outlandish tales
Stop turning minnows into whales

Now what can I say
When I get home today
What indeed could I say what is oddly true
Of what I saw on Pennsylvania Avenue

I've seen men in uniform marching in step
Marines in rhythm shouting hup hup hep

There was a marching band blaring loud
Playing God bless American to the cheering crowd

Flags galore waving in the breeze

And not one daring to take a knee

Mighty tanks come next along the street
Why be humble, quiet, and discreet

Why even we can parade the nuclear weapons
Showing off that we got the bigger guns

And that makes a story that's really not bad
But it still could be better. Suppose that I add

Guns galore brandished on shoulders
Of dozens of very tired soldiers

Soldiers who'd much rather be home with beer
But marched out by a president who needs to be cheered

A president much like Tinkerbell
Because faeries need clapping they tell
For belief in them is the attention they need
And upon adoration and praise they feed

Yes, we all do love a festive parade
But why does it have to be such a silly charade?

See the man in the fake uniform at the center of the route
Let's all give him an appropriately royal salute

Yes, I had seen this glorious bombastic review
And to think I saw it on Pennsylvania Avenue

This is Presidents' Day weekend. Remember: Lincoln never got to see the Grand Review of the Armies along Pennsylvania Avenue that Lincoln had earned.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Friday, February 23, 2018

"I Could Have Been"

Word Count: 750

I could've been a contender.

They're re-districting me out from running for Congress. Well, not really. But it's handy to have a nameless "Them" or "They" to blame. It may not indicate decent character but pointing fingers at someone else to blame usually is swallowed uncritically, the same way people accept as authentic the news from anti-social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (fooled those gullible dunces again, chuckles Putin... excepting kitten videos). Did you know Mr. Rogers used to be a Navy Seal

and that's why he wore sweaters to cover military tattoos? Did you know that the Star-spangled banner at Fort McHenry didn't fall because bodies of killed patriots kept the flag-pole in place?

It's embarrassing how these canards, long dismissed as folly, still circulate the magical web and people actually swallow such nonsense. Buy a newspaper! You'd think also Hannity would confer with Fox News colleague Shepherd Smith who's completely debunked the Clinton uranium non-scandal.

My dreams, my ambitions of a political career could be punctured by them and they. We once were in the 11th Congressional District. Given how those lines were gerrymandered by the rampant gamesmanship of the party in power (as corrupt as casino owners fixing slot machines), the courts might place us in the 10th Congressional District where the contest might no longer be an open seat. We'll see.

Plus, a potential candidate in the 10th is a drug and alcohol counselor. Seems we could use a drug and alcohol counselor in government. Any kind of counselor would help.

So I shall be magnanimous, noble, chivalrous -- more women in Congress! I guess that will leave me just an annoying, tongue-in-cheek, thorn-in-the-side columnist

Mindful that greatness is a consequence of goodness, If only I were elected...

National debt eliminated – we can't make our children pay for our credit cards.

Mandatory National service for two years through the Department of Education.

Climate change taken as the threat it is – let's get Bill Nye in charge because deserts are spreading at an alarming rate and getting hotter, we lose essential jungles and rain forests by the hectare a minute.

Jobs: install a job czar to inspire and implement entrepreneurial industries based on exciting new sciences, for we must avoid paychecks based on service industries or industries of the 20th century. We require new industries producing, for example, synthetic photosynthesis, spider web steel, new agriculture for expanding populations, luminescent roads.

Set Social Security on the guidelines Roosevelt intended, that pensioners would receive payments at the average national age of mortality. Any person receiving public aid, from those disabled to those on public or corporate welfare, even those receiving social security, owe the nation community service; then again any drug litmus test should apply equally to legislators and anyone who receives public money (corporate welfare, school officials, social security recipients).

Planned Parenthood, through medical care and guidance, does more to reduce the incidence of abortion than any placard carrying nun. Focus on prevention and compassionate care, walking with those who feel trapped into exercising the right of choice. Medical opinions do outweigh making fiat regulations, because a helping hand goes farther than 'tsk tsk.'

For our DACA and Dreamers, let's make America good by leveraging humanity against wasting money on a boondoggle wall or brown shirt officers deporting daddies in front of their children.

When it comes to gun control I'm a rabid protector of the second amendment, a strict constitutionalist, because I'll defend everyone's civil right to own a flintlock musket that fires two shots a minute; otherwise, eliminate reciprocity between states for handguns and concealed carry, plus require full universal background checks, no assault or even semi-assault rifles permitted unless controlled and stored by gun clubs. Last, any gun purchaser must pass (as with a driver's or hunter's license) a test. My reaction to the atrocity on Valentine's Day: NRA, Legislators, President, Governors: don't you dare offer your prayers or sympathies. Don't you dare.

A sick nation cannot be a great nation.

It's a matter of working on sensible positives. Something to be proud to stand for. It's a matter of elevating the civil discourse, banishing blame, exercise consideration, grace, courtesy, truths of the heart, as my brother wrote me. Good decisions are the result of good process, great decisions by great process.

Congressional energy, thus, must focus on process. Give me evidence. Let's see the facts that validate positions, scalpel sharp question about claims, statements, and slogans, fewer propagandists and from more experts.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Friday, 2 March, 2018
"Onion Snow"
Word Count: 750

Have you noticed it is getting warmer outside, howsoever slowly? Have you noticed it is getting brighter, the daylight longer?

The word 'Vernal' is such a pretty word, redolent with portent. Vernal: youthful, springtime, fruity, blossomy. When forsythia is in bloom, it's time to prune. Time to prune those rose canes that is, in expectation of June roses three months from now. Daffodils, tulips, hyacinth, lilies -- well, they already signal the arrival of the Vernal Equinox where earth and sun (equal in distance along the celestial equator on March 20) will begin drawing closer to each other, us leaning closer toward the sun.

9:30 PM. Let's go outdoors. Where is Ursa Major? She's high above Polaris. She pours the contents of her cup down into Little Dipper.

Daffodils have been adopted for good reason as American Cancer Society's March fundraiser: they are bringers of beauty and new life, first signs of new life bursting from the cold soil. The soil isn't as barren or cold as supposed. It's time for the onion snow.

Your garlic bulbs you already had planted last fall, weeks before Jack Frost came visiting. Onions sets should be planted in our area (Area 2 according to the Farmer's Almanac) in March, preferably between March 13 and 26 when the waning moon makes planting favorable.

Planting by the moon phases. Implanting by the moon phases. We may have heard of that technique before. Natural rhythm.

Tasty onions are first available for the harvesting around mid-summer. They definitely are ready later when their leaves turn floppy, when these full and succulent onion bulbs don't need their leaves anymore. They've grown all they need to grow. Now is the time to enjoy them and store them. The Sulphur they absorbed makes your eyes water.

Raw chopped onions on hot dogs. Rings of raw onion for the hamburger. Sautéed onions for medium rare Delmonico steaks. Fried onion rings. Onion soup. Onions and sausage. Blooming onion. Liver and onions. Onions mixed into hash browns.

All require cutting. That which can make you cry can be worth the cry. Right? Slice them, dice them, chop them. Good for the heart, good for the soul. Both the tears and the taste.

Hardy vegetables are these onions. They even benefit from a good onion snow.

Onion snow: winter's final gesture, its final gift.

Onion snow: that awkward hesitation when winter just can't seem to say goodbye, like lovers on a phone who can't hang up. You first, no you. Just one more word, one more sigh, one more kiss, one more smile.

I miss smiles. Too often the coldness of winter brings on depression. February can make a person cranky. Hasn't life gotten cranky enough? Where has the humor gone? I hear jokes and I see grins, but so much humor these days has become mean and barbed, tilting toward cruel. Where is the light-hearted joke? Where is the self-deprecating laugh, the size of a person's spirit measured by their ability to make fun of themselves? I want to smile more. You too?

That awkward hesitation when winter just can't seem to say goodbye, like lovers on a phone who can't hang up. You first, no you. Just one more word, one more sigh, one more kiss, one more smile. Or like toward the end of a really splendid date and you stand there at her door knowing you have to leave (dad is watching) but you don't really want to leave her.

Onion snow: winter's way of saying: "Remember me, will you please. I promise that I'll be back."

That which can make you cry can be worth the cry.

You wake in the morning and open the curtains. Winter's final gift, its curtain call, decorates, like confectioner's sugar, your world outside. Snow caps on tulips. The green leaves of the wild onions sprouting through this icing of white fluffy snow. The tree branches layered. The triangular tracks of the birds in the loose layer of snow. The juicy worms and bugs surfacing for the hungry hasty bird to peck and feast upon.

You smile from the window knowing you won't need to shovel this snowfall. In a matter of hours the sun will do the work for you. Drip, drip, drip. And the warming muddy earth of our springtime beginning will welcome this wetness in her ruddy womb, for now, unlike last month, she'll be able to gently absorb the moisture.

Onion snow: a last kind soaking to nudge life along.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Friday, 9 March, 2018
“Come and See”
Word Count: 750

My brothers, sisters, and I were fortunate. Our parents wanted us to travel and see what we could see.

When I was in sixth grade we packed up the Dodge Motor Home and seven of us, plus Fox Terrier, wandered across country. We broke down in Winnemucca, Nevada. In California we relished a snowball fight in July. A week later Dad and I grilled bacon while the Snake River cascaded nearby. The next Motor home trip took us through the Shenandoah where on the way to the camp site showers we surprised a black bear momma and cubs. In eighth grade I was pitching rocks over the cliff outside the Jerusalem Hilton, the Dome of the Rock below me. A man rose out of the hillside and yelled at me. The stones were hitting the cave where his family lived. I remember machine guns stationed at the Mandelbaum Gate. I remember the trashy tourism hawking Jesus souvenirs and teaching me that there is little holiness about the holy land. From Cairo we flew a Russian prop plane to visit Luxor. My older brothers were more interested in the belly dancer back at the hotel. Junior and Senior High saw me hopping a bus to Port Authority, then strap-hanging to Greenwich Village.

There is little doubt that our parents bred in me my wanderlust. Odysseus, my hero.

Flip the calendar pages and I'm investigating Belfast during the troubles, frisked by British soldiers at every intersection. Years pass and it's a honeymoon in San Francisco discovering Irish Coffees at the Buena Vista. Later, learning in Avalon about the fish snaring talons of Ospreys (unlike Eagle talons). Then again mission trips to the deep country of Honduras. Pascagoula after Katrina. A tour of Scotland with kids, looking for Nessie, chewing authentic haggis, followed by the transatlantic crossing on the Queen Mary II coming home.

It's little wonder I get itchy. It's also little wonder that the notion of vacationing at any Sandals Resorts resembles a descent into the lower circles of hell. Ours is a bigger world beckoning: "Come and see." Do you pay attention?

Most recently, you would have seen us dodging spandex joggers while us circumnavigating anti-clockwise the 3.2 miles of Oakland's Lake Merritt. The chubby happy-go-lucky fellow strolling clockwise we saw twice and each time he remarked on the good weather. We saw three senior fellows briskly pacing the path, evidently their regular time to exercise and solve the world's problems. An evangelist preached through a megaphone. Twice we passed a younger couple pushing their little boy in a cheap stroller. Instinct told me they were out searching for items useable to take back to the homeless colony of tents, cardboard, plastic bags clustered beneath the walk-bridge at the top of the lake. There were several colonies of the homeless along the lake, some tucked up in the shrubbery, some spreading out over benches. With rent increases catering to the moneyed population, more folks in the bay area cannot afford apartments.

Our own son was threatened with loss of home, not by landlords but by the county government. He had been summoned for jury duty. He accepted his civic duty. It cost him \$30 dollars to travel via Bart, then cab to the courthouse. They pay jurors \$15 a day. It was a civil case between two construction

companies who couldn't have cared less about jurors unable to afford their duty. Our son had to return the next day to plead his case that a trial would bankrupt him. Tough on the working class.

When I was just a boy, I distinctly recall when it happened, standing at the end of Helen Street full of curiosity, full of wonder, seeing myself looking at myself. It hit me, first sneaking up on me, suddenly distancing myself from myself, both rocking my world and expanding my world leaving this little suburban boy changed. Me perceiving Helen Street isn't all there is. For I remember imagining another young boy standing somewhere on the other side of the globe staring at his home, town, street, himself, realizing he is a small part of something larger. I got rocked discovering the world is bigger than me.

It happened again when after long labor, when wife and daughter almost didn't make it, me amazed at this newborn girl in basinet. My wife on the stretcher exhausted and pale. I got rocked discovering the world is bigger than me.

It pays to travel. It pays to notice.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Friday, 16 March, 2018
"Something Was Missing"
Word Count: 750

Three sold out performances last week. A first for the Danville Drama Club.

Why was it sold out for three performances?

Was it because of the clumsy kerfuffle over last year's initial selection of "Avenue Q," how its rejection inspired young people to do it themselves and offer a fine summer performance of this rather bawdy bohemian puppet production?

Was it because "Annie" attracted and involved a large number of persons in the cast, pit crew, tech, ushers?

Was it because "Annie" engaged middle school students in the performance (is there hint here of a middle school drama club)?

Could it also because our community was hungry for a 'feel good' musical. Honestly, the musical "Annie" isn't a powerhouse of profundity. It ain't no "Les Miserables." But it sure is sappy fun. It sure gives a dose of optimism and hope in troubled, irksome times. God bless little orphan Annie for inspiring Roosevelt's New Deal and for melting the heart of a ruthless Tycoon.

As with most things, the likeliest answer is all of the above.

You should note I'm drama biased. Few fathers and mothers in Danville can boast their two daughters had starring roles in Danville high school musical productions: our Maggie as Daisy Mae in "Little Abner" and our Penelope as Anita in "West Side Story." Plus, our son, now a cartoonist in Berkeley, California, enjoyed four years as one of the key black-garbed set design members. Being part of the Tech crew was

about the only place in his high school career where he felt he belonged. We still believe the school district orphaned him. In drama he found a home.

Our bias in favor of the arts is obvious. Academics and sports constitute only a portion of the character equation. The incredibly hard but rewarding work of the creative arts – painting, pottery, poetry, textiles, band, writing, chorus, dance, theatre – bring a missing humanity to all other disciplines. Around this town we do tilt toward sports, science, engineering, especially sports. I love sports but firmly believe they are over-rated and sport stars over-valued (over-coddled in other districts). Compare our sport trophies to the success of forensics.

A friend of mine had to relocate to the Atlanta area. His daughter played defender on our high school soccer team. Despite her small stature, she was fast, dependable, formidable. My friend told me how after arriving at her new high school she immediately realized she'd never get to play soccer there. In fact, given a school of over a thousand students, she realized she had to choose one extra-curricular activity. There were just so many talented kids and so many different options. Her new school being too big forced her to choose only where she had a chance to succeed and use her best talent. She joined the business club.

Contrast her experience to here. I love how at halftime you'll see football players rush to pick up their trombone and join the band. I love how on stage you'll see more than a few young people who are Triple A successful: Academics, Athletics, and Arts.

Which again is why we've got something really good going here. Which is why I have learnt to appreciate the virtues of a small town (see Tom Hylton's checklist of the qualities of a small town). I wish other newcomers would learn to appreciate the small town, provided the small town keeps investing in the qualities of the small town (recreation, open space, walkability, jobs, health care, civic commitment, diversity, great schools, arts).

Trying to find talented new pastors to fill pulpits in small towns has become increasingly difficult given the skewed expectations of our current crop of seminarians. Along with my donation to Princeton Seminary's annual fund was my offer to come to talk to seminarians about what the calling really involves and how fortunate they'd be to end up in a town like Danville.

Where else? The drama club drew a sold out auditorium full of little girls and boys, parents, grandparents, friends of the players on stage rooting for them, kids in the pit playing instruments next to teachers, middle schoolers on stage with high schoolers. One of my favorite moments happened when a toddler behind me spoke to her mom about how effectively nasty was the young woman playing the villain, Mrs. Hannigan. Toddler said: "She's bad, mommy. She's not nice."

Here is the authentic optimism of "Annie." We are the stage where no one should be an orphan.

The Daily Item
Robert John Andrews
"Green and Orange"
17 March, 2018
Word Count: 575

I frequently tease how I'd concede to wearing green on St. Patrick's day when folks begin wearing a Scottish tartan on St. Andrews' day or a leek for the Welsh on St. David's Day.

My wife and I playfully, stubbornly, whimsically never permitted our children to wear green to elementary school on St. Patrick's Day. Our children, Protestants of Northern Ireland heritage, wore our color: orange. I still do, ever mindful however that pride in heritage often is mere masquerade for the sin of clan and tribe. This sin has led to knee-capping and car bombings. Where do you think al-Qaeda learnt their terroristic skills? From the troubles in Ireland.

Maybe we should all just wear Hawaiian shirts?

Back in 1972 I disembarked from the Stranraer Ferry and bussed into Belfast. The office at customs inspected my passport and asked my reason for the visit. I replied that I was a tourist. He looked at my funny and said: "You're kidding, mate." My real intent was to interview Christian peacemakers from the Corrymeela Community whose ministry sought reconciliation between green and orange, especially amongst children, youth, and mixed-religious married couples (Protestant and Roman). Entering Belfast it seemed I entered the pages of Orwell's ugly novel, "1984." Heavily armed British soldiers patrolled the streets, side streets were gated. I was frequently taunted by them. Announcements blared from speakers from military vehicles. Parked cars had to keep a passenger inside in order to indicate this car wasn't a car bomb. Garbage cans were absent, the favorite receptacles for sidewalk blasts. I was frisked wherever I walked. I made more than one mistake, the worst when I was returning from the Corrymeela Community and was thirsty. I was walking through a poor neighborhood where the women would slam garbage can lids on the sidewalk to warn their men that a stranger was in the neighborhood. I should have kept walking but I entered a pub. The men inside stopped talking and stared at me. I decide to order only a half-pint. They kept staring at me until I downed it quick and left.

After interviewing leaders of the Presbyterian Church and getting the familiar excuses, I chatted with the armed guard at the entrance and got the real story when he bragged how he could spot a catholic by their eyes.

One of the last songs sung by late Canadian folk singer Stan Rogers offered a better solution. He had been approached by a representative of the Irish Republican Army to donate to the fight. He refused, singing:

*Now they cry out for money and wail at the door
But Home Rule or Republic, 'tis all of it shame;
And a curse for us here who want nothing of war.
We're kindred in nothing but name.
All rights and all wrongs have long since blown away,
For causes are ashes where children lie slain.*

Perhaps the peacemaking efforts of church groups led to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement that brought green and orange together and established some ground rules for the future: political representation, the number of parades, economic plans. Since this agreement, Ireland (both northern and southern) have improved economically. Did peace bring prosperity or prosperity the peace?

God bless the church peacemakers, but what finally quieted the Irish Republican Army and Ulster Defense League's suspicions and hostilities despite centuries of tribal hatred were good jobs. The dignity of work. Feeding your family. Affording a decent place.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

23 March, 2018

"Right Thinking"

Word Count: 750

Who's ready for springtime? Give me soccer practice with my kids! It's a giggle serving as the tactical assistant to the assistant. Confession: a reason I love being involved with organized sports is because I really dislike organized sports.

Mom warned against the danger of organized sports. Organized sports, she feared, would spoil kids' ability to learn to compromise, collaborate, create, arbitrate, work out what needs to be worked out. She preferred the way we boys played ball. We kids had to improvise. It was a rare Saturday when we could scrounge up 22 kids to play softball. You get five guys on a side? Well, a hit into right field is an automatic out. Who needs four bases? Imaginary runners on base. The other side supplies pitcher and catcher when they're up.

Organized sports, mom feared, would breed kids who would always look to the external authority figure to tell them what to do, to set rules -- breeding robots, automatons, weak and dependent adults. Who needs umpires?

How about this fuss and bother about getting school permission to stage a protest walk-out? You're kidding me. It's a protest based on principles -- so what if you get in trouble with the principal?

Clearing the air, I was raised to respect persons but always to question authority. I was raised to question people telling me what to do and believe. Why? Because I was expected to listen and learn from others but to think and do for myself. I was taught the more authority you receive the more you have to deserve it.

Perhaps it's a Scottish thing, in our blood to resist tyrants wherever tyrants appear. Blame it on being the ignored middle child and given a whole lot of independence. Rebelliousness is good for the soul.

Still, I appreciate the need for some rules. Why? Because rebelliousness and independence can be a convenient excuse for vice and sinful selfishness.

Read the Federalist papers -- the argument in favor of the United States Constitution. A nation of law, not a nation of men. The social contract that holds us together. Democracy depends on checks and balances. How Liberal Democracy (America's soul) depends on virtue, education, altruism, truth, a commitment beyond self-interest. If none of these, we got trouble.

We must have rules because we can be real stinkers, so we need to be reined in. We will cheat to win. Spitballs, deflated footballs, faking a foul in the box, stuffing the ballot box, spreading lies and disinformation. Great family values...

Our third greatest president [Lincoln, Washington, Madison – top three; FDR, Taft, Teddy pretty close. Genocidal Andrew Jackson, Nixon, Andrew Johnson on the bottom] James Madison wrote: “If men were angels, no government would be necessary.”

If children were angels, we’d have no need of parents. We’d have no need for rules about homework, chores to be done, teeth to be brushed, writing thank you letters, curfew is 11 PM, yes, you’re going to Sunday school and then we’ll all go to worship together.

The littler we are the more we need our parents and depend on our parents.

So, yes, we cruel parents spell out the rules and we demand discipline and there are consequences, howsoever annoying and oppressive and repressive and tyrannical are us parents. Family is no democracy, Dad would declare. You cuss? You’re going to get your mouth washed out with soap {my preference wasn’t Lava – too gritty – Ivory’s tastier}.

Why? Because the entire purpose of parents is to raise kids who won’t need their parents.

Libby and Larry Andrews ruled their mob of five because they knew the secret about parenthood. Parents, not kids, set the rules.

Why? To free us. To emancipate us. So that we could become independent and choose for ourselves, own it ourselves.

Larry and Libby raised us so we could think and act for ourselves, inspired by rightness rather than controlled, boxed, by others like mindless, fearful sheep, so that we don’t become slaves to drug dealers and drugs, or slaves to hatreds, prejudices, or vices, slaves to ignorance, slaves to unhealthy ambitions, slaves to cliques, or party-lines, or crippling religion, or fawning loyalties, or lies, or ideologies, or slogans, or propaganda, or social media, or public opinion, or the throb of the mob or intimidating minority, or slaves to the need to please or be pleased.

If you don’t think for yourself, you will end up owned, leashed, muzzled, oppressed, subjugated, ruled by things that don’t deserve that authority.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Friday, 30 March, 2018
“Good Friday”
Word Count: 750

Are you ham people or lamb people or something else wildly decadent? What is your preference for the Easter main course? As Jersey imports, we were surprised by how we surprised our Pennsylvanian neighbors by roasting a leg of lamb for Easter. Rubbed with marjoram and thyme, slivers of garlic stuck into the meat, layered with slices of lemon. An eight pound leg at 310 degrees for three hours equals perfection. An authentic Shepherd’s pie seasoned with Bovril on Monday. Ham, however, seems the main course of choice throughout Pennsylvania. It’s partly an agricultural seasonal thing, with pigs fat from acorns and apples butchered in the fall. It also was originally a gesture to mock Jews. Ham is definitely anti-kosher. Lamb of course is the Biblical meal for Passover (Jesus’ preference), thus also for Easter. Happily, both holidays happen this weekend. There’s promise for you.

I once attended a Passover Seder. The symbolism was moving. The Jews have a knack for blending hope with sorrow, which makes sense given their tragic history and maltreatment by us Christians. The empty chair for the prophet Elijah yet to return to usher in the new age. Matzo: the bread of affliction. The Maror and Chezeret, bitter herbs to remind them of their harsh oppression and slavery in Egypt. The Passover (Paschal) lamb itself, newly born, sacrificed so its blood would spare them from the Angel of Death (while we sentimental Christians depict angels as cute and cuddly). No, the Jews -- indeed the Bible itself -- dramatizes there is no promised land, no deliverance, without suffering and sorrow.

Ham or lamb? How about music? Do you prefer your music sad or glad, show tune music or music that stirs your soul and makes your cry? How about your crying: sweet tears or sad tears? I admit how my natural melancholia tilts me toward the sad camp. There's no Passover without bitter herbs or sacrificial lamb.

Soon I will officiate at the funeral of the First Presbyterian Church, Williamsport. It is sad, the painful side of Dylan's "These Times They Are A' Changin'." I grieve with those few remaining older members who poured their love and devotion into the work of this church. For what all their efforts and dreams? For me to change the locks and sell the building to buyers who likely want to gut it for scrap? There be ghosts. Bitter herbs must be tasted. Empty places at the table.

Fantine's song, "Dreamed a Dream," in Les Miserables becomes ours, her song haunts us. Dreams killed. Romance ruined. Love stained, betrayed. This song makes your cry. It seems personal, too familiar. Where did our dreams go?

*But there are dreams that cannot be
And there are storms we cannot weather
I had a dream my life would be
So different from this hell I'm living
So different now from what it seemed
Now life has killed
The dream I dreamed*

I'm trying to finish my non-fiction book about my grandfather and grandmother and the house they built. Given the death of my parents, given so many sacrifices made in love and concession, given loss of homestead, business, estate settled, their story has pivoted into a story about loss. Loss as the crucible of who we are. Loss as the incubator of who we become. There be ghosts.

Which also explains my deep pity for President Trump. Trump saddens me for he knows not love. Something is missing, obvious by his theatrical desperation to compensate, discount, be noticed. My pastoral instincts tell me he is a loveless man. To truly love and been truly loved means to experience loss, abandonment, loneliness, forgiveness, failure, hurt, wounding, disappointment, longing, selfishness. It means to be raggedly human and accept our tragic, broken, hungry humanity. This is why our truly great leaders are persons who have experienced profound tragedy and loss in their lives, resulting not in cynicism, fear, self-indulgence, or despair but in empathy, faith, wisdom, and greater love.

Easter and Passover proclaim for us something the world cannot give us: how death spasms, death rattles augur birth. 'FEAR NOT' is the message and promise of both holy days. Walk in love and faith, urge both holy days. What a courageous people we can be.

So this weekend, as at the original Easter, we gather at the convergence of Passover and Easter. Both speak the same message of deliverance: of hope that embraces the sorrow. Bitter herbs must be tasted to merit the main course.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Friday 6 April, 2018

"Goebbels In The Wings"

Word Count: 750

Why do we disdain experts? What's wrong with someone who is elite? In a surrealistic way I love this exchange about the BREXIT vote a few years ago:

"During an interview, the Justice Secretary, Michael Gove, was challenged to name a single independent economic authority that thought Brexit was a good idea. Mr. Gove's response was defiant. 'I'm glad these organisations aren't on my side,' he said. 'I think people in this country have had enough of experts.'"

Who needs experts when the people have spoken? Popularity and ratings rule! If you watch TV news, mark which news media relies on disinterested experts and which on propagandists pushing the party line.

Why are we condescending about who qualifies as an expert, an elite? Isn't there a place for listening to experts? Do we realize experts aren't always economists, bureaucrats, surgeons? Aren't they also plumbers? If you badmouth experts aren't you also badmouthing those folks who know how to expertly install a toilet or the mechanic who repairs mowers?

Thank goodness for all varieties of experts, for elites who actually know something about something.

So today I write about a subject about which I know a lot. I've been faking most everything else all my life. Knowledgeable about Art? Faking it. Knowledgeable about Literature? Faking it. Knowledgeable about Love? Faking it. Knowledgeable about the Bible? Busy quoting those who really know something about it. Knowledgeable about faith? Show me someone who is.

But ANGER? Now there's a subject about which I'm a five star expert!

I admire those who can at least pretend to be serene and tranquil and patient, but I even get into a real angry snit when I can't be like them. "Judgment day -- right there in the rear view mirror" – Steve Goodman.

When I'd get into one of my jagged rages, mom would scratch my back calming me down. Anger is a torment. Ripped a screen door off its hinge. Kicked a door in. Punched my fist through a window. Punched a fellow for fouling me during soccer. Mom knew how to drive out the evil spirit from me. Nowadays I am the paragon of serenity. Right...

Besides anger making you look like an idiot, anger produces something worse: it incites you to attack the person versus remedying the problem. Big, tragic difference. Anger is a gateway emotion to lots of dangers, with the first victim being truth, the second victim your integrity. Third? Your relationships.

Some might remember comedian Stephen Colbert coining the word, 'truthiness:' "The quality of seeming to be true according to one's intuition, opinion, or perception without regard to logic, factual evidence, or the like; the growing trend of truthiness as opposed to truth."

As Colbert explained in a serious interview: "It used to be, everyone was entitled to their own opinion, but not their own facts. But that's not the case anymore. Facts matter not at all. Perception is everything."

Truth based on feelings? Examples? You can feel as if this is the most violent time in America. It isn't. Factually, ours overall is the most peaceful time ever.

Anger always fans flames rather than douses them. Anger feeds fears and starves self-reflection, anger triggers our sensitive emotions at the expense of reason. These emotions get even more intense when it seems personal, as if a hostile world is personally weakening you. Threatened, you attack, as if this were a poll on their regard and respect for you.

A master at harnessing angry emotions was Joseph Goebbels, Adolph Hitler's chief propagandist. He knew something about manipulating emotions: "If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it. The lie can be maintained only for such time as the State can shield the people from the political, economic and/or military consequences of the lie. It thus becomes vitally important for the State to use all of its powers to repress dissent, for the truth is the mortal enemy of the lie, and thus by extension, the truth is the greatest enemy of the State."

What else did Goebbels teach? That propaganda must evoke the interest of an audience and be communicated through attention getting means, that propaganda must facilitate the displacement of aggression by specifying the targets for hatred, that propaganda must label events and people with distinctive phrases or slogans. This playbook seems Alt-Right/Trump familiar. We've been used.

Do you want to be manipulated by demons, ideologues, dictators? Let them stoke your anger.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Friday 13 April, 2018
"A Pack of Cigarettes"
Word Count 750

Happy Opening Day of Trout Season! The last time I baited a hook was decades ago when John, my barber, and I would fish the Octorara Creek. He'd pick me up in his rusting pick-up truck. We'd go rattling down the road. John was adept at driving a stick shift and spitting chewing tobacco into the coffee can he kept by the gear shift.

Sometimes we'd fish the section of the creek reserved for fly fishing. We didn't fly fish much. I wasn't much good at the fling and whip. John had a few favorite holes. The last time we went to the fly fishing

section John learnt a lesson: don't carry corn in your pocket, so saith an agent from the Fish and Game Commission. Five kernels of corn equaled coughing up a twenty-five dollar fine.

My tobacco spitting and fishing partner John phoned me one night, though it wasn't about going fishing. He wanted my professional assistance. One of his son's friends had gotten himself into a little bit a trouble and John wanted me to go with him and his son and visit the friend.

His son's friend was enjoying the hospitality of Lancaster County Prison. He and another fellow had been arrested for taking a shot gun and murdering two other young men in their trailer over \$600 of marijuana.

I've seen the drug culture close up. Ugly, destructive, painful, hellish, ugly. I buried a fellow who was self- medicating and bought a bad batch. He left behind a young wife and two little girls who didn't understand. Dealers don't care who they sell to. Dealers like slaves. You should see what happens to the girls in Bloomsburg they get hooked. Dealers just like to reel them in and use them.

I had visited prisons before. It goes go with the territory. I've been to Juvenile Detention centers, to jails, to prisons. Several of my softball teammates from Seminary served as chaplains both at Rahway Prison and Trenton State Prison. Those places were the big time. Back in Seminary we even played softball against the inmates at Trenton. They, muscular, always swung for homeruns over the wall, muscular. We always won because we kept batting singles. The felons never figured it out.

John's son persuaded the young murderer to include our names on his visitation list. For the first trip the three of us traveled together, got processed, and sat together facing the young man through the thick glass wall. John's son picked up the grimy black phone receiver and talked with his friend. Small talk. They shared some strained smiles over High School glory days. When it came my turn, I sought and got his permission to come back with John. Our periodic fishing expeditions turned into breakfast at the Gap Diner every other week followed by a road trip to the Lancaster County prison.

John soon got fed up. He couldn't believe this kid felt nothing about what he had done. What really irked John was how on our last trip we had to wait until he finished talking to some young girl and then we only got a few minutes of his visitation time. The closer his trial date neared, the more of a lark he thought it was. A school of young girls visited him frequently. He was a bad boy and the girls thrilled at the forbidden scent of it. If he weren't behind bars, he could score his brains out.

On our last trip to visit him, he decided it was time to dismiss us. He thanked us for coming and all. He wanted us to be sure to tell John's son hello. But he really didn't need us. He didn't need any help. He knew it wasn't going to be paradise but he was cool with it.

John stormed out, causing some anxiety in the prison guards. I slowly picked up the phone receiver and silently looked at him through the thick window. I tried to tell him he had better get serious. No catch and release.

He was nineteen years old. His light brown hair was nearly shoulder length, curling at the end in a natural wave. He stood about five foot, four inches tall. He was slight of build and tender of features. His murderous hands were very delicate, long and slender. And he was going upstate to Camp Hill. No doubt about it. I tried to warn him that he was worth a pack of cigarettes.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Friday, April 20, 2018
“When A Poll Isn’t”
Word Count: 750

You’d think they’d have figured it out by now. Either that or else I’m special.

Yes, I must be special for I received two months ago my 2018 Congressional District Census delivered exclusively to me from the Republican National Committee. As the letter explained: “The opinions registered in this document will be used to build a nationwide national grassroots network that will help us maintain our Republican Congressional majorities and show that President Trump has the support of the American people to continue to move toward and act on the critical issues facing our county.”

This is cute because the Republican Party my father supported his entire life is dead. Maybe on the local level the Republicans still represent a semblance of their traditional principles, but not anything above county commissioner.

Permit a sampling of questions and my replies:

Question: Did you vote for Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential election? Answer: none of your business.

Question: Do you plan on voting for Republican candidates? Answer: Dumb question. Depends on who runs.

Question: Do you think Congress is committed to passing President Trump’s Agenda? Answer: What agenda? There is no strategy, it’s all impulse.

Question: Do you think race relations in America are getting better or worse? Answer: It’s been worse, now it’s getting exposed. Black lives matter. Blue lives matter. But blue lives have chosen a profession of danger and risk. Black lives don’t get the choice. They were born into the danger and risk.

Question: Do you support canceling all of Barack Obama’s unconstitutional executive orders that created new regulations, fees, and other freedom-destroying measures? Answer: There’s a biased question.

Question: Which of the following do you think will have the most impact on America’s foreign policy in the next 5 years? Answer: I marked ‘other’ and wrote in: Nationalism.

You’d think they’d realize by now. Snicker, snicker... But I do love them sending these to subversive me.

Last week I received another one. I received my 2018 Voter Opinion Poll on the Trump Agenda. You would have thought they’d have figured it out.

This so-called poll was sent because, as the cover letter explained: “Unlike the polls the media puts out daily that contact only 1,000 people or less (grammar alert: ‘fewer’), our objective is to reach out to more than 4 million people (grammar alert: ‘persons’) in the next 3 months to prove President Trump’s

agenda has the support of the citizens of our country and to get the truth about his agenda out to all Americans.”

Reply: Thank God for our journalists

This is cute. Let’s target our poll to those we expect will agree with us. My wife worked for Gallup Poll. This isn’t a poll. This is ridiculous. This is as cute as those who yell that if you’re in favor of gun safety measures you’re pawns of liberal leftist extremists.

What else did this cover letter say? “President Trump is under fire because he stands up for you and other Americans.”

Are they suggesting only true Americans support Trump? I’ve heard this nonsense before back in the sixties.

My temptation is to punch back as Trump contemptuously does, arguing that his Administration is on track to becoming our most corrupt, venal, immoral. A dear friend of mine, a Trump promoter, tells me to ignore the theatrics and look at what’s accomplished. I find both lamentable and long-term ruinous.

Nevertheless, I’m instructed by how columnist David Brooks urges that it’s wiser to critically highlight how his Administration is failing to legitimately address the social problems that gave rise to Trumpism. To denounce him is easy but it isn’t going to move the needle. If anything, condescending invective only galvanizes support and turns him into a perverse folk hero in the eyes of those who remain uncritical, unquestioning supporters.

Last, read this paragraph: “But with the Democrats and their loyal cronies including the union bosses, environmental extremists, the liberal media, other ultra-Left extremist groups spending hundreds of millions of dollars to destroy what you and Donald Trump want for our country, we need to be able to counter their every move.”

Who’s calling who deplorable now? And this is addressing those social problems?

Naturally, they always ask for a donation at the end. Nope. Alas, they made me affix my own first class postage stamp, which I did. Affixed upside down of course, as I have been doing since November of 2016. The United States flag upside down: the international sign of dire distress.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Friday, 27 April, 2018
“Hug a Tree”
Word Count: 750

Go outside today and hug a tree. Your neighbors might think you odd but Mother Earth will be proud. It’s National Arbor Day. Besides, if it weren’t for our trees, we’d all be dead.

Arbor Day. Arboreal. Arboretum. According to the Arbor Day Foundation a million trees were planted in Nebraska on the first Arbor Day celebration. It became a legal holiday in Nebraska in 1855. Other

States followed. J. Sterling Morton, father of Arbor Day said: “Each generation takes the Earth as trustees.”

Our finest conservationist President, Teddy Roosevelt, proclaimed it a national holiday. Teddy liked trees. He liked National Parks. Teddy recognized that forfeiting serving as Earth’s trustees for being Earth’s exploiters would prove suicidally short-sighted. Want proof? Fish the Western Branch of the Susquehanna. Acid mine drainage anyone? Flint, Michigan, how’s your drinking water today? Chunky?

Would someone please fill up EPA Director Pruitt’s water glass from Flint faucets.

We can be either Earth’s stewards or her despoilers.

Mother Earth isn’t a fungible commodity. She’s all we got. What profits doesn’t always profit. Mother Earth is a closed system. She’s our Spaceship Earth. Everything we got already is here: water, air, dirt. Do you suppose Morton would consider today’s generations worthy trustees? If we won’t renew it, we lose it. Motor oil, pharmaceuticals in our rivers anyone? Greenhouse effect anyone? Warmer oceans anyone? Horrific weather anyone? Reduced oxygen levels with every acre of Rain Forest savaged, wasted for minerals? Plastic garbage swallowed by whales or ensnaring necks of sea turtles? Overfishing anyone (which is why I buy farmed fish only)?

I like trees. Without them, besides me being ex-Bob, I lose both inspiration and appreciation.

Appreciation? Because trees are beautiful, stately, life-giving. Trees feed us critters -- two-legged, four-legged, six-legged, those legless, those with wings. It’s inspiring how many cultures, Old Testament Hebrew included, didn’t see trees as distinct entities but rather as extensions, expressions of Earth herself. Did you read the article in National Geographic where possibly the heaviest single organism on Earth grows in Utah (perhaps oldest too), a single genetic tree root system covering 106 acres sprouting 47,000 Quaking Aspen trunks? All the same tree called, Pando.

Appreciation? Trees house us. Trees prevent us from freezing. Trees cool us in their shade. Trees gave us the gift of cooking, of fire.

Inspiration? Because trees teach us to be better humans. Trees seek to reach as high as their nature allows them. Trees sink down roots deep and secure. Did you know that at dawn’s first light, all trees bow toward the sun?

Inspiration? Denude a hillside of trees and you produce mudslides. Consequences.

Inspiration? Walking through Muir Woods one day, Sequoia country, I learnt how Redwoods are able to grow so tall. The roots of Redwood trees wind around each other and interlock – they help each other hold fast. Better yet, the roots even graft onto each other. If one tree is in a dryer spot, they can get water to it. They feed each other.

Inspiration? Trees teach that in heavy winds the mighty oak may crash whereas willow bends. So which really is stronger?

What about this being dead without trees? Answer: Oxygen. According to the Arbor Day Foundation, "a mature leafy tree produces as much oxygen in a season as ten persons inhale in a year." I like breathing. Do you too?

Here's a scientific gem to value from the "Cosmos" series: 300 million years ago Earth's entire land surface was thick with newly evolved wooden cellulous fortified trees. These tall trees would eventually fall and become buried without decaying, forming layers of carbon-rich coal. Gases from decay weren't released, resulting in an oxygen surplus, twice our current oxygen level, spawning gigantic insects. Alligator-sized millipedes.

Near the end of the Permian era, Siberian volcanoes erupted over millennia and the coal ignited, a continental Centralia. The carbon dioxide and acidic fumes created a greenhouse effect that warmed the oceans. Global warming. Methane gases from the warmed ocean were released. 96% of all species on Earth perished forever, the Great Dying, the third of our five planetary extinction events: 1) 444 million years ago and 80% lost; 2) 375 million years ago and 75% lost; 3) 251 million years ago and 96% lost; 4) 200 million years ago and 80% lost; 5) 66 million years ago and 76% lost.

Ask Director Pruitt if there might be a sixth massive extinction? That is, if he can hear you through his costly cone of silence.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Friday, 4 May, 2018
"I Want To Be A Cowboy"
Word Count: 750

When our first baby was born in our first congregation we usually asked girls from the youth fellowship to baby-sit. One night, none was available so we asked our church organist to baby-sit. She was eager to be asked.

We returned from dinner, thanked her, and noticed our house felt odd.

Two weeks later we had her baby-sit again, this time as an experiment. Her husband accompanied her. He was an interesting man. The day he was to return after heart surgery the choir sent flowers to his home. A nice gesture. Nobody was yet home when the florist delivered the flowers, so he left them on the doorstep. They wilted in the sun. Husband and wife returned home from the hospital. He phoned me, his voice bitter. He was insulted that the choir deliberately sent him dead flowers.

We trusted her with Margaret but we wanted to make sure we could trust them with our house. This time, I was ready. Not only had I growed up watching all those James Bond movies, I grew up sharing a bedroom with two brothers. I knew how to place little pieces of paper or strands of hair strategically in desk drawers.

We returned to find she had rifled every drawer in our home. Welcome to parish life. Yes, the way congregations talk about pastors is exactly how pastors talk about congregations.

We never asked her (our church matriarch, nee Dominatrix), back. Shortly afterwards rumors began to be spread about me. She also was moderator of the Board of Deacons. He, an elder in the church, served as a Trustee. He also had been the church sexton for years.

He was a lousy church sexton. He could unfold chairs and set up tables. He couldn't clean. It got worse as Sunday school got busier. Dirty diapers would often be left in the nursery for a week. Too often I would arrive early to prepare for a wedding to find the Sanctuary dirty. I ended up vacuuming the carpet, cleaning the bathrooms. I never minded doing some chores. If you're part of the team, you got chores to do. But I do mind doing someone else's job. I told him so. Told him often. Helped him set up a job chart. We still got complaints. Then I got brilliant. I suggested that we promote him. I suggested to Session that we hire a professional cleaning service to come in every two weeks. He could supervise and still be called sexton, even tidy up between the cleaning service visits. Great idea. I shared the idea with him. We signed the contract.

Matriarch didn't think it was a great idea. He soon wrote a letter to me and Session expressing how insulted he was. He resigned from Trustees. She also wrote a letter. She wanted something done or she too would quit, as Deacon and as Organist. Session waffled. I felt hung out to dry. I tried to speak directly to both of them. They wanted to split the church. Didn't.

The elders tried to placate them until one of our elders finally reminded everyone that "we are not going to be held hostage – we've been as fair as possible." Good line. I've used it plenty since: I'm not in the business to please people but to be fair. It's a dereliction of duty for pastors to worry about catering to the congregation, currying favor.

Which is why I want to be a cowboy. What's your fantasy? With Cinco de Mayo tomorrow, perhaps I could be a vaquero, a caballero. Which is why I enjoy listening to Louis L'Amour stories on cassette or watching certain western movies: "Open Range," "Crossfire Trail," "Cowboys and Aliens," "She Wore a Yellow Ribbon." It's the cowboy code: do the hard work, say "Yes, ma'am," don't brag, keep your promise, talk less say more, never shoot in the back, be a man, step up. Those with courage don't need to advertise it. Ride off without needing to be thanked. What do real cowboys in Montana think of our President?

More and more I'm convicted – at church, in my career, as a father, as husband – that I must work on doing my best not as a goal but as my standard, without getting obsessed or worried about the outcome. As said: "the ends are preexistent in the means." Our task is to do what is honorable, fair, true and right, and that is more than enough. Saddle up, we're burning daylight...

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Friday, 11 May, 2018
"Love Isn't Enough"
Word Count: 750

It's been said too often: love is my God. The speaker means well, however juvenile and fatuous is this cliché. The real question is as we celebrate Mother's Day: what kind of love? Love that is needy? Needy love may be fine for mommy's toddler but dreadful in desperate adults. How about love that is gift-love, longing to give? Or love that that is fully appreciative? So asks theologian C.S. Lewis.

When King James set out to have his scholars translate the Bible into the beauty of Shakespearean English, the translators came to the word for love used most frequently throughout the New Testament (AG-A-PEE) and fished to find the most fitting English word. The word they chose was 'charity' from the Latin 'caritas,' defined as 'friendship of man for God.' Charity means far more than benevolence. Far more than pulling out pen and cutting a check for the poor and needy or adding few dollars to be deducted from your cell phone account.

Far more, because the Greek word, AG-A-PEE compares with the Old Testament word, 'hesed,' translated as 'steadfast love.'

I remember a fine man named Dan at my first congregation, an artist and professor of art history. He learned his art by cutting up tents for canvasses during the Korean War. Dan buried his first wife from cancer shortly after she gave birth to their beautiful little Andrea. We buried his 12 year old daughter too, Erin, of his second wife. The elders, male and female, shouldered Erin's little casket from our sanctuary to her grave in the cemetery behind the church building. At Sunday school one day Dan grimaced during a discussion of that gospel phrase "For God so loved the world," and muttered: "I am sick of all this talk about love -- love isn't enough, we need more than love."

Given how we abuse love, Dan was exactly right. All you need is love, love is all you need. Love, love, love – that's what it's all about. No, it isn't. Love isn't enough. At least this kind of popularized, trivialized facile love. Love sentimentalized, saccharinized, romanticized only hint at the real thing. Or take Motherly Love. How often can even a mother's love get twisted into a demonic, smothering, martyr-filled kind of love? Healthy moms exude AG-A-PEE. We can spoil something so humane and beautiful. Without AG-A-PEE love, what becomes of love of country, love of clan, love of self, loving her/him? How twisted can they get?

AG-A-PEE is a special Bible word. You will find it rarely used in any classical Greek writings. Rare word, yet used over 320 times as verb, noun, adjective in the New Testament. What about the other Greek words of love? How about PHILIA (friendship love, brotherly love, based on a common exclusive commitment)? Only 45 times in the New Testament.

EROS (erotic love, pleasure and pain, fleeting)? Alas, never used.

STORGE (comfortable and indiscriminating affection, general affection)? Only three instances will you find in the Bible.

AG-A-PEE. Far richer, stronger, than any form of natural love for it is spiritually divine love, love as divine energy, not a goal but the force by which we live. It makes the other loves worthwhile. It's love made incarnate. For Christians it's the love revealed in Jesus. It is love unconditional, self-giving, respectful, vulnerable, grounded in impersonal truth, for to love is to be courageous enough to be vulnerable which makes AG-A-PEE unsafe and dangerous. AG-A-PEE seeks what is good regardless popularity or ratings.

One early morning it hit me: Were it not for this love, I would have been worse a man than I have been.

This love isn't transactional, ultimately lived as sacrificial love. Self-giving love. Goodwill. Forgiveness. Empathy. Kindness. Self-giving love rather than self-getting. "Love is the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing another's spiritual growth" – Scott Peck.

Guess what? When folks devoid of love denounce you, then you know you must be doing something right, you're loving right. Some might remember when President Obama was speaking about Sandy Hook and gun control and tears welled up. Do you remember one commentator's scoffing, mean-spirited remark about where was the onion on the podium? Golly gee, he only was crying over the murder of first graders. Which politician today is showing such charity?

Imagine a world without AG-A-PEE. It would be like an empty 50 gallon drum echoing with lots of noise, plenty of bluster and emotion. Sadly, that's too easy to imagine.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Friday, 18 May, 2018

"Elder Privilege"

Word Count: 750

Casey, crowded by defenders, might have squeaked out a shot on goal but he played the smarter option. He back-heelled the ball to TJ who one-touched the shot and scored. In soccer, whether club soccer or Premier League, scoring goals is fun. Still, it's manufacturing the assist that's more satisfying. Casey did it again later, trapping the ball on a throw-in, weaving toward the top of the box, and laying in a lovely cross for Dane to snare and slide into the net. In baseball it's the sacrifice fly. It's the satisfaction of making others succeed and get the credit.

Far better this attribute than the opposite, right? Nobody likes a showboat, the guy who demands praise, the fellow who taunts and brags, the guy who needs to be a personality, a celebrity, a glory-hound. Whether its real football or American football, those antics after scoring are annoying.

Give us instead the assist man. I've always admired how Newcastle United's Alan Shearer, one of the greatest forwards of all time, rarely celebrated his goals. He was a no-nonsense, journeyman player. At most he'd raise his arm thanking the crowd while walking back to the half-way line. As Alan aged, he became comfortable in shifting into the set-up role. Mike Schmidt was like this for the Phillies. Remember how he advertised for milk? He knew he had the responsibility to be a role model for kids. I attended one game at Vet Stadium where it was announced that his MVP box was occupied by his church's youth fellowship group.

God bless the meek. People oft misconstrue this word, meek. It doesn't mean mousy or push-over. It means being humble, confident, self-controlled.

It is the best dance step of all: stepping aside. It's holding the door for others. It means taking your turn. It's when a new cashier opens up at the grocery check-out and she waves you over and you invite the person waiting in line ahead of you to go first. I recall a pastor's meeting where some pastors complained to the Director of Pastoral Care that Geisinger lacked reserved parking for clergy. The Director surveyed the room and replied: "Looks to me like most of you could use the extra walking."

By the way, when merging from a ramp, the oncoming traffic has right of way. You're the one merging, you're supposed to yield.

My daughter worked food service for a year at Geisinger Hospital. She thought it funny how on more than one occasion a flock of medical residents considered themselves too important to move out of her way when she was trying to push the food cart down the hallway. The residents did jump, however, when her friends' parents – Surgeons, Physicians, Administrators – would see her in the hallway and say: "Hello, Penny, how's work going today?"

Privilege, self-importance, entitlement is downright annoying. Single moms deserve discounts more than wealthy seniors. With all this talk about privatizing Veteran Administration Medical Care, I sure hope that this doesn't mean vets get to cut in line when scheduling regular hospital appointments.

Let's nurse this theme. The real privilege is being the assist man. It means us retirees shouldn't whine about paying school taxes. Stop being so selfish. Educating the youth is the best investment for our country and for us older folks. What a privilege it is to invest in their lives and their future. Besides, remember this: you're sucking up their future wealth. Their future is our present. Besides, who paid for your public schooling? We old folks benefit from these taxes even if our kids have graduated and gone. We get to enjoy what the young bring to our community: sports, art shows, concerts, theatre, our youth volunteering for local causes, how a quality school district improves our property values along with improving the quality of our lives.

My brother has finished his second round of chemotherapy for lymphoma. Four more to go. We brothers have been kibitzing a bit more than brotherly usual, with my natural tendency toward melancholy bumping up against his tendency to be sanguine. As Ricky advised me: "Don't get too melancholy, getting older is a privilege even with losing my hair -- let us be curmudgeons. Let us remind people of the older important values, also too many don't get to grow old, the world still full of sorrows."

I yield to my older brother. He tells me growing old is a gift. It is our privilege to show the young how to age.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Friday, 25 May, 2018
"Peace Be With You"
Word Count: 750

It took me a while but I finally researched who is the lady statue on the Soldiers Monument at the center of Memorial Park. We know that the lady statue facing Bloom Street on Danville's isn't Lady Justice. Where are the scales of justice? She isn't Lady Liberty for those statues hold the torch aloft. Neither is she the Goddess of Peace (if you want to find out who she is you can find out for yourself by visiting Memorial Park, Danville Pa at Youtube and view our multi-media tour).

Memorial Day deserves a Goddess of Peace, of serenity. In classical mythology Eirenei was this Goddess' name. Eirenei is the source word for lovely Irene: "Good night Irene Good night Irene, I'll get you in my dreams." The statue of this goddess is depicted as a beautiful young woman holding a horn of plenty pouring out corn, bread, grapes (or in her arms a child named 'plenty') because peace makes real the dream for prosperity, abundance, happiness. An overflowing, nourishing cornucopia.

This makes sense. No-peace brings the opposite. The sin, failure, and impracticality of war, chaos, conflict brings devastation, privation, disease. Lack of peace brings ruin, disaster. Read the newspaper. Brokenness breeds brokenness. Separation breeds separation. Hostility breeds hostility. Lies breed lies. Corruption breeds corruption. Immorality breeds immorality. Chaos breeds chaos. Yelling breeds yelling. The problem is that peace requires listening, which is tough for men particularly.

Men declare. Language for men is a tool, a weapon for combat or sport, a means for achieving status, to show off, to impress everyone in the room how much they think they know, ever convinced that my cause, my opinion, my position is just and right and righteous, and I cannot believe all those stupid others do not agree with me. I swear, Twitter must have been invented as the perfect male communication medium: Yelling and telling without having to listen.

So when was the last time you felt serene? Content? At peace? At peace with yourself (blessed peace of mind), at peace with others? Can we get peace from things un-peaceful? We ask our farmers: can you grow good crops from toxic soil?

Eireinei: much more than the absence of war – that’s armistice. But we’ll take what we can get, although it would be nice if all those soldiers who paid the ultimate sacrifice died for real peace rather than a lull in the actions. But we’ll take what we can get.

Armistice is a negative, it means merely the temporary suspension of hostilities. Lack of peace is reactive. Peace is a positive. Peace is proactive. Eireinei comes from the Greek word meaning “to join, to knit together into a whole.”

It’s impossible to be at peace personally and socially when lacking wholeness, integration, without seeing ourselves connected, mutually dependent, mutually weak, mutually needy. There’s the prescription for our personal and social hope; there’s our source for social and personal healing. Cure the cause rather than continue to treat the symptom.

The x-rays revealing the broken tibia and fractured skull of little toddler also exposes parents themselves as inwardly broken, deranged, peace-less. Is it true that unless hindered by other forces and factors, a wound wants to heal?

Can you tell when a choir lacks harmony? Can you tell when a soccer team is a mess? We know that a racing shell crew rowing out of synchronization, ignoring the coxswain, each doing what they want to do, oars clashing and slapping, isn’t going to advance forward very well.

Let’s claim C.S. Lewis’ analogy: Imagine a convoy of ships bringing supplies across the Atlantic to England. A convoy can go wrong two ways. First is when this fleet of ships fails to keep position, breaking formation, either drifting away or colliding into the path of another ship. Second is when the ship itself has failed to keep itself seaworthy and fails to maintain engines in good order.

We are a convoy. In our homes, at work, in worship, nationally, internationally. It helps when we keep formation, maintain courtesy, commitment, fair play, truth-telling. It helps when we keep ours engines in good moral and spiritual repair.

Many of us religious types are fond of passing the peace and using the word for peace as a greeting or a blessing: Peace, paz, shalom, salaam alaikum. Peace be with you. My Bible offers a clever twist in this greeting. The 'you' is plural not singular. It must be plural. It means nothing unless plural.

The Daily Item

Robert John Andrews

Saturday, May 26, 2018

"One Nation Under God"

Word Count: 564

This Gettysburg Address was a message for all America, north and south. Lincoln knew the United States wasn't plural. We do not say: "The United States are conceived in liberty." We say: "The United States is conceived in liberty." Out of many, one. Count how often Lincoln used the words 'we,' 'our,' and 'us' in his Address -- 15 of the 272 words.

The Gettysburg Address: far more than a piece of antique rhetoric intoned full of patriotic sentimentality and solemnity on our Memorial Day gatherings, it's a message demanding from us the progress of human freedom and human equality as originally endorsed by the Declaration of Independence. That's why Lincoln used that arched phrase 'fourscore and seven years ago' (appropriated from Psalm 90). Instead of referring to the adoption of the U.S. Constitution as the birth of our Union, he refers to the signing of the Declaration of Independence: A nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

87 years later, Lincoln achieved what the signers of the Declaration of Independence failed to do. Those created equal now include former slaves.

What Lincoln did at that November afternoon's cemetery dedication was to "take an ugly reality and transform it." From horrible, dreadful war, he voiced purpose in suffering and sacrifice.

Historian Gary Wills explained how Lincoln surprised the audience. The great task about which Lincoln spoke was not emancipation and slavery's prohibition but popular self-government. By popular, he meant lawful self-government. A nation of law not men. Just as law protects us from the tyranny of the few so law protects us from the tyranny of the majority. Self-government by all the people, not just my kind of people.

Our American Revolution avoided ending up as did the French Revolution. July 4 and July 14 -- Independence Day and Bastille Day -- are a study in contrasts with the French mob filling baskets with severed heads and creating a petty despot. Our American Revolution remains incomplete, an unfinished work of democracy. True then, true now. Unfinished liberty, equality, justice. Each generation must continue the work and the progress of this United States experiment.

Lincoln likely added the phrase 'under God' during the speech. The phrase is absent from prior drafts.

Wrongly should we view 'under God' as affirmation, as boast, a divine quid pro quo, as if America is some kind of Christian nation guaranteed to be blessed above all other nations when we submit to the Bible (as certain Christian demagogues desire to tell us exactly what the Bible says). How is this dangerous view of nationhood any different from Iran and a theocracy of sharia law?

Lincoln's faith kept him keenly alert to the danger of idolatry of nation. He firmly believed that no nation is absolute or sovereign, for all nations stand under divine judgment. This is what the phrase "under God" means. It's no boast. It rejects the notion that America is spiritually pure or morally superior – our sin of slavery proved that, as have all our sinful injustices since. It means we exist under God's almighty judgment. Providence as judgment reveals itself through human history.

When you say "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance be very afraid. History judged them. History judges us. Whether or not the men buried at Gettysburg have died in vain is up to us still.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Friday, June 1, 2018

"A Teacher's Life Part I"

Word Count: 750

Most of us haven't a clue what other people's work life is like. Nevertheless, we are quick to complain about the demands of our jobs while making assumptions about other jobs. We really should hush up until we walk around in other people's shoes for a day. A favorite book by journalist Studs Terkel is "Working," where he recorded interviews with construction worker, waitress, social worker, farmer, professor, clerk, nurse, piano tuner, among dozens of other occupations. Teachers, because our taxes pay their salaries, lazily become subjects of assumptions. How familiar are we about what they go through in a day? Would you enjoy spending a day with a teacher? The gift of understanding.

What do you suppose a teacher's life is like? I met a young teacher the other day and asked a few questions. She was talkative; hence this column will be continued. She graduated from University several years ago where she earned degrees in English and Education. She attained her teacher certification. Two years were spent serving as long term substitute in two different districts. Finally, she was hired in her dream job as Middle School Language Arts Teacher. I interviewed her about what her work life is like. Let's walk around in her shoes awhile.

What is the official school daily schedule? Teachers report no later than 7:40 AM. I often arrive between 6 to 6:30 AM to do paperwork, get access to the copier. The day ends at 3:05 PM. Sometimes I leave at 3:45 PM, sometimes not until 5 PM due to preparing lesson plans, cleaning my classroom, or grading and updating the grades into the school computer. Some kids arrive at 7 AM and wait in the cafeteria until 7:45 AM when they gather in class for announcements, the pledge. Block One is from 7:53 to 8:53 where I teach 25 students English Language Arts. We are reading well-worn copies of the novel, "The Giver." Block Two begins at 8:55 until 9:55. My class has 22 students, 12 of whom have Individualized Education Programs that require extra attention. Special One (from 9:58 to 10:35), Special Two (from 10:37 to 11:19), and Special Three (from 11:21 to noon) are times when the students rotate through such classes as industrial tech, health, computer tech, chorus, band. I use Special One to make copies, prepare, grade papers. For Special Two I conduct remedial teaching, helping students improve their writing. Many struggle with writing. We try to get them passionate about their work. We've decided to focus on journalism now: articles, filming with a camera, self-produced material. During Special Three we meet either in our Teams to plan with our counterpart teachers (math, social studies, sciences) or in our own Departments. Noon to 12:30 is when the students gather alphabetically in classrooms to work on assignments. 12:33 to 1:02 is lunch. Sometimes I eat with other teachers, more often I eat in my classroom so students can visit and we can review their progress. During Block

Three (1:05-2:05) my 18 students work on the novel, "The Giver." 23 students are in my Block Four class also reading, "The Giver."

What hours do you spend beyond the school day? Preparation is endless. I spend time in my classroom on many Saturdays frequently from 9 to 2 or 3 PM to redecorate the room, tidy up, clean desks, prepare my unit, and grade papers and tests (it is easier than bringing all the material home). Because it is my first year where I'm learning the material as I teach it, I'm observed and evaluated each of the four marking periods, each in turn by the Vice Principal, the Director of Curriculum, the Director of Special Education, and the Principal (although since we don't have a Principal right now, the Vice-principal stepped in).

What extra hours have you put into doing your job? Hours spent grading, revising plans, reviewing curriculum, reworking power point presentations, making sure plans are ready for substitute teachers. We are insanely structured –since they are Middle Schoolers, time without direction, unstructured, can be wasted time.

What kind of resources do you use to teach? Worksheets, textbooks (containing short stories, articles, passages), novels, on-line WebQuest. Some material is in rough shape. Each student also has a Chrome book which, considering they are 7th graders, are misused all the time. Where there's a will, there's a way. They like their games. They like texting. A new favorite, 'Fortnite,' they try to play on their phones.

To be continued...

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Friday, June 9, 2018

"A Teacher's Life Part II"

Word Count: 750

We continue last week's column walking in the shoes of a Middle school teacher.

What expectations are placed on you? The students ask me to watch their games or concerts. They expect me to be nice, fair in grading, to answer them immediately, to be bubbly, to care about them. Parents expect me to notify them immediately if their child isn't handing in their homework or using their Chromebook correctly. A big challenge is finding new methods for students to write down homework assignments. I communicate with parents mostly by email, sometimes by phone. Parents can forget I deal directly with 90 students. Our administrators want to make sure our instruction reaches all kids at all levels, that we use technology appropriately, that we enter grades on time, that lesson plans are kept in a binder and stored in the system. My colleagues want to be assured that I know the material and that we present the material consistently, coordinated. We also help each other use fun ways to teach.

What do you feel the community expects of you? I feel they want me to do my job well without getting overpaid for it.

Is teaching what you expected? Absolutely! Absolutely not! I didn't expect this much stress. Some stress comes from the demands of parents, students, administrators. Most stress comes from myself,

my own self-reflection – that’s the hardest part of the job. Stressed out for myself to be a good teacher, to know what is a good teacher. I take the blame and am hard on myself. I want to give them the best.

Is it what you were trained for? My best class was the teacher at Bloomsburg University who told stories about being a teacher and dealing with classroom management. He once told how he was held up during bus duty.

What do you find unsatisfying about teaching? We completely missed talking about emotional support. You need to consider their maturity level. We want them to be functioning adolescents. Hormonally they are bananas. How the kids can talk to each other, calling each other ‘retard,’ ‘gay,’ ‘autistic.’ How they treat substitute teachers. It’s become our job to teach manners. One student ripped a workbook in half. Another was cursing at teachers. Another had to be confined. Another drew a swastika on an assignment. Some will refuse to do the work. Contacting the parents can either be great or a waste of time. Discipline can involve a warning, reporting the incident, lunch detention, after school detention. Useful can be bringing the student to a teacher’s meeting for us together to go over the problems. It can be rewarding and terrifying. It gets difficult with the kids in and out of the classroom all the time, such as for band lessons for 20 minutes of my class but then you want to the kids to enjoy band. Or fire drills. Or early dismissal for sports. You have to remember who misses which lessons. One day four students were called to the office for something that happened at lunch. These were kids who can’t easily get caught up. Also unsatisfying is when we hear: “I support teachers; I just don’t support how they are paid. They get summers off.”

Do you get summers off? No! It’s a time to set up the classroom, work on the curriculum, prepare lesson plans. Everything needs to be planned out but you also need to be prepared to be improvisational.

What do you find satisfying? The kids are Middle school weird. But they are what is satisfying. One student blossomed when writing a book of poetry that she dedicated to me. There was a kid who thought no one cared. His poetry was dark. But we read it. He felt valued. There is a kid who struggles to read who wrote a haiku badly spelled about hating school. Now he volunteers to help other kids in class.

How would you evaluate the state of education today? Wonky. What’s going to be the next trend? Then the Pennsylvania System of School Assessments: the kids sitting for tests for two hours three days straight. Keystones for High School. Politicians telling educators what they need to do. Proficiency and growth are not the same thing! Kids aren’t meant to be molded but unmolded.

What improvements would you want to make in yourself as a teacher? Less self-doubt. More time to prepare. Hand papers back quicker. My desk is littered with post-it notes reminding me who and what.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Friday, 15 June, 2018
“My Dad”
Word Count: 750

Looking back on my relationship with my father, I cannot say we were close. Ours wasn’t a hugging kind of relationship. As others have joked, if my father and I ever said that we loved each other it would have

embarrassed both of us. I didn't want dad to be my friend and he didn't need me to be his friend. He was dad, I was son. Third son at that. There's virtue in those halcyon days of "courteous detachment." Golly, if either of my parents ever arrived to watch one of my sporting events when I was a kid my buddies on the field would've asked me: "Why are you in trouble?"

I grieve to say I find it a blessing dad died when he did, that the dad I admired, despite him handling World War II, didn't have to suffer today's headlines, including what I perceive to be the debasement of his Republican party and deconstruction of American democracy (encouraged by silence, servility, jingoism, pseudo-patriotism, incompetence, greed, willful ignorance, self-interest, disregard for intelligent debate, and lack of humor).

When my brothers and I spoke at dad's funeral, I offered these words: "Today, goodbyes really are goodbyes, neither can they be sentimentalized away. Death cannot be mitigated with blithe self-indulgent slogans. He is gone. His arms will never again hug his wife. No new babies on his knee for his "boolah, boolah" song. He is gone. He did, however, leave something behind. We say goodbye to a man who needed to work, to build something, to contribute, to make chances to make memories rather than wait around in the off-chance that memories might attach themselves to you. Live well, die well. So today, I relay how he lived and died: be a man, be an adult, take responsibility. Far more important than you fussing about your rights and your feelings is to serve and do what is right for the sake of family, community. So, friends and family, we all know what it is to lose. I'm just grateful for having had the chance to find."

This may sound odd given our contemporary craving for emotional appeasement, but we didn't feel it necessary to say we loved each other. He said it to us in a dad's way to sons. He said it when he gave mom a Saturday sleep-in, waking us at 6 AM, griddled pancakes while we watched 'Modern Farmer,' then led us to work at the family factory. He said it when he would've been mortified not to rush to hold a door open for a lady. He said it by us watching every State of Union speech together. He said it by serving as school board president, church trustee, bank board director, president of Rotary. He said it by showing that the boss sometimes sweeps the floor and unloads the truck. He said it by slipping an extra twenty into my bride's hand.

He said it with his paternal admonitions: "Remember, you represent the family;" "We expected more of you (that one was a crusher);" "Smile and the world smiles with you, cry and you cry alone;" "If you can't say anything nice about someone don't say anything at all;" "Don't wait for someone else to do it." The nastiest thing he would say of someone was that they were 'kooks.'

Once when he was verbally attacked by a crude customer at our paint store, I learnt about manhood. We three sons wanted to throw the man out. Dad listened as the man berated him, yelling how our paint was no good, he wanted his money back, it was peeling all over the side of his house. Dad nodded. Dad waited for the man to breathe and quizzed: "So how is it on the other three sides?" The man grumped that those sides were fine. "So," dad observed, "It isn't the paint."

Dad figured it was more important to show us love by showing us how he expected his sons to live in such a way as to be worthy of the legacy we inherited and live in such a way to leave a worthy legacy. Respect not resentment, service not exploitation, others not you, where we reject cheering or justifying snobbery, dishonesty, and vulgarity, where morality, equality, justice, constitutional law are no mere platitudes but practiced realities. Someday I might get there.

How will history remember you after you die? How will you be mourned? What will they say about you at your funeral?

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Friday, 22 June, 2018
“Never Here”
Word Count: 750

With Independence Day almost two weeks away, I give thanks I'm a citizen of the United States of America. Our family tradition, besides eating several kosher hot dogs, is to watch the musical, "1776," every July 4th. Imagine creating a Broadway musical about John Adams and the Continental Congress? We love it. It's our small way of celebrating the daring, commitment, and courage required to draft and sign the Declaration of Independence with its revolutionary words inspired by Calvinistic theology and Scottish philosophers (Reid, Hume, Smith, Ferguson, Hutcheson): *"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness."*

Thank God for such a country, such a Declaration, and such a Constitution, which is why after I finished reading an early Father's Day gift of Madeleine Albright's new book, "Fascism: A Warning," I gave thanks I live in our USA.

I closed her book with gratitude that such a thing could never happen here in our United States. I closed the book giving thanks at how fortunate we are to live a country immune from such terrible possibilities. Good thing too, because me being of Scottish temperament, if I were to live under a fascist government I hope I'd be among the first to be rounded up. Perhaps that's why I envy how in the musical Abigail Adams explains why she is so proud to be the wife of John Adams: "Well, think of it, John, to be married to the man who is always the first in line to be hanged!"

Albright explains how fascism isn't so much a "political ideology but a means of seizing and holding power." Albright details in her book how fascism gained a foothold in certain countries that aren't as blessed as America, such as with Mussolini in Italy, Hitler in Germany, Erdogan in Turkey, Putin in Russia, Kim Jong-un in North Korea. She describes the characteristics that gave rise to despots, characteristics fortunately absent from the United States. After all, we can rest on our laurels. In the most recent Democracy Index sponsored by 'The Economist' we rank as high as 21 out of the 167 nations measured by the sixty indicators of democratic principles (electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, function of government, political participation, political culture). Pat yourselves on the back: The democratic health of the United States ranks right after South Korea.

What are the characteristics and tactics that resulted in the rise of fascism in those lesser countries? It began with economic distress and anxiety. Characteristics included a rabid nativism, a hyper-nationalism that rejected collaboration and championed their nation against other nations, the charismatic leader used "grandiose rhetoric" to pit us versus them, "drawing energy from those upset,"

stirring up fears, resentments, and grievances against the enemy who has denied us what we feel we deserve. Fascism requires that government decides, citizens serve -- in stark contrast to our American understanding where we don't want authoritarian leaders to save us for we value creating solutions by working together from the bottom up.

Mussolini, whose campaign slogan was "drenare la palude" ("drain the swamp"), described his rise as plucking the chicken one feather at a time. Using lies, violence, threats, he gradually eliminated political parties and adversaries, demanded personal loyalty, silenced media outlets, eliminated the freedom of the press, took personal control of the judiciary where he, not the courts, decided what was just and fair. Fascist leaders succeed by "doing whatever is necessary to achieve victory and command obedience." Ultimately, fascist leaders cheat their followers, making lives worse.

Rest easy, fellows Americans, for such an unhappy thing could never happen here. I assume we too would have signed our names to this pledge: *"And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor."*

Happy Independence Day! Enjoy your picnic.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
2 July, 2018
"The Dead Speak"
Word Count: 750

Due to lichen and erosion, many of the epitaphs were difficult to read but we did our best to decipher them. An epitaph is a commemorative tombstone inscription, literally from the Greek: 'epi' meaning 'above,' 'taph(os)' meaning 'tomb.' We look forward to sharing with the community during the Heritage Festival what we found and photographed in our local cemeteries: Odd Fellows, Reformed, Roman, Sidler Hill, Episcopal, Lutheran, Jewish, even Grove Church's Memorial Garden. How we bury today ranges from traditional casket and grave, vault, mausoleum, cremation, columbarium, urn, loose ashes. How we mark and remember our dead also is changing dramatically, from traditional scripture to sentimental poems.

Aside from raising some basic questions such as why are so many cemeteries located on a hill and why do we have grave markers in the first place, our slide show will show our modern tombstones and contemporary epitaphs -- tending toward the more personalized, even cute -- in contrast to the older sayings and religious symbolism -- Statues of little lambs indicating the grave of a baby, scriptural epitaphs: "The Lord is my shepherd," "Asleep in Jesus." We'll include a tableau featuring military veteran grave markers for the wars fought. We will show examples of different types of headstones. How we bury says much about ourselves. Visit the rows of humble tombstones for all those nuns who served selflessly. Contrast them with the more ostentatious mausoleums not too far away.

Some might think this morbid -- not really. We can learn much about ourselves by our cemeteries, our burial customs, our mortuary rituals. I also wonder when did we start wearing clothing for modesty rather than for the cold (and I don't mean fig leaves)? Our dead reveal much about the living. In fact, only humans bury their dead. Only we have experts in handling death: funeral directors, pastors and priests. Yes, other species can grieve and mourn, such as elephants standing witness at the corpse of a

killed elephant or a mother chimpanzee holding onto the body of her baby chimp. But even with such expressions of grief, elephant and primate leave the body behind and move on. Deer leaves fawn beside the shoulder of the road. Praying mantis dine on her mate.

We bury. In fact, there is paleontological evidence we have been burying our dead for at least 350,000 years, well before the ascension of us Homo sapiens. The evolutionary tree is vast, expansive, lots of branches, only one still blooming. Us. Still, they are us. A cave in Spain hints that Homo heidelbergensis, a Hominid branch that didn't make it, buried their dead together, even including profoundly an axe handle in the burial site (much as we ritually might include rings or Bibles in caskets). A NOVA episode presented how in the Rising Star Cave system in the Cradle of Humanity near Johannesburg, South Africa, Homo naledi buried their dead 335,000 to 266,000 years ago. 90,000 years ago a mother was buried in what is now Israel along with her baby. Closer to home, the Neanderthals respected their dead, carefully burying them 50,000 years ago in what is now France. The bones indicate the man was elderly and had suffered an injury years before he died suggesting how the Neanderthal cared for the sick and old.

The Neanderthal, too long stereotyped as a callous and brawny beast, actually showed the strength of tenderness. The strength of being a protector, of being compassionate. Even pre-human Neanderthal (whose DNA we share even now) seemed to appreciate that the truer way of humanity isn't that world is savagely divided between the cruelly hard and the weak. No, survival of the fittest doesn't mean the survival of the strongest. It means survival of those who best adapt. The theory of Alpha Male has been long debunked. It has for wolves. Us humans too. The sharpest teeth or snarl isn't what secures dominance. The scientist who first suggested the alpha wolf theory has himself been saying he was wrong. The real 'top dog' is based not on bullying and brute dominance but on the family model: of mom and dad raising pups, discipline encouraged through the true strength of commitment, agreeableness, kindness, affection, generosity, love.

Let's repeat: our ancient evolutionary ancestors respected their dead. They cared for others. They demonstrated symbolic behavior, even spiritual behavior. They demonstrated not only consciousness, self-awareness, but also a conscience.

Dare we say that to be human, humanity itself, means to be compassionate, securing the dignity of each other?

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Monday, 9 July, 2018
"Lady Liberty"
Word Count: 750

Oswald Young would have seen her when entering the New York harbor. Mary, his bride, would have seen her a few months later after her crossing. She arrived and they were married in 1888 on the 4th of July. They both left their homesteads at Whitley Bay near Newcastle for new lives. My grandfather, George, would be born in New Jersey two years after their reunion. It was the way it often was done. The man gaining a foothold: employment, a home. Bride following alone. In Oswald's case he was a carpenter, although, as my mother remarked, perhaps not a very good one.

My grandmother's family would have watched her being assembled from their homes in Brooklyn. They might even have celebrated her dedication on October 28, 1886, even seeing President Grover Cleveland, even enjoying the very first ticker-tape parade.

She is "Liberty Enlightening the World," familiarly known as the "Statue of Liberty." She wasn't a surprise gift. Sections of her had been on display at various fairs years before. She was a gift, not from France per se but from French admirers of the United States. Given France's political turmoil – despots, corruption, inflation, Franco-Prussian war -- certain French liberals wanted to celebrate the United States as a "model of popular government rooted in stability."

For years, American writers and artists had been sojourning in Paris, learning from them and them from us. Our relationship with France historically had been more affectionate than with any other nation. Thomas Jefferson was, as was his friend Marquis de Lafayette, a fervent proponent of the cause of the French Revolution but not the eventual tactics. If it weren't for France, Cornwallis wouldn't have surrendered to Washington. During those years we faced a common enemy: Britain. So certain French liberals, who admired how our American Revolution ended up in a noble constitution rather than a Napoleon, wanted to give us a gift symbolic of our national values (or what they hoped would remain our nation's enduring ideals).

She was a gift not from government to government but to our people from people who admired how this young nation in the new world offered the old world a promise of idealism, of meritocracy, of a chance, of hope for them back in the old world, a beacon shining forth the dignity of individual rights rejecting the threadbare ways of class, race, privilege. The seed of the Statue's idea took root shortly after the Civil War when our nation fought to remove our sin of slavery, men died trying to make us a good nation.

Facts are facts, for we confess we haven't perfected these ideals. Within us still lurk demons of intolerance, imperialism, bigotry. At least we have ideals to which we can still aspire. She still stands in our harbor despite plenty of immigrants nowadays arriving neither by land nor sea but through our airports.

She faces southeast toward the entrance of the harbor that her welcoming face would be among the first things the newcomers would see. Yes, Oswald and Mary would have seen her upon coming into port just as my wife and I saw her coming into port at the end of a transatlantic crossing on the Queen Mary II. The difference was that we were coming home; Oswald and Mary were coming to the unknown to build a home.

What did Oswald and Mary see? The same things that you and I can see still.

We see the goddess of freedom named Libertas, worshipped by freed slaves in Rome. She wears a modest robe rather than the half robe that the goddess wore during the French Revolution.

We see the torch of liberty, purposed as a lighthouse to guarantee safe passage and safe harbor.

We see her holding the tablet shaped like a keystone. A keystone is the supporting stone in construction. The keystone for us is what is inscribed on this tablet in Roman numerals: the date of July 4, 1776.

At her feet we see the broken chain. We are a land emancipated from tyranny, independent because we remain a democratic republic. There should be no political irony in how those two words hang together.

Her crown bears seven spikes representing the seven continents and the seven seas, with twenty-five windows through which heavenly rays beam upon this world. Liberty belongs to all humanity.

Last, she wears sandals. Please do note: she isn't standing still. She is walking forward. Let us make sure that she continues walking forward.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Monday, July 16, 2018

"Would You Qualify?"

Word Count: 750

Our immigration policies are a mess and recently made messier. I petitioned both of our Pennsylvania Senators for a national forum to take place where facts, intelligence, and reason could shove aside rhetoric, propaganda, and invective. Let's sit down and get the facts about immigration: who wants to emigrate, why, how, what statistics? We might begin by sharing our own immigration stories and how our people became citizens.

By the way, would you qualify to become an American citizen? Here is a sampling of civic questions posed in the naturalization test when an immigrant wants to become a US citizen. The officer can choose any ten questions from the pool of a hundred. To pass the test you must answer six of the ten correctly. The ones I share here deal mostly with principles of American democracy. The test begins:

1. What is the supreme law of the land?
2. What does the Constitution do?
3. The idea of self-government is in the first three words of the Constitution. What are these words?
4. What is an amendment?
5. What do we call the first ten amendments to the Constitution?
6. What is one right or freedom from the First Amendment?*
7. How many amendments does the Constitution have?
8. What did the Declaration of Independence do?
9. What are two rights in the Declaration of Independence?
10. What is freedom of religion?
11. What is the economic system in the United States?*
12. What is the "rule of law"?
13. Name one branch or part of the government.
14. What stops one branch of government from becoming too powerful?
15. Who is in charge of the executive branch?
16. Who makes federal laws?
17. What are the two parts of the U.S. Congress?
18. How many U.S. Senators are there?
19. We elect a U.S. Senator for how many years?
20. Who is one of your state's U.S. Senators now?
21. The House of Representatives has how many voting members?

22. We elect a U.S. Representative for how many years?
23. Name your U.S. Representative.
24. Who does a U.S. Senator represent?
25. Why do some states have more Representatives than other states?
26. We elect a President for how many years?
27. In what month do we vote for President?
28. What is the name of the President of the United States now?
29. What is the name of the Vice President of the United States now?
30. If the President can no longer serve, who becomes President?
31. If both the President and the Vice President can no longer serve, who becomes President?
32. Who is the Commander in Chief of the military?
33. Who signs bills to become laws?
34. Who vetoes bills?
35. What does the President's Cabinet do?
36. What are two Cabinet-level positions?
37. What does the judicial branch do?
38. What is the highest court in the United States?
39. How many justices are on the Supreme Court?
40. Who is the Chief Justice of the United States now?
41. Under our Constitution, some powers belong to the federal government. What is one power of the federal government?
42. Under our Constitution, some powers belong to the states. What is one power of the states?
43. Who is the Governor of your state now?
44. What is the capital of your state?*
45. What are the two major political parties in the United States?
46. What is the political party of the President now?
47. What is the name of the Speaker of the House of Representatives now?
48. There are four amendments to the Constitution about who can vote. Describe one of them.
49. What is one responsibility that is only for United States citizens?
50. Name one right only for United States citizens.
51. What are two rights of everyone living in the United States?
52. What do we show loyalty to when we say the Pledge of Allegiance?
53. What is one promise you make when you become a United States citizen?
54. How old do citizens have to be to vote for President?
55. What are two ways that Americans can participate in their democracy?
56. When is the last day you can send in federal income tax forms?
57. When must all men register for the Selective Service?
96. Why does the flag have 13 stripes?
97. Why does the flag have 50 stars?*
98. What is the name of the national anthem?

Would you be admitted?

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Monday, 23 July, 2018
"True Believers"
Word Count: 750

When challenged by journalist Chris Wallace in the interview in Finland, Vladimir Putin punched back with diverting accusations. He's a counter-puncher. It's a familiar tactic. If you dislike the question, you turn the tables and interrogate the interrogator. If you dislike the question, you shift the blame to someone not yourself. Putin is adept at avoiding being accountable. It shows how thin skinned he is about accountability or criticism. He needs to be unquestioned. Do you remember how angry he became when people hinted that the Harry Potter movie modeled the elf Dobby on Putin? Check out the ears.

Said Putin to a tough-minded Chris Wallace: "Don't make the relationship between Russia and the United States — don't hold it hostage of this internal political struggle." Putin added: "It's quite clear to me that this is used in the internal political struggle, and it's nothing to be proud of for American democracy, to use such dirty methods in the political rivalry."

Really? It would be dirty politics if the response to the Russian cyber-attack on our electoral process and values were used as Putin and Trump allege. Their allegations actually reveal their souls, how they operate. Not that Trump and Putin are the same. No, no, no.

Putin is a Stalin-esque tyrant in tailored suits. Putin murders and imprisons opponents. Putin erases journalists. Putin controls the state media. Putin and cronies are stealing themselves rich. Putin isn't so much a sick man as he is a driven man. His problem is that he is righteous. He is on a patriotic mission to take his second rate and economically struggling Russia and restore the Soviet Union to former glory. Putin is ambitious and motivated by a cause which requires the destruction of liberal democracies and collapse of NATO. Putin is dangerous because he is an insidiously competent true believer.

Trump isn't at all like Putin. Trump has no beliefs. Trump isn't ambitious so much as greedy. Pastoral instincts tell me that Trump is a weak, hapless, insecure, jealous, incompetent man, emotionally crippled. He's desperate to be loved because he doesn't know love.

Which suggests how we should be very proud of the Mueller investigation. It is living proof that we won't use the law to persecute opponents, that due process isn't some dirty political trick. The Mueller investigation is living proof of the rule of law, and that all persons — from president to average citizen, even foreigners in our land — are protected by the law.

How long do you think Mueller would be allowed to remain alive in Russia?

Putin rejects the rule of law. He believes in the rightness of the strong man. Even the Orthodox Church bows to Putin. He likes those portions of the Bible that urge upon humble Christians obedience to civil authorities.

Yes, several portions of the New Testament include admonitions to be obedient to the civil authorities, as inadequately quoted recently by our Attorney General.

The reason for these admonitions in the New Testament is partly indicative of conventional deference to the rulers at that time and place. Rulers were arbiters for peace and justice because they could punish, Christians couldn't. Rulers could levy taxes, wage war, Christians couldn't.

This is reinforced when the father of Presbyterianism spoke about the high calling and role of the magistrate in administering justice. For us of the Reformed tradition, the highest and noblest religious calling of all is to serve in government, politics.

These admonitions also are in the New Testament because the Christian community was a target of repression and fear by the state religion of Roman paganism, so Paul among other Christian writers wanted to impress the authorities that Christians posed no threat to their authority.

Yet what would threaten Putin is a fuller grasp of the Bible: the obligation of leaders to serve their people, free their people, protect the weak and poor; the bad examples of corrupt rulers who failed to fulfill what God expected of them; God's own warning to the Israelites that wanting a king was a profoundly dumb idea; the higher gospel of loving your neighbor as yourself.

Putin surely would be threatened by this theological rationale for revolution: that when the civil authority becomes a tyrant and fails to protect and implement the divine principles of justice, goodness, then that government no longer is valid government. The will of the people to alter or abolish.

Rebellion then becomes a faithful act. This is the theology that inspired our Declaration of Independence.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Monday, 30 July, 2018
"Dear Alyce"
Word Count: 750

I received a disheartening letter from Alyce, a member of my first parish. She wrote about her disappointment with church, feeling betrayed by the church whilst acknowledging her failure to be a responsible, thoughtful Christian. Part of her disappointment stems from the church's failure to teach the Bible's rich history: who wrote it, how and when it was composed, how we fail to be honest about the church's dark side. Her disappointment also stems from her detour into a vague spirituality that has left her feeling rootless. She asked me what discussions are occurring behind the church's closed doors. What's happening to Christianity?

Lordy knows church can be ultimately disappointing. It'll always be disappointing. There's no perfect church because church is imperfect us. Like clumsy dancers, we bump into each other and step onto each other's toes. Plus, we can be readily offended.

My reply? Replying as one who also can feel rootless and searching for good soil, I tried to provide some direction, some hope, for I fervently believe that Christianity in the US isn't collapsing so much as experiencing a major reformation which is exciting, liberating, profound, scary. I mentioned also how despite modern trends, I see church people caring for one another, bringing meals to the grieving, visiting the sick, fighting for justice, daring sacrificial love.

Nevertheless, it would have been cowardly for me to avoid critiquing my beloved church. We suffer the sin of low expectations. 19th century American Protestantism cheapened us by turning Jesus and the Bible into idols. If you really want to cringe over the current state of the church, list those in our nation

today who get to speak for Christianity. Dear me: mice-like, throne kissing preaching. What does it profit to gain a Supreme Court and lose your soul?

What are our others sins? Too many Sunday schools stagnate believers into third grade thinking. Arky, arky, wee little Zacchaeus, pabulum, pat moralisms might be fine for children but youth and adults deserve theological meat.

Our sin? How “the greatest enemy of religion is religion itself.” How religion easily becomes the object of faith rather than the organic means for essential faith.

Our sin? How our professional conversations behind closed doors are often about how to sell off church buildings, about marketing church like a product, about the dearth of dedicated pastors, the lack of high caliber, scholarly, gutsy pastors, the prevalence of neediness and a cultural preference for anti-intellectualism.

Our sin? How we desperately want to feel good about ourselves. We want security. We need to be liked.

Our sin? How once again we’re failing to find balance between the pulls of ardor and order, feelings and intellect. Ours is a culture rampantly feasting on feelings and disparaging knowledge, intellect. We wallow in rank emotionalism. It’s one reason we suffer leaders driven by feelings of insecurity and injury. Careful there, friend.

Hunter said to bear: “I want a fur coat.” Bear said to hunter: “I want a full belly.” Bear ate hunter and both got what they desired.

Passions are wonderful, transporting, but when reckless, unchecked, passions are like an untrained Pit Bull. Passions, affections, the senses, emotions, the inclination of the heart – they are natural, potentially beautiful, same as the natural elements of wind, water, fire.

Yes, pity the person who lacks feelings, pity the hard-hearted person. Even when feelings overwhelm you, mislead you, better that than no feelings at all. Better pain’s lesson. Because the more instructive emotions are rarely the ones that make you feel good about yourself. Do you find it fascinating how we cry, why we cry?

I never have been convinced that the business of church is to make us feel good about ourselves. Comforted, yes. Blessed, yes. Awakened, yes. Challenged, yes. Transported and transformed, yes. Daring truth.

The problem is that if all it is is ‘feelings,’ – your guilt, your angers, your fears, your resentments, your insecurities, your loneliness, your fear of being found out, your hurt feelings, your need to feel happy – then people can be taken where they don’t really want to end up. History judges. History always judges between the true and the false.

Colonial preacher Jonathan Edwards warned: “the will is determined by the stronger motive and the will soon is followed by the body.”

Feelings simply are signals trying to tell you something about yourself, very often something you don't want to acknowledge.

But, we are not our feelings. Instead, we are what our mind does with our feelings.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Monday, August 6, 2018

"The American Dream, Part I"

Word Count: 750

Black women, please don't vote. White women, please don't vote. Black men, please don't vote. If you are 18 to 29 years of age, please don't vote. I'd rather you didn't. After all, I'm an old white guy and I'd much rather my vote count more than yours. You see, if you stay away from the election polls, I get to have more say than you as to who'll be elected. So, don't vote.

With your types now getting more involved in politics, you're really messing up America for old white guy me. Though I thank you for keeping on working as hard as you can in howsoever many jobs you need to sustain your standard of living because your contributions to social security enable me to maintain my standard of living. Keep working, just don't vote. That's my prerogative. I'm an old white guy. For me, the economy's doing just dandy. I got my house, my pension, my social security (Bob: you do realize that social security is a pure form of socialism?).

Trump boasts of his fantastic, unrivaled, miraculous economic turnaround. From the economic mess he inherited, Donald brags, our nation finally is on the path of recovery and wealth. He's so predictably boring, a TV rerun. Too bad the facts don't add up. Accountability, Donald. Trump inherited an improving economy. In the 17 full months before Trump took office – September 2015 to January 2017 – the U.S. economy created 3.54 million jobs, more than Trump's numbers. Obama also had better numbers for GDP. I give Trump credit for not bankrupting the Obama Administration's progress (yet). Has Trump ever done a decent days work?

Thank God for our adversarial, free press. Quoting Steve Benen: "What about GDP growth? This morning's quarterly report pointed to great news – the economy grew at an annual rate of 4.1% between April and June – but Trump's boasts overlook the fact that it grew even faster in several quarters during the Obama era. What's more, in Trump's first year, economic growth reached 2.3%, which wasn't bad, but it was short of the growth we saw in 2010, 2014, and 2015."

What's the greatest threat to our economy today? It's the most wracking cancer afflicting any economy, for Trump's self-interested, foolish policies are cheating, weakening America: the thinning of the middle class, income disparity ('wealth gap'), the increase of those considered lower class and poor. As the eternal cliché goes: the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer, largely due to wealth consolidated in privileged folks enjoying their tax reforms and the lack of decent wage earning jobs for folks who simply want decent work so they can raise their family in a nice home.

Retreating backwards to the fading jobs of yesteryear isn't the answer. It makes lives worse in the long run. It's like steel workers saying: "Let's fire up iron forges again." We commit suicide when we resume throwing coal ash into rivers, when we dig oil pipelines through precious landscapes, when we deregulate environmental laws, when we hasten climate change. Sure, what fun to see the Cuyahoga

River burn again, what fun to guess which town will become the next Centralia? I suppose we can start allocating pontoon houseboats to half the population of Florida. How big a wall is needed to prevent Wall Street from flooding?

No, we require new entrepreneurial industries for a new age and this global economy.

Sorry, Donald, America isn't getting richer. Wage growth for those on the lower end of the pay scale is flat, for certain sectors it's declining. Where incomes are steadily increasing is among those already paid well, those who can afford country club fees. Fore! You are no populist.

Entry level jobs (Weis at \$9 an hour, fast food breakfast shift at \$7.85 to \$9.42 per hour) have become unsustainable main sources of income. \$9.42 x 40 hours equals \$376.80 weekly income. \$376.80 x 52 weeks equals \$19,593.60 annual gross income. According to Poverty Guidelines a family of three would qualify for Head Start with \$826.40 to spare. Then there is the food service cashier at a local University who during summer break is laid off and told by the employer to apply for unemployment compensation. How many part-time jobs does it take to gain full employment?

Candidates, are you listening?

So don't vote, you types. Despite me living month to month on my pension and social security, I'm sitting pretty. I'm an old white guy.

To be continued...

The Danville New
Robert John Andrews
Monday, 13 August, 2018
"The American Dream, Part II"
Word Count: 750

How are young people able to make it in today's economy where the middle class is thinning and the lower class and poor are swelling? How are families surviving given flat wages and widening income disparity, this cancerous wealth gap? Trickle-down economics simply means a golden shower.

Consider local real estate. A Mill Street apartment goes for \$675 a month. You can buy a home on Water Street for \$87,500 or Ash Street for \$149,900. If you can afford more you can buy at Heather Hills for \$330,000.

Our expenses are peanuts to where many of our kids live, where the economic, cultural opportunities are. Their careers weren't going to advance around here. Seeking positives, they felt it necessary to relocate to San Francisco, Denver, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Portland, Brooklyn.

From one young woman in Philadelphia: "Average rent here is probably mine... \$1800 for a decent 1 bedroom with outdoor space but not in a high rise. Utilities... \$150ish. Most of my friends in Philly have pretty steady jobs, but some friends from other parts of my life do have a couple jobs to get by."

Here's what a young man wrote me about his perceptions: "Rent for a 1 bedroom apt in Berkeley, California, proper goes for \$1500-\$2000 a month for a place in sketchy neighborhoods. A one bedroom

in Oakland averages at \$2,300. San Francisco is probably around \$3,300. That usually includes water and trash, but not electricity/gas. Homelessness is rampant with no end in sight. Tent cities can be found under every overpass and grassy median. With practically no mental health services or safety nets to help these people, rehabilitation is impossible. Some of my friends are in their late 30's, nearly 40 years of age and still paying off student loans. Due to the fact that finding a career is also increasingly difficult, many wish that they had never bothered to go to college in the first place. Working full-time offers little relief as the 40-hour a week wages earned don't cover the cost of living without assistance or roommates. The word from the young is 'change.' We see a hopeless future where the 'path to success' no longer leads there. The old formulas of 'working hard' and 'getting a good education' have been made irrelevant as we all end up working at supermarkets and department stores regardless of our degrees and worth ethic."

Wrong choices? Wrong dreams? Wrong Times? Wrong burdens?

Tent colonies of families, victims of gentrification, surround Lake Merritt in Oakland, California. Churches allow single working women who are forced to live in their cars to park together safely overnight in church parking lots.

Even my progressive minded daughter who commutes to San Francisco is getting frustrated with a homeless population out of control, them lacking even places to relieve themselves.

Could we discuss reopening many of our state facilities for those mentally ill and the addicted population? Under Reagan we tilted toward reckless autonomy. A course correction is in order. We don't need to exercise rough paternalism, but a little maternalism would help.

Does the formula that worked for grandpa still work today? It worked for grandpa because the U.S. then was a prosperity machine. There was a reason for American prosperity, not that it really was earned. We were the only industrial nation whose industry survived World War II. What was the percentage of income spent on housing by that generation? My kid's grandparents never paid a mortgage. My grandfather built the house for them. What percentage of income goes for housing nowadays? What percentage for health care?

The GI Bill paid for my dad's college education, all \$546 dollars for tuition. I attended the same college. My tuition cost \$3,000. Hobart and William Smith Colleges now cost a yearly total of \$68,990 discounting book expenses. And beer.

Tuition plus room and board for Ithaca College is \$59,540. Tuition for one semester at Bloomsburg University is \$3,858 for residents.

School loan indebtedness? \$40,000 for one school teacher. A source tells me the average debt load for medical residents begins at \$200,000, some are over \$400,000. One woman, aged 37, writes: "Most people I know have just recently paid off their loans, or are very close to doing so. I still have about \$5k in loans, but I went to grad school. I had two jobs until I was 25. Much of the Lyft/Uber culture out here is comprised of people of all ages needing to pick up extra work."

Is anyone listening?

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Monday, 21 August, 2018
“A Healer”
Word Count: 750

The best bit of advice I was given as a rookie pastor came from a veteran pastor who said bluntly: “Shut up for a year.” I heeded his advice and thereby listened to my new parish and gradually built up a degree of trust. There are other nuggets in my pastoral grab-bag: “They’ll forgive a lousy sermon but never missing them at hospital;” “You can’t spend what you haven’t banked;” “You cannot change the past, you can only change you;” “You can only defeat negatives with positives, never by more negatives;” “You’re not good at everything;” “You probably weren’t God’s first choice either;” “Be very careful, lest you become what you fight.”

One autocratic new pastor didn’t heed this advice. Conflict erupted, ferociously. I got recruited to deal with it.

A useful instrument in diagnosing church conflict provides a scale of conflict intensity, beginning with Problem to Solve, then Disagreement, then Contest, next Fight-Flight, finally Intractable. In church world there’s three sure tells that something’s wrong: building neglect and disrepair, fewer volunteers, no laughter.

This pastor with his penchant for “my way or highway,” with a talent for alienating parishioners with insults from the pulpit, with a gift for replacing pastoral care with self-righteous dogmatism, quickly intensified the church conflict level to intractable. A sign of intractable conflict is when both sides are more interested in destroying each other than in winning. For church, this means one thing: the pastor is voted out and good riddance. The danger continues because his followers might continue the fight. They might even sabotage the effort to call a new pastor.

Fortunately, our committee of oversight worked with them and achieved the four basic steps toward reducing conflict: lower the temperature, lessen the anxiety, slow down the process, and remove barriers to good communication. The congregation, after a shaky search process, finally called a pastor who epitomized what they wanted and needed: a healer. Better, they were the kind of healing congregation this pastor needed because he too had been wounded in a failed marriage. Wrote Henri Nouwen: “The great illusion of leadership is to think that man can be led out of a desert by someone who has never been there.”

It was a divine match where compassion smiled. What greatly helped was that the new pastor had a heart for mission. Following a horrific hurricane in Central America, it was he who organized a team to go and serve in Honduras. It was he who thus healed me at a time I needed healing because I fell in love with Honduras and those mission trips. I miss them.

To be healed. It inevitably involves helping heal others. I remember a delightful little girl whose seizures forced her to spend what remained of her young life in Pediatric Intensive Care, becoming a favored mascot of the staff. Many enjoyed bringing her gifts and treats. She enjoyed receiving them. On one of my visits she asked me what did I bring for her today? I replied: “Me.” I went on, having been coached by a very wise psychologist: “My question for you is what are you doing for all the new children who come here, wouldn’t they like a gift from you?” She sulked for the merest of meres but

then spent the afternoon with her mom making bracelets which she enjoyed handing out to each of the children and staff. Her mom said how that was one of her happiest days.

What are you giving to others? The secret is that faith is incredibly simple – love your neighbor as yourself -- albeit doing the secret takes risk, effort, and intention.

Amidst so much division, hatred, animosity, distrust, lack of forgiveness, negativity, what are you giving? What are you doing that is positive, affirming, joyful? What are you doing to love your neighbor? To create beauty? In giving do we begin to find happiness. In giving begins healing.

We sure could use a healer-in-chief.

Do we really want healing or are we allowing ourselves to be controlled by conflict?

It's called in Hebrew 'Tikkun olam.' The Rabbinical story describes how the light of creation suffered an accident. The light of the world was shattered into thousands of shards of light which fell into the world and were hidden. It is our responsibility as humans to find these shards of beauty and light hidden in all people, all events, all things and restore the wholeness. 'Tikkun olam' means the repairing, the restoration of the world.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Monday, 28 August, 2018

"Creationism Etc."

Word Count: 750

It's not a big deal to me, but then I know what I'm talking about and I know what I believe. I read in the weekend paper how the Central Pennsylvania Creation Fellowship of State College is ramping up vocal defense in favor of creationism. Headline: New Fellowship defends 6-day creation account.

Here we go again.

The organization argues how "Christianity is on shaky ground if the account of creation is taken away." They contend how those who hold to an alternate interpretation of Genesis are compromising Biblical authority.

Really? What's shaky ground is when their view is argued as the sole accurate reading. Creationism also fails to uplift the wonder, beauty, majesty of this vast, bizarre, terrifying, marvelous universe.

There are far more important topics for church to debate. What worries me is how if affirming creationism is served up as some litmus test for Christianity, it tilts toward driving people who prefer facts into a false choice. The debate shouldn't be framed as an either-or, as some binary choice between which view is right and which view is wrong. This violates a sacred trust, feeding the beast of disaffection, especially among young people full of questions and doubts.

What is a big deal is how young people who if pressed to say evolution is wrong and anti-Biblical, they will say instead: "If that's my choice, see you! Count me out!" Rightfully so, for the creationist actually

argues in favor of relativism and subjectivism, offering a circular argument. We today suffer too many false narratives. We deserve a truth based on facts upon which we can depend and build our lives.

Evolution is a theory the same that gravity is a theory. It works. It's been evidenced by cells and how antibiotics have caused them to evolve.

The real issue isn't between creationist and evolutionist. Be a creationist, fine – we can still agree on the good news proclaimed. Just realize that the real debate – the one far more compelling – is the debate between those who interpret Genesis as a historical and scientific narrative (the so-called literal interpretation) and those who interpret it as a metaphorical and theological proclamation (the real literal way to read the Bible). It's a false narrative to force a contest between Bible and Science.

Creationism doesn't even offer a profound reading of Genesis. Even in first century Christianity they didn't think the creationist way. The great fourth century theologian Augustine interpreted Genesis as an allegory of how individual Christians emerge from nature's chaos into the sublimity of divine humanity.

The authors of Genesis (a Biblically modern work) weren't writing how the material world came to be, they were writing why and what for. That's the job of theologians. We welcome scientists to explain how; We want theologians to tease out what is the meaning of life and what we are meant to do and be, especially considering what nuts we be and what messes we get ourselves into. Another fine mess, Stanley...

Besides, our Bible really begins with chapter 12 and Abraham. The first 11 chapters describe this royal mess called humanity, they depict why we need the faith of an Abraham: God saving the world through humanity rather than saving humanity through the world.

Picture the writers of Genesis sitting in the middle of Babylon, the mightiest empire in the known universe. These composers are slaves, oppressed by both the politics and religion of Babylon. There is a reason Genesis 1 sounds like a liturgical chant. It is. It is a priestly hymn extolling God's glory whilst making serious sport and taunting fun of the Babylonia religion where sun and moon are deities. To the Hebrews, sun and moon are merely clocks to keep track of time. To the Babylonians, the gods formed humans from clods of mud to be their slaves only after the gods tired of creating. To the Hebrews, humankind is the fulfillment of God's creation.

It also isn't creation out of nothing. The entire account presents God bringing organization and sense out of chaos. I compare it to laundered socks. You carry them up to the bed in the laundry basket, you dump them on the quilt, you begin sorting them, bringing order to chaos. We divide, separate, and sort so we can make sense of our world and pretend to have some control over it.

Our church confirmation class once asked: "Why did God create the world?" This is a far more inspiring question than asking when or how.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Monday, 3 September, 2018
"A Lightness of Soul"
Word Count: 750

Keeping Sane Rule Number 1 for Parents: con someone gullible into teaching your child how to drive.
Keeping Sane Rule Number 2 for Parents: if you must teach your child how to drive, don't laugh at them when they're behind the steering wheel. Take it from experience. Yes, I broke Rule Number 2 -- darling daughter stopped the car in the middle of the street and walked home. In the case of Rule Number 1, I was the gullible one who got conned.

Actually, it was fun. I enjoyed teaching the young man how to drive, despite those occasions when he bolted into lines of traffic, even when he approached a sharp turn too fast. Hello embankment. His mom raised an interesting theory as to why her son lacked judgement about speed and timing: He rarely rode his bicycle when younger. Hilly neighborhood. Changing childhoods. Mom is onto something here.

When my brothers and I were kids, we rode everywhere: to school, across Route 22 to Seely's Pond, down the steep hill without holding handlebars. We darted through traffic, we fishtailed into turns. We learnt balance, speed, timing, danger. When it was time to learn to drive, cars were so natural that even on the day after I got my permit dad had me drive onto the entrance ramp to the Garden State Parkway at rush hour. He laughed, saying: "Get used to it." I did.

Fact: I had a date with Linda Bonner to see 'The Band' play at the Garden State Arts Center the night of the day I was scheduled to take my driver's test -- a combination of bravado, recklessness, and hormones.

Fact: how we grow up oft determines how we function as adults. I'm ever grateful to my parents for fostering independence, love of books, fascination with politics, commitment to public service, dedication to church, and (like sugary cream inside the Twinkie) a healthy sense of humor. We weren't a joking family, though we did pull pranks. Wit and witticism, oftentimes scathing, was our sardonic style. Wiseacres all. My record collection still includes an album called "The First Family." It was a comedy album poking fun at the Kennedy's. Very bad timing however. It came out a month before the assassination. Killed the album sales.

Such is the blessing of five siblings born within a fecund span of ten years (which accounts for mom surviving by Winstons and Whisky Sours). We never were cruel or vicious, but there were barbs of banter, insults, and tons of teasing.

We five were raised watching surreal TV skits by Ernie Kovacs (aka Percy Dovetonsils), Marx Brothers' movies ('Mrs. Teasdale: The eyes of the world are upon you. Notables from every country are gathered here in your honor. This is a gala day for you. Firefly: Well, a gal a day is enough for me. I don't think I could handle any more'), listening to old broadcasts of Will Rogers ("I am not a member of any *organized* party -- I am a Democrat"). In 1964 and 1965 a weekly family favorite was to watch "That Was the Week That Was," a satirical news show featuring David Frost lampooning politicians.

This was a best: you learnt the freedom of self-deprecating humor. Humor lightens your soul. You learn to laugh at your silly, risible self. You might as well because if you won't laugh at yourself others surely will find good reason to laugh at you. Humor doesn't mean you don't take life seriously, it just means that you have decided to ride through life filled with good will, delight, optimism, refusing to let this rude world crush you into being petty, cruel, nasty, defensive. Humor supplies balance, timing.

Laughter is tonic for resentments. Laughter is tonic for a frowning you, your arms folded in harrumphing self-importance and victimhood. Will Rogers: "Always drink upstream from the herd."

A task I've undertaken for my denomination is to develop an instrument by which congregations can look into the mirror and discern their fate. I fear I'm becoming the guru of church dissolutions. I've noticed three ominous tells that a church is failing: 1) their facility is neglected; 2) they lack volunteers eager and interested to serve, and 3) they lack a sense of humor. Where's the fun? If it isn't fun, why stay as you are? Where's the joy? Where's the appreciation? Where's the gratitude? Where's the delight? A glad heart sweetens especially our tears.

True for our homes, churches, for nations too.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Monday, 10 September, 2018

"Dear Donald"

Word Count: 750

Dear Donald: I don't know if you had the chance to catch any of the portions of John McCain's funeral the other week, but McCain's funeral made me ponder mine own. Will I too be mourned with at least a fraction of the honor, respect, appreciation, and love with which he was eulogized? I would even welcome the bagpipes, provided Amazing Grace is omitted! I'm in no rush to have my funeral. Nevertheless, funerals give one pause as to what others might say of you. Have I contributed enough to earn their respect?

Each of McCain's memorials offered appropriate sadness, appropriate humor, appropriate gladness, and more than appropriate incentive for self-examination. We honored an imperfect McCain because McCain endeavored to serve something more important than himself: a cause, a faith, a nation and her ideals, the gift of loving and being loved.

It was me reflecting on John McCain's flawed character with which I connected most. How about you, Donald? I found encouragement and hope in how McCain's travails and failures urged him to become a better man. But before he could become a better man he had to admit his flaws and mistakes. Hard humility. Only then was he able to mature, accept forgiveness, and contribute in a worthier way. Life's hard. When your soul is in a bad place, when you feel broken, that's when you require restoration, redemption, repairing, mending, peace, love. It begins with confession, honesty.

The memorials for John McCain helped re-center my lonely soul. Little doubt they were intended by McCain to help re-center our nation's misplaced soul.

Did you connect with McCain, Donald? I ask this because I suspect you know deep inside John McCain was a better man than you have been.

Then I got thinking about your funeral, Donald. My pastoral instincts had me imagining you sitting in front of the TV and you contemplating what your funeral service will be like. Sorry, it's the pastor in me. I was wondering if you watched the Arizona service or the worship at the National Cathedral and were moved to think about your funeral. Who would attend? What words would be spoken about you and your legacy? Would you be as loved as McCain was loved? Who would weep for you? Who would

place her head on a son's shoulder tenderly remembering you? What would be said about your contribution to human decency and American greatness?

Being a theologian, greatness must be defined by my Bible. Check out how curiously Jesus describes greatness. Greatness means gutsy love, fairness, justice, upholding human dignity, doing what is true and good for the least of these. However flawed was John McCain, his funeral and mourners showed how McCain realized and practiced this kind of greatness. How greatness means getting out of yourself and serving God by serving others. When the U.S.A. practices this kind of greatness, we are a great nation of great men and women.

Which means, however, whenever we fail to practice greatness as so defined we get Jim Crow laws, the Trail of Tears, corruption, bad wars, bad laws, unredeemed leaders.

Donald: There's still time for you to earn the kind of funeral John McCain earned.

Ebenezer Scrooge changed after three ghostly visitations. Or did he change? What really happened to Scrooge was that he realized he had fallen away from the person he originally was. Good Scrooge was restored. Donald, did you ever have a happy, good, worthwhile life that can be restored?

There still is time, Donald. There still is time for repairing your soul.

There still is time, Roman Catholic Church to repent and become the church you have failed to be.

There is still time you pharisaical Evangelicals to turn back and forswear your foolish ways. What breaks my heart most about these pharisaical Evangelicals fawning after you, Donald, is how they don't care for your soul. They are willing to sacrifice their Christianity to gain a few judges. They seek Caesar to be their savior – a very dangerous place in which to place your faith. They're exploiting you just as you are exploiting them. There's more to life than exploitation. Much more. I believe you fear accepting this. Worse, they are supposed to be pastors. Who among them is pastor enough to care for your soul, your redemption, urging you to get on your knees, confess your tormented life, and be healed? That's how true greatness begins.

There still is time, me too.

There still is time, America.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Monday, 17 September, 2018
"Autumnal Equinox"
Word Count: 750

On Saturday, step outside around 10:30 PM. Turn off the porch light. Those summer mayflies won't bother you now. Find a spot with little light pollution despite the almost full moon. The full Harvest Moon is in two days. Trust that the sky is clear and cloudless.

September 22 is the Autumnal Equinox, when day and night are clocked in equal amounts, when light and dark are balanced. Well, that's misleading. You don't see light but you see by light. Darkness isn't

the opposite of light at all, no more than hate can be the opposite of love. Darkness is the absence of light just as hate is the absence of love, indifference the absence of compassion, fear the absence of faith, despair the absence of hope. It all depends on what fills you. Regardless, the equinox is when the Sun crosses the celestial equator as it does twice a year.

Look up. Locate the star, Polaris. Our North Star. The lodestone star that orients all things, the entire sky rotating around this star like a Ferris wheel around its axle, like a record album around the phonograph spindle, like the hands of a clock around the central shaft of the cannon pinion. The sky is our clock. By it we tell time. The stars, plus Sun and Moon, are there for signaling us when the seasons begin. Same time each year. Patterned. Mechanical. Dynamical. Predictable. Trusty.

As an astronomer friend reminds: "Just to comment --- Polaris is within 1 degree of the celestial north pole, hence in a long exposure photograph the heavens appear to rotate around Polaris while it stands still. It's all a celestial optical illusion." Earth perspective.

Step outside. Look up. For we who live here in the northern latitudes the star we call Polaris will be seen due north halfway between the horizon and directly overhead. Straight below it, all four paws standing on the horizon, will be the constellation of Ursa Major. Ursa Major will circle around Polaris. When straight below Polaris, Ursa Major (in English, our Great Bear) signals to us autumn has officially begun.

Remember what grandpa taught: the Great Bear is more familiarly known as the Big Dipper. An asterism rather than constellation. Find the two stars at the right side of the cup, the pointer stars, and trace a line upward. That bright star to which they point is our Polaris, the last star at the tip of what we call the Little Dipper. We know it is autumn because Little Dipper (Ursa Minor, Little Bear) is pouring into the cup of Big Dipper.

Neither Ursa Major or Ursa Minor dip below our horizon, ever. In western mythology Ursa Major once was the beautiful woman, Callisto the huntress, raped by Zeus, God King. She bore a child. Queen Goddess Hera blamed Callisto for her husband's waywardness and punished the huntress by transforming her into a bear, the hunted. When her son, grown to become a fierce hunter, was about to kill his own mother in her bear form, Zeus took pity and transformed him also into a bear and placed them together forever in the sky. Still hot and angry, however, Hera convinced Poseidon, God of the Sea, never to let them swim or bath in the ocean. That's why they both forever remain above the horizon.

Our Galaxy's nearest neighbor is the Andromeda Galaxy. The light of Andromeda that we see tonight, given that light travels 186,282 miles per second, is the Andromeda as it was two million, five hundred thousand years ago (Homo habilis was beginning to manufacture stone tools).

Once upon a distant time we assumed the earth was shaped like an upside down copper bowl and the stars above were lights hanging from the dome enveloping us. Beneath the ground and above the dome roiled and raged the waters of chaos, water bubbling up everyone now and then, water falling down every now and then. After a while we thought the sun, stars, and wandering planets revolved around the earth. After another stretch of time and depth of discovery we thought the entire universe was our Solar System. Now, given the theological gifts of science, we have begun to reel, stagger, and take deep breaths from the observable fact that there are out there in our universe over twenty galaxies for each person alive on earth today. And counting.

It's a big thing this time and space, if you pause to look.

It pays to notice.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Monday, 24 September, 2018

"Hitting the Left"

Word Count: 750

Arriving for an eye exam the other week I ran into a friendly reader. We chatted at the door about my columns. He playfully prodded me: "Why don't you hit the left?" Really, I don't hit so much as step on toes or tweak noses. Honk, honk! But I do try to listen.

Really, I try to avoid playing favorites. If you want to categorize where I stand politically, I would label myself a: ROMANTIC PRAGMATIST CENTRIST IN THE CLASSICAL HUMANISTIC TRADITION OF LIBERALISM AS MEDIATED BY REFORMED THEOLOGY. Sorry, no easy label. No bumper sticker either. I drive pollsters nuts.

In my defense, it's not as if I intentionally target the right and avoid writing anything critical about the left. What I try to do is giggle and meddle whenever I sniff hypocrisy, stupidity, nonsense, lack of integrity, anger, and wherever ideology spawns obnoxious ideologues of all stripes. Which, come now, happens to be predominantly displayed by the inane, debasing, anti-American antics on one side of Pennsylvania Avenue. Still, having been myself an ideologue, brimming with anger, lacking integrity, full of nonsense, stupid, and hypocritical, I feel well qualified to point this out wherever it appears. I can because I've been. I ain't no Saint Andrews.

So yes, my friend, I'll criticize Antifa. Hey folks: fighting fascism with fascist tactics makes you a fascist. Inspired by the Civil Rights movement and collaborating in opposing the Vietnam war as illegal and immoral with the American Friends Service Committee, I always found it ironic how violent and militant some anti-war protestors could be. We see it now with pro-abortion jihadists threatening Senator Collins' staff. We see it with irate students shouting down speakers with whom they disagree. To be fair, however, why do Young Republicans snicker and bear-bait by hosting on campus intolerably incendiary and loutish extremists?

Plus, I've long argued that the only thing worse than a self-righteous judgmental conservative is a self-righteous judgmental liberal. Why? The conservative will admit it, even brag about it. The liberal will justify it as altruistic. Regardless the politics, a jerk is a jerk.

I've seen this close up during many protests in which I have been involved. Youth today simply cannot fathom it when they hear me describing sit-ins inside the Capitol Rotunda, the Pentagon, staging High school strikes and walk-outs.

One of my favorite moments happened senior year of college as we were finalizing post-graduation plans. Because my plans for seminary hadn't yet gelled, my fiancé and I had applied for church service in Botswana. Part of her family are African, specifically South African. Which itself was a lesson when I met her mother's cousin during the days of apartheid. I, zealous and righteous, expected to confront a

monster. I met a decent man who acknowledged his system was a monster. We talked, listened, learned.

It's so very easy to be doctrinaire when you don't have to deal with people.

Back to campus. One of our louder radical leaders of our college left wing berated me. He called me an imperialist contributing to the oppression of the natives. I said that we were going to teach. Teaching's good. What's more revolutionary than education? The story became funnier when we met years later at a college reunion. My revolutionary friend arrived wearing silk shirt and gold chains and boasted he was selling real estate in Florida. I blurted: "Well, I'm still working the cause."

My favorite modern religious figure reminded us: "God is God and we're not."

I'm quoting Will Campbell. He whimsically called himself a seventh-day horizontalist. He also said he left the church to minister. He was a white Baptist preacher from Mississippi deeply active in the Civil Rights movement down deep South. One day he recounted to his brother how he and other Civil Rights leaders sat around the table making fun of the dumb rednecks. His brother clucked his tongue saying: "Brother, those are your people." Will Campbell got converted then and there. He began ministering to the Klu Klux Klan. He realized Jesus would see them also as victims of poverty, lack of education, injustice. The enemy never is people, the enemy is hatred, ignorance, fear, racism, despair, shame, pride. He began loving them. Those were his people. It didn't sit well with some in the movement. When visiting campuses Campbell was often verbally attacked by liberal college students for daring to minister to the KKK.

"When it comes to human tragedy you cannot take sides," said he.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Monday, October 1, 2018

"Chewing Gum"

Word Count: 750

I agree with Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders. Quoting her favorite line: we can chew gum and walk at the same time. Yes, we can do two different things at the same time such as holding personal views and being professional.

Years ago a church wanted to bring me up on charges for laughing at them. Their nominating committee for a new pastor dismissed me as the proposed liaison from our Presbytery. Whenever a church begins a search process, we attach a consultant in case they have questions about procedure.

What was their problem with me? Frankly, the problem was their own assumptions. They suspected that I would try to sway their selection of a new pastor. They feared me corrupting the purity of their convictions. They preferred their holy bubble. They wanted to build a fence to prevent any such contamination and they had judged my views the contaminant. They had their views and they didn't want to collude with anyone who didn't hold to those views. Of course, they never asked me about my views. They talked behind my back. They made a judgment, a judgment that questioned my professionalism and my ordination vows.

I thought their suspicions a hoot, silly, telling, instructive. So what if we had differences in certain areas? That's normal. That's healthy.

We can be professionals. Even if we hold differing views, my job was to advise them on process. It would be unprofessional for me to advocate for a particular breed of pastor. Besides, as a member of Presbytery and member of the Committee on Ministry, I get to examine and vote on whomever they choose. Often I voted to approve a congregation's choice despite their choice holding divergent opinions about Biblical and ecclesiastical matters. We're professionals.

I thought their dismissal revealing as well as ludicrous, so I used them as a foil in a sermon that was reprinted in my church newsletter. As a collegial courtesy, we mailed our newsletter to all churches in Presbytery. They read it. They figured out who I was ridiculing. They also didn't appreciate my sardonic quip how the fox always supposes everyone else acts like a fox.

They tried to bring me up on charges for conduct unbecoming.

What further bugged them was what happened when I initially agreed to meet with the committee and hear how they felt about my sermon. Actually, they summoned me for a Spanish Inquisition ("Cardinal Fang! Fetch THE COMFY CHAIR!"). Out of curiosity and, yes, because I needed to examine my own conduct, I agreed. Every time I've acted the jack-ass, I've been the better for it being pointed out. I also mentioned how it broke my heart that given weightier events -- children starving, made into refugees, children suffering -- this is what the church bickers about?

There were twelve of them. Me? Solo. The discussion devolved into them venting and scolding, so I wearied of being their punching bag and announced I was leaving. They were peeved that I stood up and left without permission. I should explain how these church officers were more accustomed to pastors being their employees (or pets with tails tucked).

What was funny about it all was that they weren't the only one whose conduct I ridiculed in my sermon for haughty, defensive fence-building. It also was self-deprecating. I mocked myself for building ungodly fences of mine own rather than reaching out.

One consequence of this episode was my own soul-searching. Thus I invited them to join me in spiritual reflection, confession. They didn't. They filed an official complaint to Presbytery. An investigative committee was formed.

I welcomed the investigation. I had nothing to hide. You can welcome inquiries when you have a clear conscience. They wanted to press it? Great. It's professional. Besides, I was glad for it to take place because I knew we'd all be better, even if chastened, for truth to be revealed.

Strange: since nominee to sit as an associate justice on the Supreme Court Brett Kavanaugh has dedicated his life to the pursuit of justice, keen on jurisprudence, flush with a clean conscience, why didn't he stand up right away and favor a full inquiry? Wouldn't he want his own daughters to see him vindicated?

Strange: since Trump is red-faced convinced Mueller's investigation is a witch hunt, why hasn't he eagerly agreed to meet with Mueller and clear the air? Surely, since he has a clear conscience, he would want to hasten the end of this investigation?

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Monday, 8 October, 2018
“Cheeky Cheeks”
Word Count: 750

Today we want to clean up several common Bible mistakes. Folks quote how money is the root of all evils. No. Bible says that LOVE of money is the root of all evils. Money can be a good when used faithfully. Jesus talked more about money than prayer. The issue isn't money, it's what you love. What you love is what you become. Money. Power. Fame. Alcohol. Sex. This is why I've long argued that there is no such creature as an atheist. Everybody has a god. The only question is: Which god do you worship? Choose a worthwhile one.

Another mistake is when well-meaning folk counsel: “God doesn't give you more than you can handle.” Well, I've known too many people who wish God didn't have so much confidence in them. One Sunday a TV preacher with excellent teeth preached how God sends angels to protect you from enemies. He described how his father, when a toddler, fell into a fire but God sent a passer-by to rescue him. Thus, years later the preacher was born to bless us with his oratory (and teeth). No surprise, I chaff at this convenient formula.

What would this preacher say to the young mother I work with years ago whose son did die in a house fire and there was no passer-by, no God, to rescue her little boy? What does that say of this preacher's God? I weary us using God, making God serve us.

Then there's the line frequently misunderstood: ‘Turn the other cheek.’ I heard it the other day on the news by way of suggesting how victimized women often are noble and sacrificial in the face of bullying and abusive behavior. Help us, there's too many bullies out there who are allowed to continue being bullies, some of whom are referred to by a friend as “messiah children.” ‘Brats’ in other words, indulged and privileged, who think of themselves as God's gift to the world and who expect to continue being privileged and their misbehavior excused.

Roll up your sleeves, folks. How best might we respond to these obnoxious pain in the butts? Let me count the ways. Retaliation? Appeasement? Submission? Get a bigger bully on your side? Run away, deny, excuse (and be ashamed)? I'll take the sixth choice: Turn the other cheek.

This comes from my Jesus ever seeking to transform situations. Jesus understood that evil behavior, wrong behavior, never is abstract. It always is personal.

The setting for Jesus advising to ‘Turn the Other Cheek’ is how the insult happens in public. Back then a religious authority in haughty arrogance would slap you with the back of their hand (twice as insulting) for saying something these smug prigs disliked, what they judged blasphemous. They wanted to slap Jesus often. Slapping stings. Slapping's embarrassing. You look around at everybody watching you, waiting to see what you will do. Well, you don't retaliate, you don't submit and cry, you don't run away, you don't apologize and appease, you don't tattle to Daddy God.

What do you do? You laugh at pride, demonstrate courage, and come up with something clever. Changing the person's character is unlikely so you have to change the situation. As has been said, when

decisions are made by politicians holding their finger in the air to see which way the wind is blowing, change the direction of the wind.

I once won a bet in sixth grade by challenging a friend that I could get free from him pinning me to the ground without me using my hands or legs. I kissed him. He jumped off. Won the bet. I think Jesus would have laughed, maybe even given me a passing grade with gold star. You never can eradicate evil with evil.

Turn the other cheek. You offer your cheek and smile. It's an act of daring and defiance. Remember, this is public. You tell them, "Okay, you insult me with the back of your hand? Fine. It means nothing to me. You do not embarrass me. You aren't insulting me, so go ahead, slap me again and again, and look at who looks shameful."

This is strong not weak, creative not victimized. This makes sure your ego doesn't get in the way. This drains the poison of revenge. This opens doors. This exposes the bully and maybe makes them see themselves. This refuses to let them dictate how you feel, refusing to let them set the rules by which you respond.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Monday, 15 October, 2018

"Mill and Bill Axiom"

Word Count: 750

The best part of not owning a cell phone is that I avoid texts from my brothers. Their texts would be silly if they weren't so complaining. Why they included my wife in a recent chain, I cannot guess. I wish she hadn't told me because my brothers seem crankier, grumpier, entrenched, bitter with each newscast. They're better than this.

Pastors watch church members age. I've identified what I call the "Mill and Bill Axiom." Mill aged gracefully, graciously, magnificently. She grew more loving, accepting, buoyant, kind. Husband Bill didn't. He aged, grumped, had little positive to say. He nursed resentments, grievances, and grew angrier as his world and sense of importance slipped away. It hadn't turned how he wanted. He didn't feel thanked enough.

I worry my brothers might be following Bill's spiral. The trigger for their text was the horrendous mess of the Kavanaugh hearings. They ridiculed: Why are women protesters ugly? Are those protesting guys hoping to get laid? Why are white guys blamed? One brother griped how his grandson earned his first paycheck and was shocked to see \$75 deducted for taxes. Brother reported how his grandson, channeling grandfather, blamed it on welfare cheats. Congratulations, grandson actually pays his taxes, unlike Donald.

Why ingest toxins of a jaundiced news narrative? I don't blame Trump as the cause. No, he's hardly that talented. Trumpism basically is John Birch Society circa 2018, George Wallace revived, McCarthyism loose in the White House, exploiting frustrations, hatreds, organ-grinding lies, pandering to base impulses, rejecting reason for festering feelings, inciting us to rage against each other and celebrating rancor as winning. Our souls exposed. Demeaning persons or nations is no constructive strategy. Disrespect engenders disrespect, not compliance. His choreographed rally rants show who's really

instigating a mob mentality. He knows about mobs. How about a new crowd chant? "Tax Forms! Tax Forms!"

Don't ask my brothers about national anthems. What was one brother thinking when he sent a whiney email comparing modern Hollywood stars to those of the so-called 'Greatest Generation' over military service? Come on, they faced world-wide war. Who didn't serve? Who volunteered? Who was drafted? No smug prima donna's then? Besides, I didn't see either of my brothers rush to serve in the military when they had their generation's chance. If you really want to get mad at someone, let's get mad at the corporate greed we enable that merchandises celebrity and privilege, whether as movie stars, musicians, sport entertainers, pundits, presidents, or CEO's. Molech.

My brothers label me the gullible, naïve, idealistic younger brother, so they dismiss my opinions. They harrumph when I suggest to their children, grandchildren, how Kaepernick respects American values more than Donald. They 'tsk' when I demand facts about welfare cheats versus corporate welfare cheats. Have they ever worked with families on welfare as I have? They object when I argue that if the White House didn't rush headlong into a half-baked, partisan, shady push to jam Kavanaugh through this nomination, chumming the selfish maw of both Republican and Democratic appetites, we wouldn't have suffered such nastiness in the first place. 'Advice and Consent' should begin at the beginning. Then, in a crass power-play, this Machiavellian White House handcuffs a comprehensive, disinterested FBI inquiry.

Smile: civil disobedience cures bad Supreme Court decisions.

Even messes prompt occasions for positives. Something happened. Women deserve a hearing. Their "pain and suffering" must be respected. I know because I haven't always been the gentleman they deserved. Nor my brothers. Neither 50% of you.

I often disagree with brothers I love. I'm happier for it. They don't sound happy. I hope they instead will take positive steps to transform bitterness, fears, grievances, losses. Choices.

We can wallow in the degrading, self-pitying impulses of society and let negativity win. Better is producing something that brings solutions, nourishes souls.

I pray they will step up as they did when young and hopeful and contribute still something worthwhile, decent, edifying. What are they doing to make our country, their community, this society a nobler place? Me? I've long been governed by the motto: "When the going gets tough, it's time for a party!" It's why I'm glad to collaborate with friends and present to you a dramatic reading of the play "Our Town." We welcome sharing this sweet play that reminds us about what's humane, what's worth cherishing, cultivating. Soon we'll offer a reading of "A Child's Christmas in Wales" with "The Gift of the Magi." Is life about taking or giving?

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Monday, 22 October, 2018

"Failure"

Word Count: 750

We got spanked the other Sunday. Twice. Who are we? We're 'The Diggers,' a seventh grade boys club team I help coach. I wish I had done more homework in preparing drills, tactics, and teaching strategy.

They are great kids, great head coach. This season they've shown brilliance in their play: attacking the ball, one-touches, passes with purpose, shots on frame, teamwork, movement off the ball. In one win, six Diggers scored, which is a sign of a balanced, talented squad. You never want to rely on one player. Plus, whereas my soccer lads play their best in certain positions, each is capable of playing every position. That's depth, balance.

Unfortunately, the other Sunday in York none of their skills showed up in back-to-back games. We got spanked. We got spanked hard. Our second opponent hadn't scored but one goal all season. We helped them increase that five-fold. It was a miserable drive home, likelier for us adults than for the kids. Seventh grade boys are stunningly resilient. A half hour after our first loss, they were horsing around, giggling, getting grimy tracing messages on the filthy school buses of Central York Middle School.

After our next embarrassing defeat, I altered my usual post-game message to the boys. I said three things: "Boys, after my own 53 years of wins and losses, I never mind a loss so long as it is a good loss; Second, I guarantee you, you won't remember many games but you'll remember your team-mates; Third, when we lose I usually say 'It's a wash, put it behind you,' but this time, gentlemen, I want you to remember every goal scored against you today and fix it."

As assistant coach I was intoning my recent reading of Doris Kearns Goodwin's current masterpiece, "Leadership in Turbulent Times." The book details leadership traits demonstrated in dread times by four of her favorite Presidents: Abraham Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Lyndon Johnson. Doris diagnoses a remarkable character trait that made them great leaders.

She details brutally the failures they experienced, both failures which were failures of circumstance but also those failures for which they were responsible, terrible set-backs. She quotes scholars who studied this basic question of character: "Why some people are able to extract wisdom from experience and others are not." Doris adds: "Some people lose their bearings, their lives are forever stunted. Others resume their normal behaviors after a period of time. Still others, through reflection and adaptive capacity, are able to transcend their ordeal, armed with a greater resolve and purpose."

Leaders without this last capacity remain mediocre. The irony is how greatness requires defeat. Greatness can be found in an attitude where leaders own and admit their failure, that they want to be better than this, that they can be better than this, that they want to be remembered as better than this. I remember Expository Writing in college taught by Professor Benjamin Atkinson.

I failed it. Perhaps a failure insignificant in the grand scheme, significant to me nonetheless. One cringe-worthy moment was when he read aloud my essay to the class. It was a brutal public spanking, especially since I assumed I already was a brilliant writer. So I had been told. Until Ben. But, bless Professor (my eventual English advisor), he sensed a desire smothered beneath the pomposity, verbosity, and meandering sentences, so he took me aside and worked with me. He made me read 'The New Yorker' magazine to appreciate quality writing. He pushed me, pulled me from failure to competence. My failure was the best thing that happened in shaping my pastoral and literary career.

Yes, this aptitude for gaining wisdom from failure must somehow be an innate gift. It also can be learnt. I look to my Diggers, God love each one of them. If in seventh grade they can learn this skill for "transcending their ordeal" and take this lesson from a mere soccer spanking by two teams from York, will they then be able to gain wisdom from the serious failures they invariably will experience as adults? You adults know what kind of failures these boys will, I repeat that, will experience. Interestingly, the

more exceptional the boy, the more exceptional the failures will be. Who knows? Amongst the Diggers might an Abraham, a Teddy, a Franklin, a Lyndon. I wouldn't be surprised.

My last comment to 'The Diggers?' I'd rather be with you boys in any loss than miss watching you play soccer.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Monday, 29 October, 2018

"Imagine"

Word Count: 750

A preacher's common defect is assuming that once something sensible is spoken (by us surely) it naturally becomes adopted and practiced. Preachers lack the savvy to make sane ideas reality. We're great at prescribing, lousy at providing.

While attending a meeting to hear experts talk about homelessness and inadequate housing, I asked why spend millions building low-income units in Danville (a town bent on gentrification) when nearby towns are struggling? Our daughter relocated to Sunbury rather than pay Danville's high rents. Good for Sunbury. Let's assist relocation, investing in our neighbors. Why build expensive complexes to serve fewer needs here?

Imagine. Imagine if all energy and funds spent these decades attacking the legal right to abortion were used to assist women struggling with these wrenching choices, providing healthy options, preventing unplanned pregnancies.

Imagine if money spent lobbying by the NRA was used instead to insure gun owners were properly vetted and trained, funding mental health care options. We waste so much.

What do we stand for? Knowing what I'm against is easy.

My paint store, WWII veteran, Rotarian Republican father who volunteered to be a dollar-a-year man would be ashamed to vote Republican today given how pessimistic, immoderate, mean-spirited Republican leaders act. They don't respect your judgment. They've broken their promise to serve as "stewards of the people," proved by their whiney fear-mongering, persistent lies, boot-licking cowardice, prideful ignorance, smug unfairness, rank corruption, me-ism rejecting Americanism. They're tragically reactive, slanderous, negative, boasting this eggshell economy, feebly unfit to craft competent solutions to critical problems. Why be President when you can be a campaigning jerk? He really doesn't care about us, about you.

We must learn how a broken America resulted in Trumpism. Trumpism is our judgment for our apathy, our lack of civic duty, conviction, commitment.

Since the Republican Party has forfeited its bearings, honor, credibility, moral compass, and since the Democratic Party stumbles for their bearings, I offer what I'm for, my sextant of the proven COMMON SENSE 'SQUARE DEAL,' where FAIRNESS rules!

CITIZENSHIP: Enact gun safety measures -- banning bump stocks, eliminating state reciprocity for handguns and concealed carry, universal background checks, no assault or semi-assault rifles permitted unless controlled and stored at gun clubs. Any gun purchaser must pass (as with a driver's license) a test. Institute mandatory National draft for two years modeled on Roosevelt's National Youth Administration. Expand voting rights with multifaceted means for voting.

PRINCIPLES: Commitment to reverse the pending disaster from climate change. Commitment to develop modern industries. Commitment to international coalitions to confront despots. Commitment to the State Department and diplomacy. Commitment to improve our international treaties, expressing moral leadership. Commitment that the U.S.A. stands for human rights and the dignity of individuals and that such principles are intrinsic to domestic policies, international relationships, military forays. Full throated protection of the free press. Regular press conferences presenting facts!

POLITICS: Establish "Blue Ribbon Commission" to recommend solid solutions to how we process and welcome immigrants and protect families and refugees. Front end 'Advice and Consent' of Supreme Court nominees so that consensus is achieved before the vote. Mandatory sessions for Congress when they must sit in session to hold hearings, act on legislation, regulating the months they must stay in Washington until business is done. All candidates must produce tax forms. States shall offer open primaries where all persons can vote regardless of party affiliation. Gerrymandering is outlawed with Congressional districts set by impartial justices.

MONEY: Unless the marginalized prosper, none win. Comprehensive and multifaceted health care coverage focusing on prevention, reimbursement, reduction of costs. A surgeon friend remarked: "We already have socialized medicine, it's just that the hospitals are forced to pay for it." Is anybody listening to the medicals? Our national debt will destroy our nation. Focus on increasing real wage growth and the thickening of the middle class through solid employment and reduced indebtedness. Tax reform requires listening to smarter people so set up independent commissions to make recommendations. Key is increasing revenues by increasing incomes of our citizens. Taxation is a privilege, necessity, responsibility. We benefit from taxes, they just need to be fair, hence scaled. Set Social Security on the guidelines Roosevelt intended, that pensioners would receive payments at the average national age of mortality. Gambling should never be used as a basis for government revenue except for sin-taxing the hell out of casinos and lotteries. Nothing for free, we must pay for what we want.

Make America good. If we do that, she can be great.

Imagine.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
5 November, 2018
"A Child's Vote"
Word Count: 750

Violence arrives in many guises. England today burns effigies, kindles bonfires, explodes fireworks commemorating Guy Fawkes Day: "Remember, remember, the fifth of November; Gunpowder treason and plot; We see no reason; Why Gunpowder treason; Should ever be forgot."

Guy Fawkes led a failed 1606 conspiracy to blow up the king and members of Parliament. Guy was a zealous Roman Catholic livid at England's lack of religious tolerance. So, naturally, he became intolerant.

We theologians describe how sin pervades everything human, especially our virtues. Thus we get violence, murder, bigotry in the name of patriotism, nationalism, religion. It's what inevitably happens when virtues get distorted by the fractured prism of self-centered self-righteousness. Consider: terrorists don't think they're doing evil – they think what they do is good. Who was the fiercest patriot of the 20th Century? Adolph Hitler. There's the horror.

Guy Fawkes is violence most blatant. So also the Pittsburgh synagogue. We mistakenly label such incidents 'tragedies' when they're atrocities. We shout when we should sit Shiva. Amen. Then there is violence most insidious, invidious, infectious, systemically violating our most treasured affections, forcing cruel desperations, defiling futures.

In 1999 I fell in love with the people of Honduras, a love that deepened with each subsequent trip. Beware getting a heart, Tin Woodman. In Judy Garland's ruby slippers version, Wizard warns: "As for you, my galvanized friend, you want a heart. You don't know how lucky you are not to have one. Hearts will never be practical until they can be made unbreakable."

My heart has been breaking since 1999. My heart breaks today watching this desperate caravan numbering desperate mummies pushing strollers seeking hope here. Do you know where the drug gangs terrorizing neighborhoods of Honduras learnt their trade? In Los Angeles prisons. Violent gangs are our export.

At the end of one mission trip to Honduras we cleaned up the church where we gringos stayed for the week. We drove away in the van. I looked back and watched our Honduran friends dump out our garbage bags onto the church yard. They sifted through our garbage to find items they could use such as old bottles, the village leader distributing these prizes.

That was a difficult trip made more difficult by Ernesto. We first met Ernesto four months earlier. Ernesto suffered several deformities, worse was his malformed legs and feet. For three years he was carried. For nine years he limped, staggered. His persistent tilt caused severe twisting and pain in his tiny torso. One of our people donated her sandals. One of our medicals carved it to fit the sole of Ernesto's shoe, then duct taped it secure. For the first time in his life, Ernesto walked level. Immediately he kicked the soccer ball toward his younger brother, Hector, who always let his brother lean on him when they walked. Unfit for coffee picking Ernesto's desire was to become a teacher.

When we returned it was obvious Ernesto was getting left behind. His twisted twelve year old body, aching even more from the chill and rain, couldn't keep up. A respiratory illness invaded the entire village and targeted him. Two kicks of the soccer ball and he had to sit and rest, panting, his shriveled leg stretched out on the muddy ground, his improvised rubber and duct tape prosthesis long discarded. Still, Ernesto smiled. Hector, his younger brother, wasn't helping Ernesto much anymore. Hector had to labor for two. Ernesto was being left behind.

During another trip to a town called Talanga, one of our members discovered her Spanish wasn't as fluent as she had thought. She offered puppet shows for the children near our housing work site. One morning one of the local women approached her and asked if she could take her children too. She told the woman: "Yes, of course, they are welcome." That afternoon the mother arrived with her children.

She carried two small plastic bags. They contained her children's clothes. What this mother had really asked was for our team member to take her children back with her to the USA. Mother was willing to give up her children so they might have a chance.

Do we really want to unify our chest-pounding, fractious country? A little child shall lead them. What would you do for the sake of your children? What wouldn't you do for the sake of your children? What would you do for the sake of all children? What wouldn't you do for the sake of all children? Tomorrow you decide.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
12 November, 2018
"Something Good"
Word Count: 750

We thank our audience for attending the other Sunday afternoon our dramatic reading of Thornton Wilder's moving play, "Our Town." We hope you enjoyed it. We hope even more you were moved by the story. We players sure were moved. For those unfamiliar with the play, it ranks among the classic American plays. It's a play in three acts. The play "Our Town," features Emily and George, their parents, and sundry characters set in the fictional town of Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, with each act a window into the stages of their lives. The focus for each act is the relationship between Emily and George. Act One shows them as awkward adolescents. Act Two shows them stumbling into love and marriage. Act Three takes us to Emily's death in giving birth and her revisiting her twelfth birthday.

Thornton Wilder wrote how he wanted his play to offer a rediscovery of "forgotten goods." Wilder wrote it as "an attempt to find a value above all price for the smallest event in our daily life."

It does. Most of the audience was in tears at the play's conclusion. It does that to you. It touches you deeply, especially when a dead Emily, after revisiting her twelfth birthday, realizes how little we notice while we are alive, how little we appreciate each other and the chances before us. As Emily says between her own tears, wanting to return from this painful visitation: "I can't. I can't go on. It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another. I didn't realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed. Take me back up the hill to my grave. But first: Wait! One more look. Good-by, Good-by, world. Goodby, Grover's Corners ... Mama and Papa. Good-by to clocks ticking ... and Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths ... and sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? --- every, every minute?"

Replies the omniscient Stage Manager: "No. The saints and poets, maybe ---they do some."

Some folks have asked me why we did this play. Why did we decide to present this gift to the town. Well, because it was a gift to the town. I enjoy living by the 'why not?' principle. Why not give it a try? Why not do it ourselves? We didn't need anybody's approval or permission. Why not have fun? Why wait for someone else to do it? "Turtle don't get nowhere lest it sticks its neck out."

But living by the 'why not?' was only part of the reason for rehearsals and presentation. Do you want to know the deeper reason we presented this beautiful play? Why? The answer's simple. We wanted to be

part of something beautiful, to appreciate something beautiful. We were grateful for those of you who said, 'why not?' and came and wanted to be part of something beautiful too.

I'm recommending far more than that bland cliché about taking time to smell the roses. I'm begging all of us to make the effort to plant the roses. Bushes, climbers, floribunda. My favorite? English Teas. I love the layered petals. Dig, water, prune, fertilize, cultivate canes into blossoms. I'm begging for us to stop sowing offensive poison ivy. What are you waiting for? What I've discovered in my brief tour through my years is how there's two kinds of people in the world: those who weed the flower bed and those who let poison ivy take over.

There's enough ugliness in the world today, ugliness of our own making, of our own indifference. Yes. It is that simple a choice: either wallow in ugliness or create beauty. Silly: since when does barbed wire qualify as beautiful? Take the risk. Find in yourself "twenty seconds of insane courage." Realize your humanity. Take the risk in a kindness, a kiss on the cheek, a welcome, a thank you. Why not? Sow love. Why not host a party? Why not write a letter? Why not take see the goodness in others and in yourself? My, you are beautiful. Why not produce something good? Take a risk at being a poet or saint, even if but for a moment.

Do you realize how quickly each act of our lives hurries by? What do you want to look back on after you've joined those folks upon the silent hill? Good-by.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
19 November, 2018
"A Grand Mistake"
Word Count: 750

They were lost. Did the Mayflower pilgrims want to find the mouth of the Hudson River (where the Dutch would return in 1625) or the mouth of the James River and join the other emigrants already there? Plymouth wasn't the first English colony. Raleigh's settlement at Roanoke Island in 1585 was first. The Roanoke Colony vanished. In 1607 England tried again to colonize America. 104 settlers sailed upriver (13 years before the pilgrims of Plymouth Rock fame). Financed by the London Company they established Jamestown.

Balmy Virginia rather than blustery Massachusetts was the probable destination for these English settlers. Between 1619 and 1624 over 5,000 souls had sailed to Jamestown (almost Danville's population). The London Company and other commercial enterprises encouraged them to leave home. Brochures were widely distributed advertising "an American paradise where the sun always shines, the oranges, apples, lemons were so delicious that whoever tastes them will despise the insipid watery taste of those we have in England."

Yes, they too had their hucksters selling exaggerated promises intending to capitalize on the desperation of the English poor and oppressed. Why produce when you can brand?

"America," these broadsides boasted, "was a land where everyone stayed young, where game was plentiful, and life easy." Little was said about the locals.

Virginia's where the pilgrims likely intended. But Atlantic storms had blown Mayflower off course forcing it far north. The captain couldn't map where they were. The tiny ship got lost. Along the northern coastline they sailed searching for Virginia or the Hudson River. Winter was coming on. Supplies were low. They had to make shore. They decided any harbor would do. It would be hard. Besides, they had to pay off the London merchants who fronted 7,000 pounds to finance their expedition.

It was hard. Only 4 of the 102 persons making this perilous 66 day crossing were 50 years or older, the rest in their 20's and 30's. 34 of the pilgrim passengers were children. That number was increased in transit with the birth of Oceanus Hopkins. Then Peregrine White became the first child born to the pilgrims in this new world while at anchor sometime late November, 1620. Peregrine's name means "one who journeys to foreign lands."

They all were so young. Some were rascals. One mischievous little boy threw a burning squib (a small explosive device) near the powder keg. This pilgrim Dennis the Menace nearly blew up the Mayflower.

What happened to these foreigners that first year? Hunger. Sickness. Parents sacrificed themselves for their children. The average age of the pilgrims dropped. By spring one half survived. Four entire families died. Only three married couples survived.

What did these emigrating pilgrims first build upon arrival? A common house for use as church and fort.

Plymouth was a grand mistake. Nevertheless, those women and men resolved to make the best of it for they had journeyed here for more than commercial profit. It wasn't easy. They deduced they had arrived at a location outside the boundaries of the charter originally granted so they needed to develop their own governmental charter. They called it the Mayflower Compact. This Compact shows how these young pilgrims came for more than profit, they came to establish a community in which a "genuinely ethical and spiritual life could be lived."

They were different from Jamestown, demonstrated further when Governor John Winthrop arrived in 1630. He described how they came to this new world not so they could be free to do what they wanted. Liberty ought never be regarded as an exercise in personal wants and desires. He decried what was called 'natural liberty.' True freedom, what was called 'moral liberty,' is the liberty "to that only which is good, just, and honest." True freedom means being freed FOR living the accountable and respectable life, freed not from social obligations but freed FOR striving for the good of the community and upholding your neighbor's good, to be freed FOR honoring God by living the just, ethical, and charitable life. "This liberty," he wrote, "you are to stand for with the hazard of your lives."

As Winthrop preached: "We must delight in each other, make others conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our community as members of the same body."

This Thursday ask yourselves whether or not these pilgrims still live in us today? Has the Mayflower Compact become irrelevant? If it has, then it really has been a big mistake.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
November 26, 2018
“Big Game Day”
Word Count: 750

Take a lesson from a young rookie pastor fresh from Princeton, New Jersey, raised in a paint factory, serving a Pennsylvania village that didn't even boast a traffic light: When you're invited to visit the Thompson Dairy farm and you're wandering with the clan patriarch along the lane to inspect the cows and you see a wire stretched along the edge of the field, do not grab the wire when you ask, "What's this for?"

Lesson: You will get a shocking thrill and the clan will laugh about it forever.

Take the lesson when the two of you are walking your dog in the meadow behind the church and you notice filtering through the fog and twilight six horses escaped from the paddock, do not try to stop them by jumping out and yelling, "Whoa!"

Lesson: Yelling rarely stops a stampede. It tends to encourage them to gallop into town to be found next morning nibbling gardens, dragging down laundry lines.

Take a lesson from a no longer young pastor from Jersey whose young daughter accompanies her friends to the quaint DeLong Fair. She buys a funnel cake but asks the lady at the booth: "What do I do with this?" Nice lady replies: "Just shake sugar on it like Grandma does." Daughter replies: "MyG takes me to the opera."

Lesson: Hush up and eat the funnel cake.

Take another lesson from young rookie pastor fresh from Princeton: When the Octorara Area school calendar lists 'Big Game Day' don't expect to attend a special soccer or football game at the High school. Nope. It is the day when you are the only male left in town because every other guy (short of those in diapers either at home or nursing home) is out hunting. Dunkin Donuts takes a hit that day.

Lesson: Quickly learn about the hunting seasons and bag limits. Jersey weaponry is different.

Black bear, deer, antlered deer, turkey, as well as raccoon, coyote, squirrel, grouse, pheasant, quail, rabbit, rifle, black powder, trapping, shotgun, archery.

A veteran bow hunter named Dan shook his head telling rookie pastor: "Can't stand those fellers who wound a deer with an arrow but won't track him deep into the woods. That arrow is just gonna' work its way into him. Got to finish him off. He deserves better."

You'll also learn a .243 caliber bullet travels with a velocity of 2,960 feet per second with its halfway point at 250 yards. That's two and half football fields.

Lesson: Look ahead before you pull that trigger. Are you shooting into a hillside? Better yet, hit your target you fool.

Better yet: mind the regulations as well as the rules. Keep off posted lands even though available land for hunting is losing out to housing developments. Sorry. Posted. Private property. Tough. Wear orange. Get your license. Respect the hours. Don't drink and trigger. Triple-check that the tree stand is secure.

An emergency Department Doctor talked about Big Game Day: *We expect to see an occasional gunshot wound, but we probably see more tree stand injuries. Tree stand injuries are devastating- high risk of paralyzing spinal cord injuries (often causing the person to be found alone at base of tree after laying there all day). I also have responded to the field with local EMS agencies to care for cardiac arrest in hunters several times in the last couple years in our local area.*

Sure, it's our nature to chaff under regulations, shouting back, "Don't tread on me," with whisky bravado at those who insist we mind the rules. Still, there's good purpose for the Game Commission, for the Fish and Boat Commission. How much better it is to want to do what's right than have to be told to do what's right. Come now, do you trust others to do what is right because they want to? That's like trusting the coal company to realize how stupid and harmful it is to dump coal dust in the creek even if executive orders are rescinded that prevent dumping.

November -- when the calories are high. November -- when there's been a light snow the night before Big Game Day making the day all the better. You can track the blood trails easier in the snow. Plus, the cold preserves the meat. Venison steaks, venison bologna, venison heart, venison jerky provide the calories you will need for the work needed for the coming winter.

Big Game Day. Not a day for rookies. Take a lesson.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Monday, 3 December, 2018

"The Gift of Crutches"

Word Count: 750

The cats were afraid of the crutches. Why do our three cats become wary of anything strange? Cats may be curious critters but only after they've had a chance to allow the strange prove itself safe. Advice: never relocate their litter box without first gaining their feline permission. The cats were afraid of my crutches, dashing to hide beneath the nearest table. But that's the cat's problem. I got a bigger problem, like a left knee that decided to go on strike. They'll have to get over it, at least until I can upgrade from crutches to cane. Crutches are far more liberating than me crawling up the stairs to climb into bed or into the bathroom.

Here's hoping the radiologist confirms the Physician Assistant's initial reading of no tears, no fractures, no floaters. I can manage with only a severe strain and obey the RICE regimen she recommended: Rest, Ice, Cocktails, Elevation. Excuse me, wife just corrected me. The correct regimen is: Rest, Ice, Compression, Elevation. Bother. I like my cure better. Dear me, if you learn anything in life, listen to Doctor's advice and wife's 'tsking.'

It's a bother. It's been since third grade since I've had to use crutches after I fell 30 feet (hugging the tree and saving my life), fracturing foot and ankle. It's similar to riding a bicycle. I'm pretty skillful with them, a big improvement from crawling along the floor or hopping on one foot, actions which only

amused our animals. At least my nuisance injury happened in time to heal for a busy few weeks to come.

Still, it is a bother. Wife must work, so during the daytime, solo me must take care of what needs to be taken care of. How do I dump the basement dehumidifier? How do I walk the dog? How do I feed the cats before they start imagining themselves tigers in India and me a water buffalo? I'm fortunate to have such a compact house and kitchen where everything is within reach.

Given I drive a stick-shift, I can't even drive. I'm stuck. Crutches instead of clutch. What if it snows? I can't shovel the snow. That's partly how I got into this fix, a soccer injury stressed by chores. Let's get specific. How do you carry a glass of ginger ale while using crutches? How do you get the packages from the front steps UPS drops off? Pity the poor Physician Assistant having to talk to unwashed me and sit in whiffing distance of my smelly shirt. There's no way I can cart the recycling bin to the street. It's painful enough trying to crutch my way on my inclined driveway to retrieve my morning Danville News. More seriously, what did the injured do before remote controls and portable phones? Were they forced by sheer boredom to actually read a book? How quaint. How antique.

Thank goodness, I add, for wife and friends. Thank goodness for crutches supplied by the church's medical library. Thank you, ladies, for finding them and for Cindy dropping them off. Thank goodness for Roland making time to drive me to and from Family Practice. Thank goodness for Frank coming over to help me with a portion of my version of the RICE regimen and then push the recycling bin to the end of our driveway.

I'm reminded of a classy friend who lived alone. Her greatest fear of growing old and alone was having a fall and nobody stopping by to find her. It's happened to others. It's happening today to someone. I remember having scheduled a pastoral visit one afternoon to discover the woman had fallen in her bedroom that morning. The incident made me ask back then who will help me cut my toenails when I no longer can reach them myself with the clippers.

Injury makes you mindful of how much you need others. It also makes you mindful of how easily we can forget about others, whether those living alone, those homeless, those hungry, those in diapers stinging from tear gas (there's no harmless tear gas), those lonely. Who among us is lost, who among us is forgotten?

A critical letter replying to a recent column reminded me about the suicide that took place several Iron Heritage Festivals ago. The young man placed his head on the railroad tracks. Who remembers his name? The author rightfully questioned: Are we really a town that cares for our sons and daughters, our brothers and sisters? Are we?

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
December 10, 2018
"Good Shepherds"
Word Count: 750

Often the best thing that can happen to any congregation is suffering through a lousy pastor. Some denominations appoint pastors to their posts so you can blame the bishop. In my denomination, the congregation selects their own pastor, so it's their own fault when they forgo homework and choose

unwisely. Likewise, those who have recovered from heart attacks have told me how it was the best thing that happened to them to improve their health. Perhaps ex-wives say something similar about lousy husbands.

I've seen this play out with several pastors who did dumb things. Acutely aware of how transparently dumb I've been at times as a pastor, my colleagues dubbed me qualified to take point on negotiating departures of these dreadful church shepherds (bad shepherds miserably serving the Good Shepherd Bethlehem born). Likewise, I've been tasked to guide good pastors who've suffered dumb congregations.

One dumb pastor simply lacked a work ethic and ignored his people, preferring golf. Another pastor insulted gay friends of parishioners from the pulpit. He really did. One fabricated reports about how many visits he made each week. Another had a fondness for girls in the church.

Experience more than seminary, I hazard to confess, teaches best that we pastors are supposed to be custodians caring for our people until the next shepherd who inevitably succeeds us. What did I hear recently? Character is destiny. Very true for pastors. You either got class or you don't. Can you teach character? Can seminaries tutor morality?

Sad but true -- there be incompetent, inept, unfit, retrograde pastors. Some are so needy they assume the congregation is there to love them, praise them. Good luck on that. Some deliberately prefer ignorance, denying research, scholarship, facts, vaunting their own interpretations and feelings. Some pastors can be corrupt, viewing the church as their private fiefdom and themselves the privileged. Some exploit their church supporters for their own gain. Some are such needy narcissists that they attack others, even God, for their failings -- ready with excuses. Some display moral cowardice in the face of sin, in the face of abusive behavior -- injustice, prejudice -- failing to call it out when sin happens. Saddest is how these bad pastors dishonor, discredit, demean the church, eroding respect for the church by making her weak, irrelevant, even ridiculed by the community.

It sounds incongruous, but I say 'thank you' when a church experiences inferior pastors. If it doesn't break the church, it can remake the church.

It's amazing how once we cleanse dirty bifocals do we realize how long we've been wearing dirty glasses. It's freeing to see clearly.

Why do we persist in doing dumb things when the course of action is obviously counter-productive, when a better alternative is available, when the foolish decisions are attributable to more than one foolish person but is pushed by a group?

A useful book by historian Barbara Tuchman, "The March of Folly," plays with this theme by analyzing dumb mistakes made by nations. She questions: Why have nations pursued policies totally contrary to their self-interest and what can we learn to avoid making the same mistakes? Her first example is how the Trojans ignored wise Laocoon and brought inside their gates the Trojan Horse in which the Greek warriors lay hidden. A second example was how the repressive antics of the popes fueled the fires of Protest-ant Reformation. Another example of prideful misgovernment was how King George III recklessly mismanaged the American colonies and incited a revolution.

Tuchman wrote: "*Folly is the child of power.*"

When these bad mistakes happen I'm thankful whenever they force a congregation to wake up, examine its character, and realize what kind of church they need to be and what kind of leader they need, just as a bad experience with a congregation can help good pastors renew their calling. Bad times can be instructive, therapeutic.

So I thank you, Donald Trump, for stimulating a better era in America, a wiser future, reinvigorating authentic patriotism. Your Presidency so far – dishonest, dishonorable, dissembling, dissolute -- motivates us to make America great again with love, honor, courtesy, courage. Ponder the Obama Application: If Obama had done what Trump has done, how shrill would the Trumpists scream? You, we can better than this.

Please learn what it means to be President of the USA. Understand, you're not CEO of this country. You are her servant. You may be President but you're not my boss. You serve two bosses: First, the Constitution; Second, us citizens.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Monday, December 17, 2018

"Winter Solstice"

Word Count: 750

Friday, December 21, 5:23 PM. Welcome to the Winter Solstice. The timing of the solstice is no guesswork, no approximation. You can count on it. Literally. Today our sun is at its farthest distance from us. Sunset for us occurs at 4:15 PM. The length of the day will be nine hours and five minutes. Today's the darkest day of the year. Do not fret, it won't stay this way. The Winter Solstice heralds our turning point, which is why we celebrate this time.

From solstice on, daylight begins to increase. Light increases. Hope awakens. No prediction this but promise.

Silly earthling hubris – thinking it is the sun that moves. The sun may seem to us to cross the sky but it is our closed-system earth – our precarious 'spaceship earth' -- that moves on and rotates on ($\frac{3}{4}$ the speed of a bullet), and revolves on (67,000 miles per hour), the tension of gravity inexorable, rapid. This we know. Can you feel gravity happening? Not now perhaps. Trust me though -- give it time and you'll experience the effect of gravity for sure.

Which is one reason why ancient church leaders selected this time to observe the birth of Jesus. They chose it for theological reasons more than for historical accuracy. According to clues in scripture, Jesus likely was born in springtime when sheep would be sent outdoors to graze through the cool of the night rather than during the mideastern mid-day heat. Nothing new about this origin of Christmas, nor some dark religious conspiracy.

Tonight we greet the night sky. At 9:30 PM let's bundle up in winter coats, toss scarves about our necks, and venture outside. Pull your boots on too, it's probably wet. It's Pennsylvania. Let's hope for a clear night sky.

We look northward. Polaris is right where you always see it. The clock hands turn but cannot pinion Polaris remains central, fixed. Look where the constellation of Ursa Major is now located as she pivots around Polaris: off to the east of Polaris and slightly lower toward the horizon, as if the Big Dipper is almost standing straight up by its handle. Little Dipper and Big Dipper face each other, although Little Dipper's handle points up. This panoply of western mythology.

Cassiopeia has wandered also. She now is high and closer to the west, her 'W' formation pointing down toward her husband King Cepheus, his pointy hat pointing northeast.

Fully to the east mid-high in the sky are the stars Castor and Pollux of the constellation Gemini (the Dioscuri, the sons of Zeus), Pollux the brighter of the brothers. Pollux is the twelfth brightest star we see with our naked eyes. Born of Leda, these two brothers look down on us mortals as protectors of sailors, honored by the Romans, these brothers originally Argonauts sharing Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece. Brothers: they were inseparable, even when Castor was killed. Zeus set them in the sky to honor brotherly love. Where one goes, so goes the other. Brothers look out for each other. It's perfectly natural for brother to beat up brother but if bully show up to beat one he'll have to face two. Brothers.

Turn around and admire mid-high in the southern central sky another hero located at the edge of constellation Gemini: popular Orion with his sword belt and upheld club. His foot is the star Rigel and his right shoulder marks the star Betelgeuse. Tracing the line west from the three stars that form his belt and you find closer to the horizon the brightest star in the night sky: Sirius, the dog star, Canis Major, the larger of Orion's hunting dogs. Trace the three stars of Orion's belt in the other direction and you will locate the star Aldebaran, the red eye of Taurus the bull. Orion's club is poised to strike the bull. Just to the right of Aldebaran, if you squint just right, you'll find the Hyades, the cluster of seven sister stars sparkling and glowing as one. Sisters together.

Fully to the west, mid-high in the sky, the great square of Pegasus' wing flies Perseus to Andromeda's rescue, Pegasus interposing himself between beautiful Andromeda and the fearsome monster about to attack her, the constellation Cetus, the whale (which if you connect the dots does look like a whale swimming downward).

Stars tell, not foretell. We belong. Monsters, heroes, adventurers, adventures, sisters, brothers, fights, rescues, and defeats. Above is writ large what happens here below every day.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Monday, December 24, 2018

"Danville 2019"

Word Count: 750

My favorite lesson with our youth confirmation classes was to show a variety of artwork portraying images of Jesus. Included would be that classic portrait of Jesus you find in every church lounge. We wags call it 'goblet head' Jesus because the glow from the side of his head is shaped like a communion chalice. How many of Jesus' portraits qualify for covers of romance novels given his flowing sandy blond locks, rugged European features, blue eyes? Renaissance artwork depicted Jesus as an Italian nobleman because they lacked knowledge of history. Artists assumed people centuries before looked and dressed like them. We still do it, often in children's religious books. Peruse our Hallmark Christmas cards. I still get a kick out of Jesus appearing in movies as tall, Caucasian, and blonde. It's just as funny as Charleston

Heston portraying Moses. Funniest yet are those Italian statues that depict Jesus uncircumcised. Think about it.

I finished the class slideshow with an image drawn by the National Geographic. The magazine tried to portray – based on ethnic, anthropological, historical, and cultural research -- what Jesus really looked like: Short, stocky, muscular, big nose, cropped curly hair, trimmed dark beard, olive skinned. Let's put it this way: If Jesus were to show up on Mill Street, we Danvillians likely would speed-dial Homeland Security.

You might well ask: So what? After all, since God made us in God's image, can't we reciprocate the favor by making his son in ours? My friend from seminary who served in Zambia found it moving how the children of Zambia looked upon pictures of a black Jesus. They needed to see a black Jesus rather than thinking their Lord and Savior was some blond European Caucasian dude.

All of which explains why I'm grateful for social evolution. Attitudes are changing and usually the arc bends toward progress. I freely admit that not all change is progress (cells phones come to mind), but the arc does bend toward change that widens, enlightens, advances civilization.

Howsoever curious it is that some Christians still doubt the theory of human evolution, we Christians can all acknowledge the reality of social evolution. It's hard to deny. I've seen society evolve just since moving to Danville in 1989. There was a young fellow then who attended private school because he felt back then there was no place for him in our school district. He didn't play football or baseball or wrestle. He didn't enjoy sports so he attended a school that fostered other talents: language skills, music, art. He has a son of similar temperament but his son is able to feel welcomed and appreciated in our school district. I particularly love how our athletes also play in the marching band, do forensics, act on stage. Similarly, girls today can do more than just be cheerleaders or wait to be asked to the prom or take classes in home economics or be dissuaded from careers in science.

Danville is evolving, must evolve. It isn't as if we're going to bicycle backwards. I'll take progress even when it demands I must change, I must grow, I must let go of my worn-out assumptions, my tired presumptions, my outdated language, how I regard others not like me.

Social evolution. It happens innocuously and in sudden leaps and spasms. A decade ago, a High school club helped evolve our school district's understanding of sexual orientation. Nowadays, parents are better equipped to publicly love, support their gay son or daughter.

One critical area where we must evolve shames Danville today. Let's dedicate 2019 to becoming civilized. It's a critical area to which many other regions of the country have learnt to adapt themselves and mature. We're behind the times largely because of local demographics. Thankfully, local demographics are changing. This change signals social progress. I refer to how Danville and especially the Danville Area School District can and must learn to appreciate our community becoming ethnically rich, ethnically diverse.

How boring is a painting painted only in shades of white? This reminds me of discovering jambalaya after years of my mother's cooking. Mom, bless her, considered white rice and creamed chicken exotic and spicy. Dad's favorite recipe was canned hash topped with a poached egg. Thank God for me discovering Cajun cooking.

We are evolving. There's no room for rude parochialism and nostalgic prejudice, whether on Mill Street or definitely in the classroom. Modern Danvillians come from Ethiopia, Nigeria, China, Cameroun, Honduras, Mexico, Egypt, Kurdistan. And it is good.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Monday, December 31, 2018

"Home Not Alone"

Word Count: 750

Those baby days in Bethlehem would have been baby-day wonderful. That terrifying joy of becoming mommy and daddy surrounded and supported by the muddle of loving family. Grandmas giving advice. Sisters rocking your baby to give you rest, that incredibly natural sway of female and baby. The joyous luxury of shutting out the noise of the world so you can listen to the laughter, coos, cries of your baby. Mary nursing Jesus snug, that baby smell of love.

Umbilical cord heals in time. Those blessed baby months when all that matters is 7 lbs 8 ounces. Until, as with every oasis, sand swirls to invade. Noise from the outside world grows louder. It always does. Joseph and the men -- in their powerlessness -- complain about taxes, more molesting Roman soldiers in town, the corruption of Temple leaders. Such is the fear, anger, worry, frustration that accompanies a father's love and protection from a world his son must enter.

Unknown to them in Bethlehem, the Magi -- emissaries from the kingdom of the east -- increase danger by contacting Herod, and, ignorantly, ask him about the new King of Israel they envisioned from astrological studies.

The Magi do not know who they were dealing with.

Herod. Had two of his sons strangled. Had his favorite wife killed after becoming suspicious of her. Herod's last order was to command his troops to arrest thousands of notables from across the country and sequester them in the stadium in Jericho to be executed when he died.

The Magi unsuspecting Herod's treachery bring their gifts to Bethlehem along with the news that, how nice, Herod would very much like to meet this boy.

Two other gifts they bring to this family: panic, terror.

Joseph, so warned, tells Mary they must leave their comfortable, safe, loving home. They must give up their home. We must do what we must do. We must escape.

They escape with little time to spare. They undertake this 'Journey to Egypt' -- refuge for these refugees, traveling in safety with other villagers who realize they too must escape the violence of Herod's rule. Pack what you must. Carry what you can. Mary holding Jesus on her hip. Perhaps her other arm cradling his younger brother.

Where do they settle? We do not know.

Did the Egyptians welcome them? We do not know. We do know a year or so later, news arrives that Herod has died. The tyrant is dead.

Is it safe to go home? They hope so. These refugees decide to return to home in Bethlehem to start over.

Except. Rome appoints a new ruler over that region. Herod's remaining three sons each are apportioned a region of Dad's kingdom to rule.

Archelaus is given Jerusalem, Bethlehem, all the southern territory of Judea to rule. Archelaus proves worse than his father. Archelaus burnt alive rabbis and their students who protested him installing Roman idols in the Temple of Jerusalem. During a Passover a riot erupts in Jerusalem. His soldiers slaughter 3,000. Another rebellion erupts and Archelaus orders the crucifixion of 2,000 men. This, boy Jesus likely sees. He sees, he remembers.

Says theologian Ken Bailey: "The ugly side of life is where the Gospel flourishes."

Joseph and Mary decide they must leave Bethlehem again, this time traveling north towards other family members in the inconspicuous, insignificant village of Nazareth. That region is ruled by the other son, Herod Antipas, who hasn't yet shown himself to be as malevolent as brother. Perhaps to boy Jesus an adventure, life and death to mom and dad. The blessed child is unworried about their next meal or where to sleep. They trust. The parents? Desperate.

There in Nazareth they settle and start a new home. Dedicated to make a home that is safe, loving, faithful. There in Nazareth the family grows, more little babies, dealing with hard times as all families must. We all learn to carry on with broken hearts.

Until.

Until this son grows and takes it upon himself to show God is in their midst.

Until he steps out to show how God will bring them home when they return to the way of God he reveals.

What is home? A place? Or the people? It never is quite enough for us to be grateful for our homes, for a mantel for our stockings pock-mocked by years of thumbtacks, a warm blanket, a familiar chair, a place at the table.

We shall never be home till others find themselves home.

2019

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
7 January, 2019
“My Life Coach”
Word Count: 750

It was a respectable Christmas. How about yours? A good haul? I got a fair amount of quality loot. We may talk a good Christmas story about peace and love, faith and family, joy and Jesus, but when it comes down to this very special day, the avaricious gland located right in the middle of the frontal lobe begins to pulsate and take control. Some of the loot I unwrapped on blessed Christmas morn I bought for myself, such as my remote controlled Tyrannosaurus Rex and Triceratops. They're not toys, I hasten to explain. I ordered them from the Smithsonian Discovery gift shop, so naturally they are completely educational and scientific instruments. They are, however, fun to use to terrorize the cats. Tyrannosaurus Rex even roars. We also got 'Rock'Em Sock'Em Robots' but daughter stole it.

Books I inevitably receive from well-intentioned givers. One book in particular stood out from the common rest. I read it from cover to cover the very next day. The book? “Vladimir Putin: Life Coach.” It comes from the same author who edited the book, “The Beautiful Poetry of Donald Trump,” which now I simply must read.

With Putin as my life coach, I feel fully empowered for 2019. Each page offers a description of Putin's flair and gift for living superior, followed by the author's suggestions as to how we too might achieve greatness in our mediocre, inferior lives.

Channeling my inner Putin, I've come to realize we are handling the border wall issue all wrong. The solution is staring us in the face. I refer to all the children liberated from their impoverished and delinquent parents to be cared for by our benevolent state. Isn't that what the state is for? What are those lollygags doing in those camps? Lolling about. Watching TV and learning English for free. Playing video games to become real American adolescents. We should stop them from kicking a soccer ball about and let them throw a football like real Americans. Plus, they are getting free meals and free medical care on your dime and mine.

I ask: when are they going to earn their keep? We want the wall, right? Only a wall can protect us from terrorist, drug gangs, and plague, right? We must be on guard for those seven year olds carrying plague into our blessed land. Maybe we can learn from the French and erect as successful a barrier as the Maginot Line. That worked well for them. Well, given today's immigration dilemma, there's the obvious solution. Put those kids to work building it. Where a wall doesn't make geographical sense, they could be teamed into competitive units to dig a deep trench between Mexico and the USA. Give trophies to the team that digs the deepest and farthest. I'm always up for a win-win solution.

Same again, let's invite the children to volunteer to prove that dismantling regulations on industrial waste won't harm our health, whilst, more importantly, increasing corporate profits.

Sound advice on how to empower our inner Vlad from Life Coach Vladimir include: Display your superior status; Stamp out people mocking you; Grow your power base by demanding others reciprocate favors; Get ahead by creating incriminating information on your co-workers; ; Sow discord

and distrust; Silence your critics; Rewrite history; Control what the media says about you by dominating the media.

Do these and you too can “Be More Vlad.” Of course, the question we might wish to ask is: do we really want more Putins?

And now, Rock’Em Sock’Em fans, over here in this corner wearing trunks in red, white, and blue there are the voices of Ruth Marcus, Charles Krauthamer, George Will, David Brooks, Doris Kearns Goodwin, Jon Meacham, David Gergen, Peggy Noonan, Eugene Robinson, Bruce Springsteen. In the other corner wearing only red trunks, we hear the wit and wisdom of the brain trust of Kanye West, Sebastian Gorka, Sean Hannity, Rush Limbaugh, Judge Jeanine, Ann ‘Bellatrix’ Coulter, Laura Ingraham, Rudy Giuliani, Ted Nugent, Putin.

I know in whose corner I’ll stand.

Did you hear the story of the loudmouth blowhard jerk at the end stool of the town’s sports bar who keeps yelling at the NFL because he knows better than everyone else, so he gets selected to coach the hometown team and in one season takes a winning team and turns it into the loser of the league. No? You never heard that story? Now you have.

It’s going to be a very interesting next few months.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
14 January, 2019
“I Love Trump”
Word Count: 750

Let’s ban the use of the word ‘impact’ unless the newscaster is referring to teeth or meteor craters. If you wish to speak about how something affects something try more precise words: influences, affects, alters, changes, stimulates, inspires. Thank you, Roget.

I plead similar banishment for the word ‘hate.’ “I hate broccoli,” daughter whines. Does she really? Or does she find broccoli unappetizing, disagreeable?

We use both words glibly, irresponsibly.

At the risk of Trump fatigue, I write this because it needs to be said and because it is more about you than Trump. My defiantly Republican friend leaned back in surprise when I explained how I do not hate Trump, how I love Trump. I have to. I realize Fox News tries to paint any criticism or mockery of Trump as hating him. I also realize there’s plenty of merchandise profiting from emotional antipathy toward Trump, almost as much merchandise as I saw for sale at the Bloomsburg Gun Show expressing fear and loathing of Hillary Clinton and CNN.

Yes, I realize how if you dare criticize a darling of the left you can be by certain circles labeled a ‘hater.’ For example: if you suggest you find a certain rapper’s lyrics objectionable, offensive, there are folks who leap irrationally and call you an ‘intolerant hater.’ No I’m not. I just dislike the music. Don’t I have

that right? I'm not interfering with your right to enjoy the music. I feel the same about most country music.

Fact is: hatred is too easy. Fact is: I cannot hate Trump. Fact is: Love for him makes me feel sorry for him. He's lonely, frightened, confused about love, a man who has suffered soul damage. He's also a sad caricature who should never have been given responsibilities for which he's manifestly unsuited. Fortunately for us, he's an incompetent megalomaniac. Back in March of 2017 when he took office I offered him my pastoral services. I felt he might benefit from a pastor in his life.

If all we do – politically, socially, spiritually -- is leap from disagreement over issues to hatred of the person and turn every conflict into a personal argument, we will never reach positive solutions. Your self-righteous indignation doesn't give you license to damage or destroy another person's humanity. Oddly enough, love alone cures conflict and intractability, even when the other side (immaturely lacking objective control over their emotions) prefers intractable conflict. They are unable to detach personalities from issues and are driven to win especially if it means destroying and punishing the enemy (regardless who's hurt). See what fear does?

The essence of all faiths argue how it is one thing to oppose, criticize, reprove a person's actions, behavior, deeds; It is altogether another thing – indeed, a satanic trap – to hate a person. That's the spiral toward inhumanity and ruin. Hatred's an emotion for which we must never allow ourselves the luxury. So beware whenever you start demonizing others and regarding persons as evil. Radical love requires viewing even those persons who commit great evil as children of God, children needing redemption. When you hate you're saying far more about yourself and your soul. "Be angry but sin not," I once read somewhere. "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you," I've also heard.

I'm reminded of how Dietrich Bonhoeffer ministered to the Nazi guards who kept him a prisoner by Hitler's orders.

I'm reminded of Maya Angelou who said: "Hate, it has caused a lot of problems in the world, but has not solved one yet."

I'm reminded of my Jesus who asked forgiveness of those who crucified him because they "do not know what they do." Martin Luther King, Jr., preached on this, saying Jesus was killed not by bad men but by ignorant men.

Last, I recommend that everyone find a way of watching Trevor Noah's recent comedy special called, "Son of Patricia." He recalls an incident in Chicago where, while crossing against the light, a driver in a red pick-up truck fulfilled every possible hilarious stereotype by yelling at him a racial slur. Did Trevor respond with hate at this racist act? He wanted to until he remembered his mother's advice that you take that racism and shake it with the love of Jesus and send it back it back to them. What did Trevor do? Smiling, he yelled the slur back at the man as if it were a compliment. The guy, ready for anger, didn't know how to respond.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
21 January, 2019
"On the Road Again"
Word Count: 750

With my wife's retirement approaching, we look forward to home here serving as base of operations. I've long bragged that when I become a rich and famous author, we'd move to a flat in Notting Hill, London. Well, since wealth and fame hasn't arrived yet, we'll make do with travel. I need playtime!

One of my brothers, the moneyed one, is bursting to retire this spring to a gated community in Florida, which to us sounds like entering the eighth circle of Dante's inferno. Give us a city.

You ought never have to have a bucket list. Yes, I'm mapping a third Miata cross country writing road trip. Our Fodor's are helping us chart a trip to Dublin, Bristol, a drive touring Arthurian Cornwall, Oxford, then London, back home on the Queen Mary. She has eyes on Tuscany, the south of France, New Zealand, South Africa (where she still has relatives).

Me? Portugal, Casablanca, Galapagos. I would love to return to Honduras where I would bus to Juticalpa and from there travel by jeep then by horse to load up canoes and paddle down Rio Patuca toward the Mosquito Coast. A buddy and I began planning that adventure until realities intruded.

I'd like to see the rest of America too. By that I mean Panama, Chile, Argentina. I once visited a school in the remote Honduran outback. Posted on the wall was a map of America. The map showed all of America, from Tierra del Fuego to Queen Elizabeth Islands. A dear friend in Danville found it funny how the United States claimed the name, America. Victor would protest: "I'm from Paraguay. I'm American too!"

Comedian Trevor Noah described how he loves traveling to places where he doesn't speak the language -- like Scotland, he joked. I agree. It pays to get out of your comfort zone.

My first church was a tiny, ignored country church on the Lancaster County border. Mischievously, I took my rural youth into downtown Philadelphia. We drove to Logan District and parked in front of the church where I had worked as an intern. Then we descended into the Broad Street station. None had ever been on a subway before. Cows they knew. It was great. I kept smiling at wide-eyed them. We were the only white people there. We emerged and hit the streets. We passed by an alley near Wanamakers when one young girl's eyes were drawn to the darkness of the cloistered alley by the sound of a rustling tarpaulin. She rushed to me scared, wondering: "What's that?" "Just a man bedding down," I replied.

Getting out of your comfort zone. Becoming aware. Experiencing a bigger world. Understanding it is a bigger world. Appreciating the world isn't all like you. Thank God, because it cuts away at that tendency to think ourselves superior to (or different from) those we don't understand. Martin Luther King, Jr., (blame him for me entering the professional ministry) preached how this leads to "the most tragic prejudice."

My friend Martin went on to preach: "I always try to do a little converting when I'm in jail. And when we were in jail in Birmingham the other day, the white wardens and all enjoyed coming around the cell to talk about the race problem. And they were showing us where we were so wrong demonstrating. And they were showing us where segregation was so right. And they were showing us where intermarriage was so wrong. So I would get to preaching, and we would get to talking—calmly, because they wanted to talk about it. And then we got down one day to the point...to talk about where they lived, and how much they were earning. And when those brothers told me what they were earning, I

said, "Now, you know what? You ought to be marching with us. You're just as poor as Negroes." And I said, "You are put in the position of supporting your oppressor, because through prejudice and blindness, you fail to see that the same forces that oppress Negroes in American society oppress poor white people. And all you are living on is the satisfaction of your skin being white, and the drum major instinct of thinking that you are somebody big because you are white. And you're so poor you can't send your children to school. You ought to be out here marching with every one of us every time we have a march."

Have a blessed day, dear friends, honoring today.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Monday, 28 January, 2019

"Do I Have To?"

Word Count: 750

My only complaint was that the nurse anesthetist didn't give me warning that he was about to knock me out into a deep sleep. I had rehearsed saying something terribly clever as he administered the loopy juice, such as: "There's no place like home, there's no place like home." For me, when it comes to an operating theatre, the emphasis is on 'theatre.' When you are garbed in a paper gown about to begin a colonoscopy, what could better than entertaining the staff? It helped to be first case because then they wouldn't get a little behind on the schedule.

Alas, no advance warning from the anesthetist. Bummed me out. A second later (for me), I was awake in the bay opposite the nurses station. Ten minutes later I was dressed and waiting in the lobby for my wife to pick me up and take me home for a cup of coffee and soft boiled egg.

My funniest hospital experience was done unto me whilst I was doozy, dozy, woozy, recovering. I had to have my shoulder surgically re-attached back in seminary days, the result of an errant attempt at touch football. It was near Halloween. With me pleasantly drugged, my evil friend visited and slipped one of those rubber arms with a bloody stump into my sling. The sweet young nurse's aide came to check my pulse. The arm fell out. She screamed. I slept. He howled.

Dark hospital humor ranks among the best type of humor. But then, given all that medicals have to deal with, they need a perverse sense of humor. My family, fond of the Addams family New Yorker magazine cartoons, tilted that wicked way anyway. Grandma suffered from Parkinson's. We would see her quivering and ask her to mix our drinks for us. She loved it.

Back to my recent excursion to the big house. Thank goodness they improved the preparation for cleansing. What an improvement! Sixteen years ago when I celebrated by fiftieth birthday with my first colonoscopy, I drank the purification elixir from a Waterford crystal champagne glass. It didn't help either the flavor or consistency, the gallon mix tasting like sea water mixed with Elmer's glue. This time? Four pills, two 32 oz bottles of Gatorade, and clean as a whistle.

Now, I'll admit this procedure isn't among my favorite things to do. Is it a guy pride kind of thing? Of course, wife scoffs: "you boys have no idea..."

What's pride got to do with it anyway, except when it comes to having pride in doing your job and doing it well? Foolish pride gets in the way far too often from us doing what's right. Yes, indeed. My father always taught us to tough it out, do first what you don't like doing and don't want to do but have to do. It makes all the other chores easier. Do the stinking work first to get it over with.

Not that a medical procedure is stinking work. No, no, no. What it is, is preemptive, useful, fortunate. Economically sensible too. It costs less to nip problems in the bud than let them weed out, fester, grow more unmanageable and far more expensive.

There are plenty of things I'd rather not do. A visit to Endoscopy ranks right up there with those things I'd rather not do, like brushing my teeth, like filling out applications for Medicare, like doing my taxes, like fundraisers, like Superbowl Parties, and like attending church meetings, but come on, boys, it's good and necessary to do.

It's a harmless nuisance that pays big dividends. I have a particular friend who is very grateful he finally acceded to his doctor's stern warning (care-giving by toughness and truth-telling) and finally went buns up. They found a little something that could have been a big something.

That's quality care. Those who care for real neither need nor want rewards for being caring. Some argue that what makes you a caring institution is by painting new logos on autos and vans or by handing out new nametags or keep adding the burden of caring metrics to the flow chart of nursing responsibilities. Rather insulting actually, as if finally now we are caring. What were we before? Some silly people actually think caring is a goal. The medical and professional staff I've known for decades around here have shown that caring, like excellence, is just what you do as a by-product because they are professionals and do their job right.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
4 February, 2019
"Be Prepared"
Word Count: 750

Uninterested in merit badges, uniforms, and rank, I never was a respectable Scout. I just wanted to make campfires. Yes, I was invited to leave for bucking the Scout Leaders' authority.

Despite my wayward Scouting past, I applaud the wisdom in 'being prepared.' 'BE PREPARED' is the Boy Scout motto. It's Scout-wise to be prepared for contingencies. Do you have flint? Does your pocket knife include a can opener? Is your poncho packed?

I've applied this Scout-wise lesson in my profession when it comes to holidays, such as Christmas. I learnt early on to make sure my worship services were prepared in advance because there was a high probability that tragedy and trauma would occur in the congregation during the festive season.

BE PREPARED. This motto is apt today because my radar is warning me how all of us in the United States will be called upon to be good Scouts. Be prepared. Higher patriotism will be required.

It is one thing to revel in patriotism at the Super Bowl. It's more valiant, courageous, and mature when it's not a pep rally. A bill is coming due. Rank partisanship must be set aside for righteous citizenship,

for a people promoting “virtue, good conduct, generous citizenship.” Why? Our republic exists only as “the sum of its parts.”

There’s a clichéd illustration many preachers have used. In rough seas at night the ship officers on the bridge spot a light ahead of them. The captain makes contact by radio and commands: “Divert your course 15 degrees to the north to avoid a collision.” The reply: “Recommend you divert your course 15 degrees south to avoid a collision.” The captain retorts: “This is the captain of US Navy ship, divert your course.” Reply: “No, I say again divert your course. Captain: “This is the aircraft carrier *USS Lincoln*, the second largest ship in the United States' Atlantic fleet. I demand that YOU change your course 15 degrees north or countermeasures will be undertaken to ensure the safety of this ship.” Reply: “This is a lighthouse. Your call.”

It is one thing to be the Titanic and be surprised by an iceberg in the night; it’s another thing to be a ship captained by self-serving ideological agendas steaming our boat toward rocks. We’re in the boat together, sink or swim.

How many have been indicted by Lighthouse Mueller? 37? Despite Fox and Friends’ Orwellian double-speak, what hasn’t already been proven to be accurate about the dossier? How many others in this flailing administration have been proved corrupt? Worse, please explain why so many of this administration’s tactics have resulted in abetting Putin’s agenda for deconstructing Western Democracy?

Jon Meacham’s latest book is a timely book, titled, “The Soul of America.” History is destiny. Character is destiny. He describes some of the worst stains on our country’s history: aborted reconstruction, resurgence of the KKK, Jim Crow laws legislating white supremacy, censorship of anti-war magazines, denial of women’s rights, white nativism, hostile immigration laws, Lindbergh’s America First movement fueled by anti-Semitism, fear mongering, internment camps, red baiting, Nixonian criminality.

He then describes how we were able to rise up and fulfill Lincoln’s confidence in our “better angels,” us drawing upon an inherent goodness, repairing our commitment toward fairness and truth. Every time WE THE PEOPLE recovered the American soul amidst times of grave peril, shame, dishonor, right leaders also were raised up to guide us aright. Eleanor Roosevelt said: “You cannot be a great leader unless the people are great.” Are we great? We are whenever we and our leaders are trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent.

Meacham explains what our founders intended when they wrote in the Declaration of Independence about our unalienable rights to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. “The pursuit of happiness,” Meacham writes, “means the pursuit of the good of the whole, because the good of the whole was crucial to the genuine well-being of the individual, and vice versa.”

Meacham’s book offers us great hope because, amidst times of political harm, unsavory conflict, and fear, right citizenship arose and recovered the wisdom of WE THE PEOPLE, keeping us moving toward ‘a more perfect Union.’ Whenever those darker impulses sought control of our soul, our ‘better angels’ asserted themselves: Suffrage, civil right acts rejecting segregation and KKK, monopoly busting, the Marshall Act, NATO, McCarthyism defeated by the rule of law.

Are we -- right, left, center – still prepared to defend this noble experiment?

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
11 February, 2019
“Roger is Right”
Word Count: 750

To treat Roger Stone fairly, we need more than a sound bite. We’d benefit from the wider context when, intentionally provocative, he taunted: “hate is a stronger motivator than love.” He’s right, of course. How many cheered for the Rams because they hate the Patriots? How many voted for one candidate because they couldn’t stand the other candidate?

It hurts to admit Stone is right because he’s a juvenile who just discovered a swear word. He’s an echo of what a friend and colleague said to me, smiling: “When you’re standing in a room filled with gasoline why do you have to light a match?” Can’t it sometimes help to light the match?

Yes, it’s Machiavellian, for as Machiavelli counseled: “A wise prince knows how to resort to evil if necessity demands it.” But is it loving? Probably not.

History validates Roger Stone’s opinion. Please, can we make sure our youth read about history? If they don’t learn about history, what’s the purpose in learning calculus?

Throughout the lurid tales of civilization, hate always has been a keen motivator. Ask Mussolini, a master at harnessing contempt. Ask those coiffured mommies who spat on little girls trying to attend school in Little Rock. Ask Lady Bird Johnson, also spat on by right-wing protestors irate over her husband championing the Civil Rights Act. Similarly, ask the anti-war protestors who called soldiers returning from Viet Nam disgusting names. Riddle me this: what’s the difference between a pro-lifer who hates pro-abortion advocates and a pro-choicer who hates those who advocate the sanctity of life at conception? Nothing.

What I want to know is what kind of hate is Roger talking about? What kind of love? Soldier, did you jump on that grenade because you hate the enemy or because you love your squad?

Roger just naturally invites suspicion. My faith wants me to hope that there are deep and disturbing flaws in this Roger Stone soundbite attitude. There are.

The first flaw is how his attitude locks the world into a strict and pathetic binary world view, a Manichean world-view that cheapens life into a competition between good and evil, light and dark, evil and good. Those of us who hold to a Biblical understanding of the world reject such dualism. Our Bible-based world view, given experience and scholarship, suggests that life is neither clear cut nor absolute. For example: it’s easy to preach that hatred leads us to forge swords for killing and love makes us manufacture scalpels for healing. But, haven’t we sometimes wielded swords because we love?

For us, evils aren’t the opposite of good but the deformity of the good we believe intended by God in creation. Everything, even higher virtues, are subject to distortion by our self-centeredness, by our desire to be god-like. What are the Seven Deadly Sins but perversions of fine, valuable, and useful traits?

Little wonder, then, that I find that line from the movie “Cowboys and Aliens” comforting: “I’ve seen good men do bad things and bad men do good things.” Who among us would like their entire life revealed for judgment by their neighbors? Who among us secretly fear we will be found out? We who balance ourselves upon Biblical principles are quick to say how grateful we are we don’t get what we deserve.

Upon deeper reflection, this attitude gets far more interesting than we initially began. What kind of hate are we talking about? Can there be a good hate? Can hate be acceptable if it’s sprung of a deeper, tough-minded love, never hating persons but despising evil deeds -- hatred of poverty, hatred of oppression, hatred of disease, hatred of war – or is this just a convenient justification? Because I love you I protect you with oppression? Aren’t we always struggling on a slippery slope? We must then speak of love beyond Valentine’s Day love. We speak of love brave enough to strive for the best of others, freeing them to love, helping them fulfill their potential.

So we nudge toward the fatal flaw when Roger says how hatred is a stronger motivator than a love purposed in justice and righteousness. The fruits reveal the source. What does hatred produce when it descends into hatred of persons rather than anger at evil deeds? What are its fruits? Pessimism. Indignation. Distrust. Contempt for humanity. Resentments. An unforgiving mind. Who wants to live angry all the time?

The quality of the motivation depends on the intent. So, Roger, what exactly is your intent?

Danville News Column
Robert John Andrews
18 February, 2019
“Champions”
Word Count: 750

You needn’t be a fan of Freddie Mercury and the rock group, Queen, to appreciate the movie, “Bohemian Rhapsody,” which won best Drama at one of those award shows.

We enjoyed it. I found it equally disturbing and moving how this man -- cursed with genius -- lost himself, spiraling down into lurid, amoral, destructive behavior, alienating those who really loved him.

The most touching scene was when he meets a friend who becomes his eventual partner. Says Freddie: “I like you.” Says friend Jim: “I like you too. Come and find me when you decide to like yourself.”

Freddie eventually does. He apologizes to his friends in the band for how he mistreated them, especially when they urged him to change before collapse. Freddie realized how much he needed honest friends. He realized he wasn’t good on his own, alone. He rediscovered how his talent, unless used for the benefit for others (good thoughts, good words, good deeds), was a wasted talent. He was able to break the curse, find contentment, and prepare for his death due to AIDS. Somebody to love.

“Bohemian Rhapsody” is a movie of restoration, recovery, reconciliation. It could be our story.

Back in October I was standing in line waiting for a bank teller and (voyeur me) I eavesdropped as they chattered while setting up their stations. One teller mentioned how she and her husband got so busy

they couldn't attend church that Sunday but they later picked up the video stream and listened to the message. She reported it was a good message. That's great, but it's hardly enough.

Now, I'm usually obnoxious enough to intrude in conversations like this but this time I remained shy, timid, polite, bashful, reserved. But I did take notes.

Want to hear a secret? I really shouldn't tell you this. But I will. The sermon at Sunday church isn't the reason for church, howsoever brilliant the sermon. There, I've confessed it.

Okay, let me confess a little more about church. Our calling as preachers is to help us all hear and respond with commitment to Christ Jesus as revealed in scripture, New Testament and Old. We flatter ourselves supposing you folks come to hear us. False flattery. You come to worship God. If we are doing our job, we are helping the listeners "come into the presence of God." A material part of coming into the presence of God is coming into each other's presence.

Community. Hearing about surgeries, recoveries. Meals for new parents. Celebrating our kids at forensics, sports, drama club, or singing in the Susquehanna Valley Youth Chorale. Meeting new friends. This dramatizes why our friend the Bible is filled with people's names and people's stories. How else can God be God except through people with names?

How can there be any message without the context of us gathered bringing all the stuff we bring as church? Otherwise it's a lecture or Bible study or showing off. Far different from a reflection that speaks to human moments and situations.

If all it is is hearing an informative talk, whether in person or live-streaming and pausing when we need to go to the bathroom, we conga line toward the cliff of privatized, lonely, solitary Christianity. Which is an oxymoron. There is no such animal as private Christianity. Pretty true for all religions. Faith necessitates community, the body, people through whom this verb we call God works and reveals faith, hope, love. What good is faith, hope, love unless there's flesh?

Together, only together, we are champions. Outcast, misfit us, those who aren't supposed to belong – we losers are the champions of the world. The last shall be first. The first shall be last.

Sorry marching bands, tell your band director Freddie's anthem isn't a sport song for the winning team. This song by Queen is best sung by the losing team, the defeated. "We've been there: I've paid my dues time after time. I've done my sentence but committed no crime. And bad mistakes, I've made a few. I've had my share of sand kicked in my face but I've come through. And I need to go on and on and on and on. We are the champions, my friends. And we'll keep on fighting till the end."

I've said for years how my church has made me far more faithful than I'd be on my own. Truthfully, most of them are far more religious than I am. They hold me accountable. They make me accountable.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
25 February, 2019
"Image of God"
Word Count: 750

A parent lives in abject fear for their child the instant the pregnancy test indicates positive. You worry, worry. Will there be problems during the pregnancy? Will my toddler touch the hot stove-top? Will she get kidnapped? Did we make sure he was fully vaccinated? What about being bullied, bad boyfriends, car accidents, illicit drug use, becoming a spoiled brat? When they leave home, will they be safe? You worry – far beyond petrified fear; it's a life-long fear pulsating in the back of the heart.

It's the price for having kids, which is why I cannot imagine the agony and grief of those parents sitting in the front row at the Rose garden when the President invoked his emergency to build the wall, those parents whose children were killed, either by accident or assault, by undocumented immigrants. The horror of a parent's grief. I've heard a mother's primal howl. It haunts you forever.

We'll set aside for the time-being a rational debate whether or not a declaration of emergency is warranted. We defer discussing our national complicity in consuming heroin and meth. We set aside any discussion of personal tragedies being exploited, exaggerated, to suit a snowflake ego. I now simply wish to express great sorrow at their horrible loss. Unfair, bitter, cruel, beyond tragic. Their loss is an atrocity.

Atrocities. Where in the front row of the Rose Garden were seats reserved to highlight the horror of the loss of other parents? Here's a small sampling of a numerically worse atrocity: Aurora – 6 killed. Pittsburgh synagogue – 11. Charleston – 9. Rossburg – 10. Thousand Oaks – 13. Santa Fe – 10. Parkland – 17. Las Vegas – 59. Sandy Hook -- 28. Orlando – 50.

Then again, where are the seats in the front row for the loved ones of ambushed police? Where are seats for mothers of young black men slain because of their skin color? Where's his outrage over their murders, or do their murders fail to serve an opportunistic campaign slogan?

Are these atrocities as easily preventable as the President flim-flams in the Rose Garden using the parents he sat in the front row? If we only had a wall...

Who murdered these children, parents, siblings? Were their murderers undocumented immigrants? No?

Where's strong national defense for them? Who then might be considered complicit in the murder of these innocents? Why aren't Donald and the NRA demanding a wall of sane laws to hinder further killings and mass murders? Given the NRA's intractability, disinformation, indifference, and greed, it's the jaundiced NRA and boot-licking politicians who fail to defend the true intent of the 2nd Amendment, as well as fail to defend the premise of the Declaration of Independence: "... that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."

So what's our more pressing emergency?

At the National Prayer Breakfast the other week, scripture was recited and prepared script was read: "As part of our commitment to building a just and loving society, we must build a culture that cherishes the dignity and sanctity of innocent human life. All children, born and unborn, are made in the holy image of God. Every life is sacred, and every soul is a precious gift from Heaven"

Yes, they are. I presume the speaker and his supposedly religious applauders will uphold a Biblically consistent commitment toward children separated from their parents as a diabolical deterrence for asylum seekers (shame on our immigration policies dictated by Stephen 'Animal House Niedermeyer'

Miller), toward children in cages, toward children in Honduras, Yemen, Syria, toward children in Flint, toward homeless and impoverished children, toward children suffering toxic emotional environments, toward children who deserve the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in classrooms.

Are not these also made in the holy Image of God, deserving reverence and respect? Are not they also precious gifts from Heaven?

We set aside for now any discussion of legal rights for abortion. We also set aside any judgment about the convenient piety of the speaker. He's exposed what's in his soul. We know he disdains losers. Surprise, a real loser fails to listen, learn, then deliberate intelligently. A loser rushes to self-serving schemes. A loser fails to respect facts. A loser prefers agitation versus achieving difficult solutions. A loser acts like a spoiled, pouting brat. Whiners blame others.

Donald shells about making America great again. He'd be wiser to try making his America worthy again.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

4 March, 2019

"The Belly Test"

Word Count: 750

Indolence encourages snacking on Twinkies, snacking encourages indolence -- a vicious circle encouraging comfort-fit jeans. So, despite my traditionally Presbyterian indifference to the institutional church's liturgical seasons, perhaps we can find some merit in us observing the season of Lent. Lent begins with Ash Wednesday, March 6. Liturgical seasons can educate us.

Lent was created by the church as the spring training season that prepared rookie Christians for baptism. They had to prove they were disciplined for sacrificial living. Novices would fast, pray, study the Bible. That edge of hunger makes you more alert, more productive. I always avoided a heavy breakfast before preaching. If I didn't, even I nodded off during the sermon.

Lent also served a pragmatic purpose: By spring the winter larder was bare, spring had yet to yield its fertile abundance. Time to tighten belts tighter.

Ash Wednesday begins Lent by reminding us that all things are finite, including ourselves. Unto dust we shall return. It's not optional. We only have so much time, so spend it well. Life requires effort. Life requires forbearance. Novices learn to live within limits. Life is limited.

So why does crazy Mardi Gras (Fat Tuesday) herald sober Ash Wednesday? It had its psychological place -- the last big bang to clear out the last of fats and sweets before long weeks of abstinence. Of course, nowadays, nobody stops partying -- it is all Mardi Gras, all gross indulgence, all the time. Which might be our problem.

Once upon a time there was a mouse who found a small crack in a basket full of corn. He squeezed himself through the small crack and gorged himself on all the corn. Swollen, he waddled toward the crack to escape but found himself too large to fit. Just then a weasel came by and heard the mouse moaning at being stuck in the basket because he ate so much corn. Said the weasel: "Listen, my fat

friend. There is one way to get out and you'll have to wait till you have become as lean as when you first got in."

In a culture overrun by us mice, Lent commends itself. Is it time for fasting? The less we ourselves consume, the more others might have for their needs. The less I gorge, the more there is for those who are really hungry. The less we consume the less we cause our brother or sister to stumble whenever we foster this perverse culture of consumption. Fasting reminds us our bodies are not our own. These bodies do not belong to us. They belong to God, to each other. We have a responsibility to treat them kindly, properly. Fasting reminds us that in life we never will get everything we want. When we fast, we remind ourselves what we really need and what we don't.

If we can't control our appetites how can we hope to control anything else? The belly, wise teachers say, is the first test. If we can control our appetites, then we just might have a chance on handling the rest.

How do you know when it's time to fast? When it controls you. If you cannot give it up, it owns you. If we won't control our own appetites, watch out because that's when someone else will want to: parents, church, clubs, government. Capitalism's the best system, provided capitalists are moral, decent, religious, civic-minded, saith Scottish economist Adam Smith.

Well, friends, this particular mouse is beginning to feel quite the hypocrite. Besides Twinkies, what else do I consume that I need to discipline, reduce, eliminate, at least for Lent? An alcohol fast? Credit card use? A television fast? A gasoline fast, walking more? Foul language fast? For those of you tethered to cell phones, how about a cell phone fast? A texting fast? Fast food fast? A promiscuous fast?

Here's a Lenten fast that makes sense in our indulgent society: how about refusing to swallow as factual anything you read on social media? Twitter? It's just verbal diarrhea. If it's a Facebook posting about a political candidate, odds are it's misleading mischief by persons of ill will. Why be manipulated? Why be gullible? Facebook's singular value lies in sharing cute cat videos.

This notion of fasting is getting more attractive. How about a cynicism fast? How about a stupidity fast? How about an insult fast? How about giving up resentment and negativity for forty days? Come Easter you just might prefer your new disposition. Life is richer by subtraction than addition.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
11 March, 2019
"Looking Forward"
Word Count: 750

It's finally done. February, we mailed our Christmas cards with our annual Christmas letter. Now, you might suppose our Christmas letter is cute, bragging on the successes that we achieved in 2018. No, for one thing, my Christmas letter tends to wander on for four pages. For another thing, I really can't remember what happened last year. It's all a blur, not just the years but the decades. Trying to remember last week is as foggy as trying to remember which color is my toothbrush.

Besides, isn't it better to look forward than to look backward? If you doubt that, ask Lot's wife. Salty wench. If you doubt that, take a look at the geezers with their covering their bald pates rocking with

their walkers to those PBS fundraisers featuring bands from the sixties. Hold it, I recognize that guy in the third row. Did he just throw out his hip? Oh, darn, they all look like me. How desperate and pathetic it is to see us old guys in faded Hawaiian shirts listening to Jimmy Buffett croak out 'Margaritaville.'

I've long wondered what will we sing at chapel in the nursing home when our children tell us we are going to visit the zoo but they trick us and take us to the nursing home and leave us there holding a bag filled with dentures, sweat pants, and bib.

Maybe it isn't better to look forward into the future. Still I say: "No." I've never been so pumped or so optimistic about the future. I do understand why vulnerable people get upset when watching FOX crazy grandpa rants (caravans, murderers, rapists, gangs running amuck throughout suburbia). To calm mom down, I switched the channel to Matlock.

It would take a theologian to say this: "What we believe about the future actually shapes us as much as or more than what we understand about the past."

You've survived your 2018, I guess. I hope so, with your humor and integrity tested but intact. So what do you believe about the future?

John Adams, in a letter to Abigail dated 3 July, 1776, proclaimed a glorious fire-work vision of what America would become, not could become, but would become. I feel the same for the world. Why? Because I am filled with hope and confidence, bursting with joy at the future I see. Here I get all gooey eyed, moon-faced, maudlin, sappy, sentimental, sententious.

Ours is a singular time for we face global crises and challenges, which mean the solutions will be global, universal, linked. From El Paso to Tegucigalpa, from Johannesburg to St. Petersburg, from Edinburgh to Singapore, we either sink together or rise together. I even see the United States recovering from its political heart attack and leaping forward to lead the world from best values rather than treating international diplomacy like a ridiculous Worldwide Wrestling Federation spectacle.

Because we are in it together I share my vision that what we see today are the birth-pangs of a new age. For I believe our grandchildren will see history's Second Renaissance and the next Reformation of the Christian Church. The inadequacies and failures of these Dark Ages of these centuries will force the promise of a newer, richer, deeper appreciation of humanity and our part in Creation. The Danse Macabre of violence and greed and death and pessimism will give way to the minuet of our world creating together, working together, healing together, feeding together, worshipping together. Global spiritual transformation, global awakening.

I have more reason than ever to sweat and bleed, strive and strain to foster these conditions for the new world -- we will not live to see it but those we love will see it. We here -- at this time, this place -- are privileged and blessed to play mid-wife to a world so envisioned, because, biology willing, in six months there will be another grandchild born into this world. A child to grow, to learn, to love, to give, to be and become.

"But it is up to us to make the most of [God's amazing grace], to receive it with gratitude and to prove ourselves worthy of this gift," said Obama in a moving eulogy.

What better reason, incentive, passion, and trembling joy, to make ourselves, to make this country, and to make this world worthy of our daughter's child and for all our children's children. A newborn child's wail is our inspiration and perspiration, our call and our cause, our hope and our judgment.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
18 March, 2019
"Vernal Equinox"
Word Count: 750

We celebrate the Vernal Equinox Wednesday, March 20. I'm ready for spring, us leaning closer to the Sun, ready for daffodils and tulips and the warming womb-like soil. Look: Big Dipper of Great Bear (Ursa Major) is above Polaris pouring the contents of her cup into the Little Dipper (little bear, Ursa Minor).

Mid-high in the east we see our plowman Bootes with his shining star Arcturus – second brightest in the night sky. Bootes, as one legend has it, was set in to the sky to keep a wary eye on these bears.

Cassiopeia and Cephus have pivoted low toward the central horizon. Cygnus the swan is beginning to peek over the horizon below and eastward of King Cephus sitting on his throne. Remember his story: if you sit on the throne, responsibilities sit on you. Off to the west, the dogs of Canis Major and Canis Minor are still seen but Orion soon will slip out of sight.

The constellations and stars so named come to us from the Greek and Roman western tradition. Other cultures speak other names, other stories, other meanings. Still, whether Roman or Chinese or Cherokee, we each do the same: we look up and project ourselves and our stories onto the sky.

All this is a curiosity of perception. Constellations aren't real, despite our penchant for pattern recognition. This penchant is called Paredolia, a form of Apophenia, seeing connections between random objects or even events. We look at clouds and see animals. We look at rock face and see Shikellamy's profile. Photographs come from Mars and we imagine we see buildings or statues.

This is the joy of myth and story-telling and our spiritual, mental, emotional need to imprint form upon the formless, to organize the chaos, to connect the unconnected, to cohere the random, to bring meaning to bear. It is not as if the night sky is a dome or flat or one-dimensional. We view it that way. A matter of perspective. Perspective has a way of becoming our fact even when it isn't.

Imagine you're attending a Boy Scout campout located along bottom edge of Montour Ridge, near where some good fellows farm trout for our streams that the children can enjoy their day of fishing. Imagine the night is clear and crisp. Smoke rises from the crackling camp fire. In a little while the boys will roast their hot dogs on the sticks they have sharpened with their penknives and squish burning marshmallows into smores. You gather the boys and have them stand in a group under the pavilion. You recruit three adult leaders each equipped with a flashlight. You escort the leaders into the meadow. You ask the first leader to stop and kneel and point the flashlight (turned off) toward the boys. You walk twenty paces and ask the second leader to bend and point his flashlight (turned off) toward the boys. Twenty more paces and you ask the last leader to stand and stretch his flashlight as high as he can toward the boys, it too in the off position. You rush back to the pavilion. You yell: "Turn

on the flashlights.” You pause. You ask the boys what geometrical shape do they see formed by the three lights shining in the night? They answer: “A triangle.”

You invite the boys to follow you into the meadow. Now looking sideways at the leaders, you ask them to notice where the leaders are located. They are far apart. It may have appeared a triangle but it really wasn't, isn't. The leaders weren't standing side by side. Nor is our sky flat.

You tell the boys to look up. What they see there also isn't flat. Polaris in Little Dipper is 323 light years away (323 x 5,878,499,810,000 miles, a measure of distance). Kochab, the star on the lip of the cup is much closer at 130 light years away. The light we receive from our sun is light that is eight minutes old. If the sun went out, we wouldn't know it for eight minutes.

What we see is the depth of a roiling, dynamic sky that reaches to the cusp of infinity. It's real big. You wonder if anybody out there is looking back at us.

These stars shining out there above them also still shine during the day as much as they shine during the night. The sunlight simply makes it too bright for us to see them during day.

Blinded by the light we are.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Monday, 25 March, 201
“Alien-Nation”
Word Count: 751

Several road trips are in the works. We've got a trip to Brooklyn for a small wedding between our daughter and her very fine Michael. It's a wonderfully evolving world. He -- a blend of African-American and Ashkenazi Jewish. She -- our very Gaelic-Anglo Saxon daughter. Jazz Drummer meets Jane Austen.

Planned also is a return to my step-mother's London homeland and putzing around Cornwall. Then comes another cross-country Miata column writing tour.

My last June trip was my Woody Guthrie tour years ago when I drove across country through rural areas and remote towns -- Woody Guthrie country and real populism. It was depressing. Rusted out high school football goal posts, boarded up main streets, billboards advertising cash advance on paychecks. I sniffed out loneliness, desperation, struggling for dignity. Who's there to catch us when we fall?

A book I plan to read is called “Alienated America: Why Some Places Thrive While Others Collapse,” by Timothy Carney. I caught an interview where he explained current society in terms of spiritual alienation and the need for persons to feel empowered, connected. Why? Because these alienated areas of our nation -- economically deprived, emotionally denied, plagued with overdose deaths and addictions, younger mortality rates, firearm suicides, these “deaths of despair” -- are areas (largely rural and small towns) suffering the local collapse of strong institutions of society. Family. Church. Civic organizations. Satisfying work.

Disintegrating are bonds that bind people together with a purpose, a supportive network of friends, neighborhoods where neighbors care for each other, where we “love our families and love our neighbors more than our televisions” [American Enterprise Institute].

Lack of belonging. Lack of meaningful work. The collapse of a fair society. Declining interest or energy in volunteering for town parades, school boards, fire companies, PTO's. A sense of community crumbling, unfairness stacked against you by those with the 'do re mi' -- resulting in the absence of the kind of community that helps us appreciate the world, the kind of community that tells us we are appreciated.

The result? Angry clans. Violence. Disagreement taken as personal insult. When this festers you get deranged Mussolini's. When you smell a dead skunk in your house you better find out where the smell's coming from. We get manipulated because of our unhappiness, feeling disenfranchised, missing out on our stuff, losing power. We are drawn to the clan that will empower me. Gangs, clubs, cults, brotherhoods. So it becomes necessary to separate from those we believe threatening, from those with whom we disagree. Which prompts contempt for THE OTHER. They're weak, contemptible. We lie to ourselves to convince ourselves: We're the tough ones, we're strong, we're righteous.

Toughness? My Jesus is tougher than any biker, cop, or soldier.

What's the difference between the Taliban, Al Qaeda, ISIS, and the KKK, White Nationalism? Complexion. Otherwise, not much.

A worse indicator, the author says, of this alienation isn't closed factories but empty churches: "The woes of the white working class are best understood not by looking at the idled factories but by looking at the empty churches."

The author pointed out that a certain type of Protestant Evangelical has become one of our nation's angrier clans. They are evangelicals who don't go to church. Spiritually impoverished. They are persons not participating in "robust church communities." Who has forsaken whom?

How has this happened? It's the result of decades of modern technology separating us from each other, air-conditioned homes, television, screens. Siloes and willful ignorance. It's the result of the veneration of individualism, even in what we see in what passes as church today. Promises turned into pipe-dreams and failure. It's not just the young pastors seeking a job today who are saying how they want 'ministry on my terms.' It's also those who attend church too. Privatized, individualized. Requiring scant commitment and even less change in your beliefs and behavior.

This alienation also is the result of hypocrisy in our institutions fomenting cynicism, social programs displacing church, a modern economy forcing constant mobility and forcing mom and pop shops to close, places where we would bump into each other and chat a while. Where everybody knows your name. Where our neighbors, friends, won't toss us aside like used tissues, but empower us, help us feel we have purpose and value.

Comedian Trevor Noah gets it: "We tell people to fulfill their dreams but you can only dream what you can imagine, and, depending on where you come from, your imagination can be quite limited."

Danville News Column
Robert John Andrews
Monday, 1 April, 2019
“Happy Fools”
Word count: 750

The deacons were preparing communion. At my church, whether we needed it or not, we invariably celebrated communion on the first Sunday of the month. We practiced holy clockwork. One Sunday the deacons thought they had enough grape juice for the plastic cups. They discovered they didn't, so one of the deacons rushed out to the grocery store, grabbed a jug off the shelf, dashed back, and then they filled all the cups. Except, it wasn't grape juice but prune juice, we discovered afterwards.

Thank God for a sense of humor. For almost a decade we held our annual joke Sunday (well, never quite annually, more accidentally). Between prayer and hymns, we spent an hour telling bad jokes from the pulpit, most religious jokes. Laughter, we learnt, “is carbonated holiness.”

A little girl became restless as the preacher's sermon dragged on and on. Finally she leaned over to her mother and whispered, “Mommy, if we give him money now, will he let us go?”

How Many Christians Does It Take to Change a Light Bulb? PRESBYTERIANS: What do you mean, change? ROMAN CATHOLICS: None. Candles only. BAPTISTS: At least 15. One to change the light bulb, and three committees to approve the change and decide who brings the potato salad and fried chicken. EPISCOPALIANS: One to call the electrician, one to mix the drinks, and one to talk about how much better the old one was. METHODISTS: Undetermined - Whether your light is bright, dull, or completely out, you are loved. You can be a light bulb, turnip bulb, or tulip bulb. Bring a bulb of your choice to the Sunday lighting service and a covered dish to pass. LUTHERANS: None : Lutherans don't believe in change either. UNITARIANS: We choose not to make a statement either in favor of or against the need for a light bulb. However, if in your own journey you have found that light bulbs work for you, you are invited to write a poem or compose a modern dance about your light bulb for the next Sunday service, in which we will explore a number of light bulb traditions, including incandescent, fluorescent, 3-way, long-life and tinted, all of which are equally valid paths to luminescence. AMISH: What's a light bulb?

Humor is Jiminy Cricket on spiritual shoulders. Humor pokes holes in the rubber boat of prideful pretensions, eroding the clay feet of our idol of self-importance. When was the last time you enjoyed a real belly laugh? Tears of joy running down your face? I bet it's been a while.

We (better than those pointing fingers outside the church) know that the church is filled with hypocrites. There's always room for one more.

A friend tells about his first pastorate when a parishioner summoned him after one Sunday worship to come and to speak with her. “Pastor,” she began, “you're a fine preacher but I simply can't stand that beard of yours.” My friend went home and prayed about it and decided, since it bothered her so much, he would shave off his beard. Come the next Sunday she came up to him. “Oh, thank you I'm so glad you shaved. Now, about that moustache...”

God bless those who tweak noses, who aren't terribly worried about their dignity. Give me a benign, silly jerk any day over malignant jerks who cannot laugh at their sad foolish selves.

So enjoy April Fools' Day. I miss how National Public Radio had to concede to respectability and give up their annual April 1st silly news report, such as when they broadcasted how atheists had begun celebrating Darwin Day on Darwin's birthday: "Happy Darwin Day!" Too many humorless souls failed to enjoy the joke.

April 1st probably began itself as a joke. When Pope Gregory enacted the Gregorian Calendar, many folks didn't realize New Year's Day was moved to January 1. The obstinate or uninformed still celebrated April 1st as New Year's Day. Thus began our epic day for pranks, teasing, silliness, ridicule, innocent fun, tricks and japes. Is that a spider on your shoulder? Made you look! Your shoelaces are untied. Made you look! A confession: being a Dr. Who fan whose nemesis were the dread robots called Daleks, when visiting Geisinger in the early morning I would sneak a paper sign on those hallway pharmaceutical robots, announcing "EXTIRMINATE!, the Dalek's murderous tag-line.

Mark Twain quipped: "The first of April is the day when we remember what we are the other 364 days of the year."

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Monday, 8 April, 2018
"A GEM"
Word Count: 750

Six years ago I asked Glenn Steele, CEO of Geisinger Hospital, for a measly, paltry million dollars. I wasn't asking for much. I was beginning to plot my post-pastoral career and an idea percolated. I'm now fully retired. I would be a good docent. Glenn did kindly reply to my letter, but, alas, he confessed he could not authorize a check. I also asked for space on campus for convenient accessibility, food services, and parking. Glenn wasn't optimistic about that request either.

I'm at it again, hoping that our newest CEO and the Board of Trustees might embrace this incredibly brilliant and spectacular idea. Here was my original pitch: "Having served in Danville now for twentythree years, I am most grateful and proud of what has been achieved on the hill. Ah, but the improvements are not finished yet. Indeed, I write to propose another addition to the campus and mission of Geisinger. Let us create a Geisinger Medical Museum (GMM – aka, a gem). This expands in a fundamentally concrete way Geisinger's commitment toward health education for both staff and patients."

Consider this: We highlight our short-lived iron history with festivals and as mascot for our public school. Even though iron is what our town boasts, our iron history lasted merely a decade or two. What we really are is a community of medicine and science. The State Hospital and its incredible history. Our pharmaceutical industry. Geisinger itself.

Let's celebrate these contributions with a medical museum. After all, I've been told there are curious artifacts tucked away throughout hospital departments (the ENT's collection of odd items pulled from noses and throats, Radiology's collection of bizarre x-rays, and I don't even want to mention what the emergency department has collected over the years).

What could GMM offer? I envision various rooms presenting historical displays with timelines of great moments in medical care, with each room focusing on the varied dimensions of medical care: medicine,

surgery, psychiatry, medical ethics, maternity, spiritual care, nursing, genetics, equipment and technologies, pharmacology, apothecary. Let's build here in Danville something akin to the Franklin Institute with interactive and hands-on exhibits (e.g., skeleton to skin, exploring body systems, pretend examining rooms and surgical theatre, match the organ games, displays on obesity, smoking, addictions, and sundry unhealthy practices or conditions).

Imagine also the important public lectures and presentations that could be offered (local Ted-talks). When and where was the very first hospital invented? Why was it started? What did it do? I recall how surprised I was when I first arrived in town to learn from a physician friend that hospitals that cure more patients than they don't are a relatively recent phenomenon. The tide turned in the 1930's when hospitals finally became places that could send a majority of persons home whole and well.

I humbly urge that the powers that be (because I sure have none) form an exploratory GMM task force to develop a business plan involving members of the Board of Directors, Medical staff, Allied Health Services, community, State Hospital, Merck, Auxiliary. Let's consult with the National Museum of Health and Medicine. Let's hire an Executive Director who will create this GMM as useful resource for patient and community medical education as well as a destination point for tourism. Museums are fun. The GMM administration would involve curator, docents, floor staff, finances and marketing, guest services, volunteers, facility maintenance. Sure campus space is tight, but clever people in the system can solve these challenges.

Why GMM? Simple. GMM is vital for the practice of medicine. I once was invited to give a talk to a roomful of cardiology residents. I began by mentioning that there really was only one Doctor in the room. I pointed at myself. Doctors become doctors by teaching. We improve health by emphasizing wellness education for the general public (they deserve more than computer access and brochures). Consider outreach on disease prevention education, stress reduction for those ignorant or scared, partnering with the Hood Center, local churches, and our school district for public forums on toxic stress on children, suicide education, addiction education. As vital as staff learning their skills, additionally beneficial is them gaining insight into the history of their vocations.

We could also have a room where children could play doctor (appropriately innocently). GMM could advance children's health education where children could become familiar with what leads to a healthy life, explore the roles of medical personnel, find out what hospitals do – before they have to experience it as patients.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Monday, April 15, 2019
"The Best House"
Word Count: 750

It was a tease. It was a seemingly simple question someone asked when a church was planning to host a special and important guest. The church was excited that someone of his prominence and prestige was coming to town. They wanted to treat him in style. They started to discuss who would host this dignitary. They naturally wanted to host him at the best house in town. Then the challenging, clever, quizzing, teasing, unnerving question arose: "Exactly which is the best house in town?"

Which is the best house? Is it the one high on the hill or along the expensive row of mansions, houses full of decorated rooms, spacious kitchens, showers with double shower heads. Could be. Or is the best house, the nicest house in town over at Beaver Place? Or maybe along Ash? Could be. It all depends on how you define 'the best.' By furniture, luxury, appliances? Or by the loving, faithful, hospitable, caring nature of the folks inside?

I've seen more gracious hospitality and decency while visiting a mud brick church building in Honduras than I have in several city cathedrals. I've experienced more goodness from my daughter's downstairs neighbors operating their bodega in Spanish Harlem than in my family's fancy Country Club with its classic Donald Ross golf course. In Honduras I never heard a fellow rush into the 19th hole and apologize to his buddies that he was late because he had to attend his daughter's baptism.

Exactly how do we define and measure what is best? Reverse that: what makes a place a slum-hole? A friend returned from a mission trip to Kenya where he stayed in rough conditions but was greeted, welcomed by gracious and giving Kenyans. From what he described, if you were to compare where he stayed in Kenya to luxurious, decadent, exclusive Mar-a-Lago, Mar-a-Lago is, drumroll please, hands down the slum-hole. The owners could upgrade of course. Lawless Donald declares our country too full to accept any more immigrants from Central America. Are there any real Republicans left? I'm betting there's plenty of room for immigrant families to be hosted at Mar-a-Lago. Imagine all the homes that could be built on their grounds, far better building homes than wasting precious ground for a golf course for the super-rich.

Yes, I'm angry. Yes, I'm tired. Yes, I'm fed up. Yes, I'm inspired. Why? Because I'm supposed to live according to a faith that takes everything the world values and turns it upside down. It's called the divine inversion.

I was reminded of my timid and shallow faith and how demanding and costly it's supposed to be by a one act play I was privileged to see recently. The play was called "Bonhoeffer in Prison." It was a dramatic presentation of this significant pastor, theologian, and martyr. He was in prison because he opposed Hitler. He conspired against Hitler. Everything that Hitler represented and everything the people of Germany accepted in ashamed silence rather than in radical resistance contradicted his commitment to Christ. As he wrote: "If I sit next to a madman as he drives a car into a group of innocent bystanders, I can't, as a Christian, simply wait for the catastrophe, then comfort the wounded and bury the dead. I must try to wrestle the steering wheel out of the hands of the driver."

My first reaction from listening to this presentation was how Bonhoeffer suffering and sacrificing for Christ in his Gestapo prison cell has more significantly influenced culture and church than any President, Fuhrer, Bishop, Prince, Pope, dictator, ruling from their important rooms. Such is the humor of history. More than any of the venerated mighty, those who best move the world in a godly direction are these lowly men and women who suffer, sacrifice, and die because they cannot be silent about the world's need for truth, love, and justice. The divine inversion. These are the significant ones, the ones wielding true power. These are the ones remembered, honored, and thanked.

Bonhoeffer: "Silence in the face of evil is itself evil. God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act." Bonhoeffer mourned how Christians -- and not just those in Germany but those Christians in Rome, the United States, England, France -- allowed, accepted, cheered, or tried to excuse and sanitize the evil that was pervading the soul of the world.

Bonhoeffer, silly Bonhoeffer, really believed that living by the beatitudes isn't an option for Christians.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Monday, April 22, 2019

"Roll On River"

Word Count: 750

Water cannot help but flow downhill. A river obeys geography but in so doing shapes geography.

Sleepless rivers turn sullen and shallow, rivers overflow banks, rivers carve canyons, rivers pool and stagnate, tumid rivers back up the streams and creeks which, unable to flow downhill, swell and spread where tumescent water will. No malevolence to the flow. Water does what water must. Still, we try thinking we can control such passions. One man's floodwall upstream is another man's flood downstream.

Rivers breathe and press, lunge and pulsate, evade and find new paths. A river nods at the works of man but in so doing shapes man. She defines us as us. We drink it, we are fed by it, we play in it, we work on it, we've been baptized in it, we explore it, we've died in it. Rivers mean crops. Rivers mean commerce. Rivers mean industry. Rivers mean towns and cities. Rivers mean community.

The two branches of the Susquehanna River, like parted lovers, eventually converge to flow as one. The North Branch, born of Lake Otsego in Cooperstown, New York, travels steady and strong where she meets the West Branch, it fed by rain, by acid mine drainage, and by springs of Cambria County as it squiggles north before bending east through Clearfield, winding past Williamsport, and then bending south toward Sunbury.

Rivers start off as mere trickle, widening as other streams feed it, contribute to it, fill it. From bubble to stream to vast river flowing past Milton it grows and widens and flows. It reminds us of us, how our lives become filled and deepened and richer and broader through the years as others we have met have contributed to us, filled us. We are the river.

It is us. We drink it. Where exactly is the intake for the water that pours out faucets, fills our baths, swirls in toilets?

Susquehanna means in Lenape language 'Oyster River;' its water, nutrients, and silt helping form the rich and thick oyster bed and reefs down beyond in the Chesapeake Bay. But that was before the power dams and those inflatable recreational dams, before the manure run-off, before the pesticides, before the winter salt and grime, before the acids seeping from the mines from Susquehanna's expansive watershed into the bay. The Susquehanna cannot help but flow downstream at an average rate of almost an Olympic pool flowing under our bridge every second. Second by second, a river never is the same river, yet the same. How old is Susquehanna? Likely as old as 324 million years ago, the end of the Permian and beginning of the Triassic age, a witness to Pangea, to ice age, to one mass extinction when 96 of all species died and to another when 80% of all species died. Roll on, river.

Surely the more tantalizing question might be not how old is she but how young is she?

When contractors build housing developments above the older neighborhoods they cut down trees. New houses on top boast newly paved roads and wide driveways -- must have room for all my autos.

Where does that water go? Gouging the lower lawns, thgn onto the Wastewater Treatment Plant.

Discharge water warms the river, a river that normally would ice up most winter times in these northern reaches, in the past. Rarely now, especially when effluents combine with global carbon emissions turning Mother Earth into a microwave oven. Once upon a time ice for ice-skating. Ice for commerce and using sleighs to transport the pig iron. Ice for crossing over to visit family and friends on the other side.

Same again with sewage treatment. The sewage comes in. Where does the treated sewage water go? Sewage silt is spread on fields.

I'm glad for my toilet. It helps to have utilities treating sewage water. Gallons and gallons of waste water. Thank you plant workers, taking care of the toilet water but also the water we fill with shampoo, dishwasher detergent, spoilt milk, body lotions, even the chemicals from our medicines we pass on when we pass water. Birth control pills and statins passing into the stream. Water flows where water will flow.

Where does the effluent go? We drink it, we are fed by it, we play in it, we work on it, we've been baptized in it, we explore it, we've died in it, we discharge our treated waste into it.

Happy Earth Day. Upstream affects downstream, every time. And not just in rivers.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Monday, 29 April, 2019
"Men With Chests"
Word Count: 750

There are, as author C. S. Lewis wrote in his quaint, old-fashioned way, men with chests and men without chests. We're talking torsos, not dresser drawers or pirates.

People without chests. They have the head, brain, thinking. They have a mind for reason, the mark of the cerebral human – us as intellectual being. And they got the belly and lower abdomen, us as visceral human, us as animal being. Both mind and abdomen are good, but without the chest, the torso, to unite them, there's no life-blood, no passion, no vitality, no commitment.

Chest-less people lack an allegiance to core universal virtues, "the seat of magnanimity," the truths, the affections, that connect the intellect with the visceral, bringing purpose to both reason and appetite."

Lewis, in his essay 'The Abolition of Man,' refers to these virtues as the 'Tao: ' "The Chinese also speak of a great thing (the greatest thing) called the Tao. It is the reality beyond all predicates, the abyss that was before the Creator Himself. It is Nature, it is the Way, the Road. It is the Way in which the universe goes on...." (C.S. Lewis, "The Abolition of Man).

What is this Tao that precedes and encompasses the universe? You see it in these seven virtues of the chest: 1) General Beneficence: caring for and preserving humankind; 2) Special Beneficence: caring for

and preserving the well-being of those to whom we are especially obligated; 3) Duties to Parents, Elders, Ancestors; 4) Duties to Children and Posterity; 5) Justice: treating others with decency, respect, trustworthiness, where others count on your good faith and veracity; 6) Mercy: upholding the poor, sick, and vulnerable; 7) Magnanimity: born of courage and compassion.

These list the true measure of a man or woman. How are we doing?

Consider the Doctor visiting the nursing home who kneels beside the woman in the wheelchair rather than stand over her and talk down to her.

Consider the politician more concerned with principle than currying favor.

Are you tired of a chestless life? A divided life? A life lacking allegiance? We grow tired of the conniving, chameleon, impotent, frightened life.

Some don't get it. They'll dismiss decency as weakness and faith as parochial, provincial, partisan rather than the enfleshed epitome of universal truth.

Beware the chest-less ones. The chest-less ones applaud indecencies and lies. No honor. No chivalry. No manhood. The chest-less ones among us ask: What are my rights? What's permissible? How can I cheat to win? How can I get what I want? Who likes to play with a cheater? Then there are those who ask: Am I acting with integrity? Am I acting honorably? For the greater good? Am I doing right?

Dad's frequent admonition rings true: "It's not whether you win or lose, it's how you play the game." There are those who let the world determine their being (or crush their being), then there are those who bring their new being to bear upon the world.

So often we beg for our circumstances to be changed. The only way to change circumstances is to change our character first, putting skin to the Tao.

You may remember the story of the identical twin boys and the hockey puck. The 11 year old boy hit a three inch puck through a three-and-half inch hole in a board 89 feet away. His prize? A \$50,000 jackpot. Until Dad said it wasn't right. "It wouldn't be right." Brother Nick was supposed to take the shot but when his name was called he wasn't around, so brother Nate took the shot.

Except, it should have been his brother. It wasn't right, Dad said. So they were ruled ineligible. Rightfully so. "We just told them that no matter how much money is involved. It's always best to tell the truth and things will work out," Dad said. Worse: some considered them foolish.

This is a lesson in how to be a man. Said Dad: "I just think that honesty is more important than any prize or money you could get. We may have lost the money but the lesson about honesty is priceless." We might not want to listen to this, but we better.

C. S. Lewis warned against a society that debunks an allegiance to these core universal values: "We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful."

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Thursday, May 9, 2019
“Rattlesnakes”
Word Count: 750

The black snake slept coiled up contentedly in the sunshine of the old lady’s porch. At first she wanted to shoo it away with her broom. Upon reflection, however, she realized black snake probably did her a favor. Black snake was enjoying a pleasant sleep after a fat meal of chubby mouse.

Twenty-one different types of snakes will be found curled and winding amongst the porches, gardens, hiking trails, rock walls, meadows, crops, culverts, rivers and streams of our Pennsylvania. Only two ought you fear here around the Susquehanna valley despite all of them, even the ones to fear, having a role in nature’s dance. After all, they all and each deserve our respect by helping control the rodents and other pests from taking over. Somebody’s got to limit the pest population besides raptor and cat. They do us a favor. They may give us the heebie-jeebies, but that’s not their fault, so why should it take it out on them with a stick or a shovel or a broom. We should thank them for the role they play.

The Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission identifies these particular snakes as the more common: Black Rat Snake, Northern Black Racer, Eastern Hognose, Northern Ringneck, Eastern Garter Snake, ShortHeaded Garter Snake, Eastern Ribbon Snake, Eastern Milk Snake, Eastern Smooth Green Snake. Garter snakes might cling onto your hand and inject a droplet dram of venom, but they don’t make the grade as a truly venomous snake when compared with Copperhead or Timber Rattlesnake.

It can be indeed odd what we fear as harmful and what more often is rightfully harmful. Rattlesnake may make many of person’s skin crawl and squirm, inciting her or him to shriek in fright at sight, labeling them as villains, evil. Grab the shovel!

Really? Between Timber Rattlesnake and mosquito, which of the two really is the more dangerous, the more insidious? Which really threatens humans more, the parasite or the panther? Which really causes more destruction, rats in a corn crib or rattlesnake sunning on a rock? Which really has hurt us U.S. citizens more: the ISIS terrorist or a casino owner?

At least Timber Rattlesnake gives you fair warning that it is displeased with your presence, with your intrusion. Timber Rattlesnake dislikes surprises and it dislikes being threatened, and, bless you, Timber Rattlesnake doesn’t hesitate in announcing its displeasure. Timber Rattlesnake ranks as an honest predator. It may be silent and stealthy when preying upon rabbit, but when it itself is scared and worried, it lets us know. It’s purely self-defense. Purely nature’s way. No villainy in it. No malice or malevolence in it or its venom.

Why do we ascribe morality to nature, as if nature can be moral or immoral?

Same is true for diseases. Nature just is nature. Cat is cat when it chews on mouse. Spider wraps up fly not to be vindictive, but to be spider. Nature has no conscience. Timber Rattlesnake attacks because it just does, it must for food or fear, never by making a conscious decision to bear fang and spring, never because it wants to. Snake is neither immoral nor moral, just is. Neither bad nor good, just is. Neither righteous nor evil, just is. Can’t blame them if you get bit. A rattlesnake sinking fangs in you isn’t from

malice aforethought. It just is. It just is Rattlesnake Nature. Not bad, not good, no morality involved. You just scared the poor thing.

Didn't you notice it was trying to warn you? Rattle and shake, shake and rattle.

Do not disturb. Some things really are best left alone. The real devilry isn't the rocks or the rattlers but in those who fail to respect, poking around where you don't belong. Rattle, rattle, goes the vibrating tail. Warning signs! Warning signs! Red sky in the morning, sailor take warning. Leaves of three let it be. Rabbit thumping its feet. Bull lowering his horns, snorting, pawing the ground. Canada Goose honking, flapping, neck bobbing. Skunk with raised tail. Jack Russel barring his teeth, snarling, his hackles raised up along the ridge of his back. Swooping caw-cawing crow. Grey tabby with ears laid back. Natures warning signs, thank you very much.

I'm pretty sure we cannot say the same about us humans and our human behavior because we can choose to act contrary to our nature. At least when a Timber Rattlesnake attacks, it's not by choice. We humans tend to smile at you before choosing to do you bad.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Thursday, May 16, 2019
"Queen Mary II"
Word Count: 750

We sailed under the Verrazano Narrows Bridge at 5:45 AM, the funnels of the Queen Mary II clearing the bridge by 4 meters. Five minutes later the Statue of Liberty appeared on our port side. It was heartening at how many shipmates stood out Sunday morning in the chilly rain and wind to celebrate coming into harbor and to honor the Statue of Liberty and all that she -- despite current ignorant, imperious, fearful policies -- still represents. We enjoyed toasting her with champagne from our starboard stateroom balcony when the harbor pilot turned the Queen Mary II about and we backed into the Brooklyn Cruise Terminal. Note: Cunard refuses, quite rightly, to refer to the Queen Mary II as a cruise ship and the crossing from Southampton to New York as a cruise. She isn't. It isn't. It is a trans-Atlantic crossing. Eight days. Seven nights.

She is no hotel on a barge. After 6 PM smart attire or tuxedos and gowns are required. It is an elegant crossing. For two days after we returned home we sat around in our formal wear waiting for the steward to bring us our cocktails. I did enjoy mastering how to tie my bowtie. No fake bowties for me. This ship is yare. She's shy of 40 yards wide. She's fast, nimble, tight, beautiful. We sailed 30 miles south of where the Titanic sank. My wife's English grandmother when young decided not to join her friends on that voyage. Alas, we saw neither iceberg nor whale. We did see a variety of theatre and musical performances. We did attend the lectures they hosted every day on the voyage. One was on Jack the Ripper, another on Joseph Merrick, the 'Elephant Man.' A BBC authority on terrorism shared her research on Putin's ruthless assassinations of anyone crossing him. She shared how the most recent assassination attempt of a defected Russian spy likely was connected to Putin being angry over some details revealed in the dossier produced by Christopher Steele, who is held in highest regard by intelligence experts throughout the United Kingdom and Europe. More on these talks later.

They (the famously anonymous 'they') say how traveling broadens the mind. It does much more than that, which is why we love to travel. Danville now is less home than base of operations. Travel teaches.

Yes, there is more to the world than Danville. I've seen how some folk, afraid of change, take offense when neighbors decide to move onto someplace new, even, in their opinion, better. Our teacher daughter soon will join her husband in Colorado to set up housekeeping. There was no opportunity around here for him. He also desperately wanted to experience something more than Montour and Northumberland County.

Here is good. We like it. But we also appreciate the virtue of experiencing other perspectives, other cultures, other attitudes, other priorities. Heck, it's wonderful to visit a pub where tips are not expected. It was refreshing to read newspapers and watch television news where they barely mentioned our president and our nation's political kerfuffle. We aren't important to them. Most folks we talked to consider Trump a joke not worth talking about. Besides, they had Brexit on the mind. In Dublin, Brexit worried them because they prefer their open border with Northern Ireland.

Travel enlarges you. Plus, it was a joy finally to visit the James Joyce Museum in Dublin, then wander down to Madigan's Pub where everyone we met was pleasant, amiable, chatty. It was fun driving through Cornwall on the left side of the road. Although, in one tiny village where roads are more cart path I did donate the passenger side mirror when a stone wall jumped out at me. It was touching to join Easter worship at St. Giles Anglican Church in Oxford despite me getting a slight cold after sipping communion wine from the common cup. We finally visited the cliffs of Dover. In Canterbury Cathedral I was able to write the name of a family suffering bad choices here to be prayed for during noon prayers. In Canterbury I also was reminded by my wife to stop showing off when I started reciting Chaucer's Prologue in Middle English. My wife relished High Tea and I visited a dear old, old friend in the British Library: the only surviving copy of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

After four weeks of travel, the only surly person we met was the gas station attendant in New Jersey.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Thursday, May 23, 2019
"It's Funny"
Word Count: 750

It's funny.

Here we have a political party that holds fast to the virtue of governmental belt tightening and balanced budgets yet has created our nation's worst national debt.

It's funny. Here we have a party that holds sacred the rule of law yet every day violates the spirit and letter of the US Constitution. It's funny. Here we have a party for which limited government and personal liberty are fundamental principles, waving the banner of "don't tread on me," and yet this party consistently seeks to restrict personal behavior and legislate ways to repress voting rights, while all the while diminishing the right of individuals whilst elevating the rights of corporations. It's funny how this party is keen on removing from industries, banks, corporations codes that protect consumers and our environment but busy themselves telling women, by law, what they can and cannot do. I guess it is okay to allow the unfettered freedom to pollute waterways but not to have choice regarding pregnancies.

What's funnier is how the person in charge of this party only came out as anti-abortion to get elected. He's has no convictions about this issue, religiously, morally, constitutionally. The only real conviction he

has is bossing us and wielding power, and he'll lie to whoever will give him their vote. This is fact. This is not partisan opinion.

By the way, how many of our tax dollars fund medications for our Congressmen, elected officials, and our military personnel to correct their erectile dysfunction? And this is the party of personal responsibility?

Maybe it isn't so funny.

My staunch, Nixonian, card-carrying conservative Republican father surprised us one election season years ago. He especially surprised his two teenage daughters. He was listening to the candidates of his beloved party scramble to declare themselves anti-abortion and gain support from those who viewed Roe v. Wade as an immoral judicial decision. He looked up, then looked over at his daughters. He said: "Why are these men imposing their morality on my daughters? Who are they to tell my daughters what they can and cannot do?" I don't know how he cast his ballot, but this was one plank of his party that he felt intrusive and wrong-headed.

I never met a person in favor of abortion. Maybe there are some nuts out there who do. America does have its share of intolerant nuts. Everyone I've ever met is Pro-Life, even those in favor of the constitutional right for women to decide the issue for themselves. In my career I've met many women who have gone through this experience for a variety of reasons. A distinguished neonatologist shook his head one day over how the government insists on legislating medical decisions.

My life-long complaint about this incendiary issue of abortion is how we keep stoking the fires rather than converging on common ground where we acknowledge how none of us favor abortion. Hence, more important than all our energies, dollars, and rhetoric adding fuel to the conflict, why haven't we -- church and state -- collaborated to do more to prevent abortion? You leaders: stop attacking the Title X Family Planning Program. Contraception, sex education, prenatal care and counseling, more clinics, more funds, decent adoption services, good paying jobs, more compassion and less cruelty and judgment. So many women are trying to do their best despite lousy options. With more folks considered self-employed, why can't they buy into Medicare? Why does the marketplace discourage getting off Medical Assistance? Why are women supposed to be accountable and not men? Systemic problems require systemic solutions, not slogans.

Before all the votes, appeals, laws, shouting, let's do our homework. Let's get some facts before our state legislators rush to decide for us what is right for us. Both parties do that so well, too well, too often. Nevertheless, one of the parties does it because they think it best for us. The other party thinks it is best for them. Is the allegation that abortion is used for birth control substantiated by facts? What is the average age of a woman seeking an abortion? The answer might surprise you. What are the primary reasons a woman seeks an abortion? How do the legislators calculate the age of the fetus? From the woman's last cycle or the date of probable conception?

Isn't it also funny how this party is quick to make abortions illegal but does so little to assist these women to raise their children once they are born?

No, it isn't funny.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Thursday, May 30, 2019
“Heroes”
Word Count: 750

One day weeks before the very first Iron Heritage Festival, the pastor of Grove Presbyterian Church received a phone call. The caller introduced herself as a descendent of the Grove family of Danville. Her ancestor built the Grove mansion on what now are the grounds of Saints Cyril and Methodius. Grove was one Danville’s iron mill ‘robber barons.’ She explained how excited she and family members were to visit Danville and tour the church named after her ancestor. The pastor, prone to nose-tweaking, replied: “Well, that’s nice, except we were named after the trees.”

Presbyterians almost never name church buildings after individuals. Why? Because individuals don’t deserve it. All are flawed, all are sinful, all fall short of the glory of God. Naming a church after an apostle can be tolerated, although you may wish to note that churches so named after Saint Peter often place atop the steeple a weather vane shaped like a rooster. It represents a healthy reminder that even this great church leader was a coward who betrayed his best friend.

By avoiding honoring persons with things, you avoid the protests, complaints, complications that can follow enthusiastic and nostalgic tributes. Mr. Grove may have been benevolent toward the community. Little doubt also he abused his employees. I still find it peculiar why we fuss over the generosity of the rich when generosity is exactly what they should do.

I repeat my line about capitalism as informed by Scottish economist Adam Smith. Capitalism is the finest system of economy given one fundamental Adam Smith caveat: the self-interest of the capitalist must be inwardly governed by Christian faith and morality.

We Scot Presbyterians have a talent for being honest to the point of brutality. Consider Thomas Jefferson. Surely, he was a patriot, a brave and brilliant advocate of democracy against tyranny, a true Founding Father. He also dismissed established Christianity, was a Francophile, slaveholder, rapist. My own hero of faith is Martin Luther King, Jr., but I also must admit his penchant for adultery. General Robert E. Lee? Yes, a great General, but he also embraced the sin of white supremacy. Retrospective judgment.

Maybe it’s wiser to stick to naming places after trees. Or after ideals, such as Honor Street, Humble Lane. Or historical events: Independence Hall, Liberty Place.

After Geisinger built the children’s hospital and named it after Janet Weis, I wanted to sneak up during the night and paint below her name the name ‘Brad Majors.’ Fans of “The Rocky Horror Picture Show” might appreciate my mischievous sense of humor.

Who are our heroes? Who merits respect? I must purchase retired Admiral William McRaven’s most recent book. McRaven exemplifies what I love about the American military. He described what leadership requires: when facing the jaws of death you lead from the front; at chow, you eat last. He writes: “Courage is a remarkable quality. Without courage others will decide your path forward. Without it you are at the mercy of the life’s temptations. Without courage men will be ruled by tyrants and despots. Without courage no great society can flourish. Without courage the bullies of the world will rise

up. With it you can accomplish any goal. With it you can define and defeat evil.” Who does merit being honored? Perhaps it’s the ones, like Saint Peter, who realize they are unworthy of tribute and praise.

This is why I love the way we locally honor Memorial Day. We avoid cheapening it. We avoid turning it into some partisan, jingoistic rally. We respect what the day means and we name those whose sacrifice deserves our attention and remembrance. The fact that they may have worn uniforms isn’t what makes heroes. It is what they do wearing the uniform. All were flawed and inadequate men and women. How many enlisted because they imagined war would be a romantic adventure, because they wanted to impress a girl, because they couldn’t get a job, because they were drafted and didn’t want to go into military service but accepted fate?

Still, many of these weak instruments endured wrong wars, suffered damage to soul and body. Many faced tyrants, opposed injustice, fought evil threats. They acknowledged there is a cause greater, nobler, than personal comfort, happiness, or even winning. What can be more honorable than public service?

Memorial Day inspires us with a forward hope. We believe that despite clay feet and failures we can rise up and do what is right, what is kind, what is courageous, what requires integrity.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

June 6, 2019

“Reunions and Remembrance”

Word Count: 750

If you get the chance, do it. I had the chance to job-shadow one of our English teachers at the Middle School. Most of the school day proved entertaining, enlightening, engaging. The day started with the pledge of allegiance at 7:40 AM and ended with the buzzer and the exit race at 3 PM.

The day did include moments of tedium, partly because the class project seemed incredibly dull for the end of the English and Language Arts class year. It was a Career Unit asking these seventh graders to review their gifts and prepare a computer presentation of what future occupation they might pursue. If I were king of school curriculum I instead might have encouraged the students to prepare their summer reading list. I instead might have let them enjoy the end of the school year by them sharing their favorite novels, short stories, or poetry.

I admit to dozing when the students were busy being studious on their project. Tap, tap, click, click. I also used their project time to plan future columns in my notepad. One of the pages in their Career Unit packet posed the following scenario: “You are at your 10-year high school reunion. Someone comes up to you and says, ‘OMG! What have you been up to since high school?’ Be sure to include your pathway choice and your future career.”

I joked with the teacher that my 10-year reunion wasn’t at all what seventh grade me had predicted it would be. When I was in seventh grade I had intended to become a senator, after serving as a Navy pilot (preferably in a bi-plane), after law school, after election to the House of Representatives. That was my ambition. Not quite what happened. When I did return to my 10-year high school reunion in 1981, I was a Lancaster County country preacher.

Next, turning serious, I whispered to the teacher that at my 10-year reunion we had a death wall naming all our classmates who didn't make ten years due to cancer, accident, or... The star quarterback committed suicide a year after graduation. One was killed by the police in New York City. Several died in Vietnam.

My mind wandered. My notepad reminded me that June 6 would be the 75th anniversary of the D-Day invasion, otherwise known as Operation Overlord. My brothers and I grew up with a personal connection to D-Day. One of our father's best friends was wounded during the assault. He was an Army Captain. His hand had been blown off, replaced with a metal claw. We boys called him, to his sheer delight, Captain Hook. He loved shaking our hands at church during the passing of the peace. Although, that was only for us.

A later pastor, very enthusiastic, thought it touching and spiritual to invite the congregation to push toward the middle aisle, form a circle, and hold hands as he offered the benediction. Our friend felt uncomfortable holding hands because it often made the other person uncomfortable. Maybe we adults should be made uncomfortable, lest we forget the price of peace.

Though the statistics vary, our friend was among the 22,000 US casualties suffered on June 6, 1944. Of the 22,000, nearly 3,000 were killed. They never made their 10-year reunion. War cartoonist Bill Mauldin, creator of 'Willie and Joe,' wrote: "No normal man who has smelled and associated with death ever wants to see any more of it. The surest way to become a pacifist is to join the infantry." Let us also honor the British and the Canadians, the French too, our Allies with whom this crucial day was won. We could not have done it alone. We only are as strong as our Allies are strong.

If a seventh grade boy in 1938 were asked to write a paragraph about what he might say to classmates at his 10-year reunion, how could he have imagined that in six years he might have been a Ranger scaling the cliffs facing German machine guns? How could he have imagined he'd be among those huddled in a landing craft -- scared, prayerful, stoic -- waiting for the ramp to drop? How could he have predicted he'd be parachuting into occupied France? Odds are he wouldn't want to talk about it at all. He wouldn't have to.

I wonder what today's seventh graders will be called upon to do. History turns terribly fast. When we face tough decisions, I do believe we can trust the American youth.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Thursday, June 13, 2019
"School Days"
Word Count: 750

I guess they weren't in an inquisitive mood. Either that or most already had minds made up. We candidates did submit cover letters. Not that I expected to be chosen to fill the school board vacancy. They needed to select the best person to bring strength to where school board is weak and school district stagnant. Besides, like John Adams, I am obnoxious and disliked.

Although, since we were invited for what they said would be an interview, I did expect that the directors would ask a question or two. It seemed a pointless exercise. We all benefit from fruitful, feisty discussions. They, however, weren't inquisitive. I was, especially since the day before this board

meeting I job-shadowed a Middle school English teacher to observe, listen, and learn. I'm sure each of the directors have spent a day learning, listening, and observing what happens on the front lines of our schools.

So, during my school day, inquisitive me started making a list of questions for the board directors. They didn't ask me any questions so I gave them a list of my questions. I appreciated it when one director acknowledged what I had prepared. Here's the list:

Students: What is the student population trend? How many students in each grade require an IEP? How does this compare with previous years? What is the truancy rate compared with previous years? What is the drop-out rate compared with previous years? How many students receive subsidized meals? Is this percentage increasing or decreasing? How many students participate in e-learning? How is the effectiveness of cyber-school evaluated? How does the district encourage and equip parents to fulfill their primary role in their child's education? Is there a gulf between achieving students and non-achieving students? How is achievement defined? If so, is the gulf decreasing or increasing? If there is a gulf, what is being done to remedy the situation? What percentage of the students in High school have a grade point average of 90 +? Is there grade inflation?

Review: How do state and federal mandates affect school schedules? What do graduates report about readiness for college work? [e.g., why do a variety of graduates report their writing skills are inadequate for college or university?] Is the attention given to preparing for standardized testing (standardized tests require standardized answers) affecting other areas of instruction and stifling student creative and critical thinking? What is being done to review and, if necessary, correct the consequences of Bendle's tenure? Which grades are, in the opinion of the Board, the critical grades demanding extra support and attention? [Andrews' priorities are Head Start to 3 grade and Middle School] What criteria are being used to hire a new superintendent? How often have the Board Directors consulted with all front line staff (custodial, food service, nursing, guidance, secretarial, teachers) to explore what they believe needs to be fixed? Does the district need to improve how all staff are treated as and given decentralized authority as professionals? Do administrators view their role as serving the staff and increasing their potential? How do district libraries interact with Beaver Library? Where are we with regard to teacher negotiations?

Teaching: By whom and when is the worth and value of curriculum evaluated? What hindrances need to be corrected in both horizontal and vertical lines of communication between teachers and grades with regard to preparation and planning? Does the staff have sufficient time to collaborate, prepare, and learn from each other regarding students, resources, curriculum? [e.g., how are teachers tasked with Bendle's 'What I Need' classes (de facto study halls) prepared to help students from mixed grades?] Who conducts exit interviews with departing staff and what is done with their comments? Is the investment required of teachers in preparing lesson plans that include power point, Ted talks, Chrome-feedback yielding satisfactory dividends? [e.g., is the Career Unit the best possible use of ELA talent?] Given how the Middle School auditorium gets turned into a bus station waiting room when we lack teachers, what is being done to recruit substitute teachers? Is there interest in reviving an Adult Education Outreach? Is there interest in coordinating how to reach out into the community to recruit auxiliary teachers with special gifts and expertise who could supplement and expand educational resources?

We support our directors when they serve students, staff, and community. It's an intellectually demanding privilege requiring curiosity, creativity, commitment, plus the desire to learn and change by asking hard, uncomfortable questions. Questions collect information so decisions become apparent.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Monday, June 20, 2019

"Summer Solstice"

Word Count: 750

Although the Summer Solstice begins at 11:54 tomorrow morning, Friday, June 21st, wait until night to come out. Despite the full moon shining four days before, night should be crisp and sharp. We hope so. There could be rain, there could be clouds. It happens. Weather doesn't always cooperate. Curious, why do we refer to rainfall as bad weather? We apply moral judgments to nature where it doesn't apply. I'm grateful for rainfall. Who needs a drought? Enjoy: rainfall invites you to go singing in the rain.

While I'm at it, what exactly do weather reporters mean when they say, as if in warning, we will experience weather conditions? What kind of conditions? Sunny is a weather condition, so too thunderstorms. Whichever type of weather happens is a weather condition. There cranky Bob grumps on again. Let's get back to the glory of the night sky. It's the greatest reality show ever.

Ursa Major, Great Bear, completes her yearly circuit around the North Star. Now we find her due west of Polaris. Big Dipper's handle now points upward while Little Dipper's handle points down toward the horizon. If you haven't noticed (which you might have missed because these stars are dim and faint to our eyes), Draco, the long dragon that spins off the handle of Little Dipper, has been enjoying this circle dance along with the bears, Draco too never dropping below horizon.

The treat of the summer sky (actually the treat within a treat within a treat) now sparkles and twinkles bright to the east: Cygnus the swan flying straight toward the east and parallel to the horizon, the swan's long neck outstretched and its wings bent in corsair flight. The stellar star Deneb marks the end of its tail. Deneb also marks the top of the Northern Cross that you can trace within the swan. Cygnus neck resembles the stake of a cross and its wings form the crossbar.

Above Cygnus's neck shines the bright star Vega, third brightest in the night sky to our unaided vision. Vega belongs to the constellation Lyra, symbolizing Orpheus' lyre for making beautiful music. Orpheus loved his Eurydice and tried to reclaim her from death itself, though he failed and lost her forever. Grief stricken he was torn to death by disappointed wild women of Thrace because in grief he wouldn't make music. An eagle took his lyre and flew it into the heavens to hang there forever. The eagle, otherwise known as the diamond shaped constellation of Aquila, is found mid-center of the sky full east, bending its way toward the south. Aquila's brightest star, Altair, marks the tail feathers. Now we come to the treat within the treat within the treat. Draw an imaginary line from Altair to Vega to Deneb and back to Altair. You've traced the heavenly asterism called the 'Summer Triangle.' The magic triangle. Good things in threes. Divine things come in threes. The Summer Triangle will shine all summer, gradually shifting higher in the east.

Summer treats indeed. Enjoy them while you may, because the Summer Solstice offers the longest day of daylight in the year, soon the sunsets come earlier and earlier. The solstice boasts a full fifteen hours and eighteen minutes. Saturday begins the decrease. In several days comes Midsummer Day, not

coincidentally the feast day celebrating the birth of John the Baptist. Interesting. Six months from now Christians will celebrate the feast day celebrating the birth of John's cousin, Jesus.

Yes, these were arbitrary dates set by the church. They were chosen for a message, chosen as more symbolic and theological than by historical fact. My Bible never dates precisely when John or Jesus were born, just that they were born. Jesus' natal day of celebration in December begins the lengthening and increase of light. John's time heralds the shortening, the decrease of light. June 24 is the natal date for this man who said of Jesus: "He must increase, I must decrease." Submission? A loser? Hardly. There's nothing servile about John, for John affirms that the way of service is alone worthwhile, the way of glory. His joy comes from serving, from sacrifice, from putting his life on the line for a value greater than himself.

John, Orpheus, the stars themselves: they remind us how wisdom realizes 'it's not about me.' It is the eternal greatness of humility by contrast. We belong to something larger, something more important than getting credit, praise, or prizes, something that endures far longer than ourselves.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
June 27, 2019
"Strong Coaches"
Word Count: 750

They made me take it. It required two hours of screen time for me to complete the tutorial. But, if I wanted to help coach my seventh grade team I had to take this new lesson on safe sports. Give me a break, I've been playing or coaching for sixty years. I know this stuff. I already had completed the required concussion tutorial. Properly tutored, I earned my concussion certificate. This new tutorial on safe sports had been added as another requirement for coaching. You could say I took it a tad grudgingly. Another hoop to jump. More paperwork to file.

For two hours experts talked. Facts were displayed. Scenarios were presented. Questions were asked. We were graded after each sequence.

Midway through, I realized that I was grateful I was forced to take this course. Developed by the U.S. Center for Safesports, the first part dealt with sexual abuse and misconduct. Next came information about Bullying, Harassment, Emotional Misconduct, Physical Misconduct. Coaches, similar to pastors and teachers, are placed uniquely to prevent such forms of abusive behavior, whether by athletes or by other coaches.

Bullying scenarios: teammates taunt a player about his leg brace, stealing it from him, pushing him into a locker; there's a team party but one player is excluded; other players spread rumors about an incident. 25% of adolescents have been bullied via social media. 8% of adolescents report being bullied every day. 40-50% of athletes have experienced some form of abuse. Favorite topics of bullies are looks, body shape, race. Contrary to dumb opinion, bullying doesn't toughen you up, it makes you angry, depressed, sleepless, isolated, anxious, distrustful, or worse. Don't give me any snowflake crap.

Harassment scenarios: abusive hazing that embarrasses, mistreats, that relies on dominating others and exercising cruel power over others. For what perverse reasons do people, even parents, permit long-term pains for, perhaps, short-term gains? Is "winning at all costs our morality?" If that really is winning.

Emotional Misconduct scenarios: a coach targeting individual players and berating them, name-calling, shunning, shaming them; coaches throwing chairs or water bottles, blaming players who perform badly; coaches and teammates who perversely think negative reinforcement, fear, and punitive language will somehow magically build up players, produce better performance, and achieve team cohesion.

Physical Misconduct scenarios: denying water until extra laps are run, ignoring concussion protocols, isolating players, cruel punishments, or demanding an unreasonable number of sit-ups.

A strong, righteous coach knows better ways to elicit the best in athletes. How? By building up team unity, honoring teammate differences, robust training, insuring safety, cultivating sportsmanship, emphasizing teams win or lose together. Lord, it's only sports. The singular value of sports is in developing self-controlled, disciplined, mature, responsible, tested young people.

Really now, who wants an abusive coach who throws tantrums when they lose a match? Who wants a Boy Scout leader who allows hazing? Treat others how you want to be treated. Regardless the position, uniform, badge, or whistle, respect, like authority, must be earned.

My proudest high school moment was when I got a teacher fired. He was a gym teacher and football coach. Sorry for the stereotype. He was popular with his breed of athletes. He had a particular talent for encouraging his athletes to torment -- in the locker room, gym class, hallways -- the special needs students who were being mainstreamed as an experiment. One gym class, I finally had it with him. He enjoyed his sick form of dodge ball. He'd call out the lines to which the contesting sides could advance to throw the balls. When you could cross over the neutral zone a few yards, even snowflake me enjoyed the competition. I am a jock. But when it got down to his athletes on one end of the court and the special need guys who had been hiding on the other end, the teacher would call out yellow lines, which allowed these sick jocks to rush ten yards from the wall and nail them as hard as they could. I yelled at this jerk of a teacher and lit into the Vice-principal who had been watching in cowardly silence. I had respected the Vice-principal until then. Fed up, I turned gym teacher in. It helped that I served as the student liaison to the School Board and that I was on trusted terms with the principal. Refusing to return to class, I failed gym.

My, my: can you think of anyone else who might benefit from taking this course?

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Thursday, July 4, 2019
"Freed For"
Word Count 750

We Protestants get giddy, even, dare I say, prideful, over July 4th. We boast that if it weren't for Reformed Protestants there'd be no USA. We tease that the US Constitution was inspired by the Constitution of the Church of Scotland with all its practical sentiments and political philosophy about individual dignity, human equality, freedom of conscience, election of leaders, the indispensable social contract, plus those unalienable rights.

It helps to remember that Protestants protested for freedom of religion so that government

wouldn't pervert religion by trying to suborn the church and dictate prayer and right belief. State religion always threatens liberty. It also helps to remember that we ought not confuse liberty with license. We are FREED FROM so we can be FREED FOR, the saying goes.

Cruel it would be, then, to be freed without being equipped for freedom. Please remember how comedian Trevor Noah said, "we love saying that better than giving a man a fish is helping teach him to fish." Trevor added: "But it sure helps to make sure he has a fishing pole."

It sure helps to have something to be proud about, to have something that gives meaning and purpose, to have a reason to get out of bed in the morning, to be able to go to bed at night feeling worthwhile.

What today's exhausting political and social times expose is how many of our neighbors feel the dream is dead, hope is dead. They feel alienated, abandoned, aggrieved, lonely, worthless. Life just isn't unfair, it's stacked against them. They feel disenfranchised, a fancy word for feeling they've been left out. Hence: exploitable. They feel they've been lied to, and those feelings are hotly fanned. Wrongly, they feel change comes from the top.

What they are feeling now is what other citizens have felt for a long time.

This frustration festers in regions of America where the "dissolution of civil society is acute," The crisis isn't our annoyance that prosperity isn't guaranteed; the crisis is that the support systems for facing hard times is crumbling. America is failing because "the core institutions of society – family, church and school, business and labor, fraternal and civic organizations" are decaying. The fabric of strong community is unraveling [from "Alienated America," by Timothy Carney].

Drive along Route 61.

An instructive book is David McCullough's latest work, "The Pioneers," about the Ohio Company that settled Ohio and the Midwest. This organized agreement for westward migration was championed by Congregational pastor, the Reverend Manasseh Cutler, who insisted on two provisions in the charter: One, no slavery; Second, an agreement that a section in each township would be reserved for common schools and state supported education. Cutler's faith taught that this is how we prepare the next generation to shoulder the mantle of faith and civic duty, till their turn to pass it on.

These Ohio pioneers were soldiers of the Revolution. Several years before, they defeated tyrant king George and his imperious Parliament. These pioneers renounced aristocracy, monarchy, subservience. They rebelled when King George III, in arbitrary power, sought to control information, regulate what was taught, suppress and censor what was read in the news and pamphlets. As early as 1735, journalists were arrested for critical editorials against Britain and king. Along with their Intolerable Acts, British tyranny prohibited newspaper publications and circulation.

For our mutual success, our nation demands an educated, learned, literate citizenry, free libraries, schools, a free press, scientific discovery, knowledge of history, facing facts we don't want to hear, gaining wisdom, lest we be enslaved by the tyranny of ignorance, fear, envy, distrust, base appetite, raw emotion, mob rule, self-gratification, self-aggrandizement, self-indulgence.

Our pioneer forebears – flaws, warts, and all; greed, violence, bigotry, and all -- built this country on the confidence of meritocracy. Success by merit, never by birthright nor wealth. A farmer who could read a

book was far superior to any illiterate Prince. Just give me a fair and just chance!

Thomas Paine (God love that rebel) asked in his indictment of monarchies: what makes birth and bloodline an entitlement to rule? Why not scholarship, integrity, talent, moral temperament? One nation: born of principles, ideals, responsibility.

Our Declaration of Independence and Constitution were the gyroscope and compass to set America on the right course, to ever right this ship of state given the pitch, roll, and yaw of history. Were our gyroscope and compass? It's our task to make sure they still are, not merely for my sake but for our sake.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
11 July, 2019
"Elephant Man"
Word Count: 750

When the doctor first examined him, the doctor reported that he was the most disgusting and repulsive approximation of a man he'd ever seen. The grotesquely disfigured man had come to the doctor at London Hospital because he had nowhere else to turn. He had preserved the doctor's business card that he was given when they first met.

He had spent the majority of his young life being exhibited in freak shows. According to our lecturer on the Queen Mary II, this young man was on display in Amsterdam when the owner of the freak show abandoned him after stealing his entire earnings. The young man, cloaked and hooded to hide from the stares and shock of the public, managed to cross the English Channel and presented himself to the physician who, long ago, gave him his business card.

The doctor was named Frederick Treves, a prominent surgeon, author, and omnivorous learner. The young man was named Joseph Merrick, otherwise advertised and exhibited as the 'Elephant Man.' They formed a warm friendship. Treves promised Merrick he could stay at London Hospital and raised sufficient funds to support him. Treves initially thought Merrick as mentally deformed as he was physically. With patience he discovered Merrick's inability to communicate resulted from his abnormalities. With patience, he began to understand Merrick's garbled speech.

Other folk, prominent in society, took an interest in Merrick. Perhaps they visited out of pity. Perhaps some, as gawkers do, couldn't pass up the chance to witness something ugly, horrible. All who took the time, however, began to discover a man who was sensitive, insightful, generous, and, despite the abuses and isolation he suffered his entire life, was forgiving and loving. Merrick created, with great difficulty, artistic gifts for his friends.

We can gain what I call Jesus eyes. It is the incredible and incredulous ability to look at someone and know of their flaws, their deformities of mind and soul, their sins, and still love them, still embrace their humanity. This doesn't mean you ignore the sin, error, or flaws – no. You must be brutally honest. You cannot dismiss wrong. All the more reason, then, to view them with Jesus eyes.

It has to do with doors. As a kid, I remember thinking about the troubles my family was going through. It also occurred to me how we were a really good family. We had our scrapes and scraps, but overall we were happy, healthy, successful.

One day we learnt how my father wrested a shotgun from the hands of a neighbor suffering from cancer preventing his suicide. Dad told him this wasn't how he wanted his children to remember him.

How could we kids have known then that neighbor X was an alcoholic or about the silly, sad, corrosive games some adults played when they would gather for their many parties? Those secret gestures between his wife and her husband. Wife tired of husband's flirting. Husband tired of wife's admiration for someone else.

I stood looking at my house. I looked at my front door and thought about all the stuff going on behind our door. It made me look at all the other doors in my neighborhood and wonder: what's going on behind their doors?

Very early I realized unfairness, hurt, sickness, emptiness, wanting to be loved, is our human norm. Us divided from each other. Us divided from the essence of what makes us whole. Suffering is normal. Behind those doors.

It seems a shame children must learn what adults discover about what really goes on in a town, in families, behind the closed doors of our homes. The Joseph Merrick trick is to avoid being tainted by the pain. We need more than love. We need justice. *Mishpat* is a key Hebrew Bible word. *Mishpat* speaks of justice, balance, trying to get right what we can get right. Things made right. As people. Nations too. It's amazing how ugly people can be beautiful, and beautiful people ugly.

Before he died from the weight of his malformed body suffocating him, Merrick wrote this poem, paraphrasing in the second stanza a poem called "False Greatness, written by English hymn writer, Isaac Watts.

'Tis true my form is something odd.
But blaming me is blaming God,
Could I create myself anew,
I would not fail in pleasing you.

If I could reach from pole to pole,
Or grasp the ocean with a span,
I would be measured by the soul:
The mind's the standard of the man.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
18 July, 2019
"Riotous Times"
Word Count: 750

Danville's original iron foundry began in 1829 fabricating farm and kitchen tools. It lasted three years. Danville's iron industry was ultimately snuffed out by the depression of 1873. Iron was only a 40 year run. That's the nature of economies. Keelboats that steer downstream and pole upstream get replaced by steamboats. In 1811, a steamboat traveled from Pittsburgh to New Orleans in 14 days. Fine, until railroads. Fine, until auto assembly-lines.

We all get replaced. Technologies invariably change. Coal plants close not from EPA regulations but from corporate decisions (cheaper, cleaner alternatives) and improved technologies like automation. The real question is: does our community have the social and personal resources to help us adapt? Once upon a time a fellow would graduate from High School, get a job at Textron, make a decent enough wage to get married, buy a house, raise a family, support his church, volunteer as a fire-fighter, contribute to the community. That world's gone. The world where physical male labor is a premium also is gone. The world where white men are culturally and economically protected is going. They must compete with competent women and minorities, oftentimes more competent.

Manufacturing, however, isn't gone in America, it's better. I'm indebted to conservative Timothy Carney for all I'm sharing: "In general America manufactures more stuff every year keeping up with the overall growth of the economy. Manufacturers in 2016 contributed to 11.6% of the overall economy, comparable to the 1970's. In fact the US is increasing not decreasing how we manufacture every year."

Look at Pittsburgh. In Pittsburgh renewable energy employs more people than does steel. For Pittsburgh and many regions, Carney argues, the American Dream is alive and well. Still, it is not alive and well in other places, like Shamokin, and that is America's oozing wound. We are a collection of places where it is okay and where it is not okay. "Economic growth has been climbing since 2009 in metro areas, growth even returned to pre-crisis level in 2013. Non-metro employment never has. Rural areas show no job growth or even loss in growth." While places like Fort Collins thrive, places like Shamokin – once prosperous -- were skipped (along with those trapped in urban pockets) in the overall economic recovery that began in 2009. Carney calls our attention to these "maps of despair" because the real threat isn't the inevitable changing economy, it's empty and ignored churches, broken families, failing schools, loss of purpose and accomplishment, loss of local newspapers, evaporation of civic commitment, decline of work habits that instilled delayed gratification, commitment, reliability (qualities equally necessary for work as much as family and marriage). It's feeling detached, distrustful, defensive, unneeded, class segregation.

This fact exposes the lie that Dow Jones is a measure of general prosperity: the typical male today earns less than the typical male of 1969. No wonder many white males want someone, even a corrupt fraud, who'll bellow: "I'll fight for you, I'll restore what you lost!" It's dog eat dog, right? It's us versus them, right? Ends justify means, right?

Where are these places of "geographical determinism?" Carney asks. They are wherever you see the collapse of working-class community (disintegrating "civil society"), wherever you see a high number of white men going on disability or dropping out from seeking work (in 1964, 1 in 30, by 2015, 1 in 10) thus absent from unemployment rates, wherever you see the poor unable or uninterested in relocating, wherever you see "the retreat from marriage" and increased birth rates to unwed mothers (58% of all babies born to non-college women are born out of wedlock), wherever you see higher white male mortality rates, more alcohol-related deaths, more overdoses, more suicides. "The differences among places aren't merely differences of income, wealth, or education. They are differences of health, hope,

and opportunity...places left out of the net gain of proven economic benefits from immigration and free trade.”

Danville’s economic history mirrors other towns: erratic markets, falling prices, lay-offs, failed shops, bankruptcies, fires, explosions, increased competition from immigrants or foreign manufacturers, low wages.

At the end of July, 1877, according to ‘The Danville Intelligencer,’ a mob of men – their families starving – gathered on Mill Street demanding work or bread. They threatened to take the law into their own hands. When Borough stalled, certain leaders tried to capture weapons and arm themselves to press the issue. Tensions escalated between rioters and police. Apparently, when bread and promises were finally offered, the protesters drifted away vowing to organize.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Thursday, July 25, 2019

“The Ikea Effect”

Word Count: 750

All that was needed was a jigsaw, drill, sandpaper, wood, cork, stain, and some free time. The free time came at the expense of studying for my weeklong series of ordination exams: Bible, theology, polity, pastoral care, homiletics. I was bored. I needed to construct something. The something became a chess table. Nothing fancy. I’m no carpenter. It wobbles. Still, I’m proud of it. More proud than if I had bought some marble chess board and silver pieces. It’s followed us around wherever we have lived.

It’s called ‘The Ikea effect,’ where the “effective value increases if you’re proud in putting it together.” You’re proud of doing it yourself. It supplies that “assumption of competence.” It’s your own. You did it. You see this when kids bake cookies. Their cookies of course taste better than any chocolate-chip cookie bought from the pastry shop. Pride, self-reliance, accomplishment – in the context of sharing.

Golly, I wonder if there is a message here in chores we expect our kids to complete so they can earn money to buy a skateboard? If something is given, if something isn’t earned, does it have the same value as something worked for? Ask Ikea. A little bit of pride, a little bit of satisfaction, is more than a good thing, it is essential for self-respect, dignity, and hope. Pope John Paul said as much when he preached how if a man wants to live fully like a man, it’s a matter of self-sacrifice. Self-reliance only makes sense when you are committed to a community, a family, a marriage.

Golly, I wonder if there’s a message here in how we go about doing charity? Empowering them or demeaning them? Listening or telling? Partnering or, ugh, mentoring? I’ve long argued that the business of church isn’t charity. The business of the church is proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Our purpose is transformed lives. How we do charity simply is one of the means by which we proclaim this Gospel.

Some folk argue that church has gone the way of Sears Catalogues, phone books, video stores. I think not. What may be losing ground is the aberration of baby-boom, post-World War II church that many of us experienced in the 1950’s and 1960’s. In 2019, religious communities still remain the fundamental institution of civil society with a deserved and rightful place as leaders in the public sphere. We are here to shape culture so culture can shape politics. I love politics. Pastors are supposed to be community

leaders rather than mere shepherds of an isolated flock. Don't shove our faith into the private, nice-nice sector of community life. We're committed to building up community. We persevere appreciating we are in it together for common success. Like the Ikea effect, it means more when, like Jesus, it's local, personal, particular.

The demographic statistics are coming in and they are telling a remarkable tale. Even though plenty of folks who live in 'places of despair' call themselves evangelical Christians, very few belong to a church or attend church. Surprise, in liberal communities of the 'elites,' traditional family values of church attendance, marriage, and parents involved in the lives of their children, outpace what you will find in conservative communities of the 'alienated.' Why? Because wherever you find suffering and damage from this alienation, this "collapse of civil society," you will find the emptying of churches. This uncomfortable fact is course-correcting how I view the mission field, charity, and how to do church.

I'm proud of the positive role religion has played throughout the history of America. Sure, we confess we haven't always been a positive force – we know this better than our tedious, uninformed, judgmental, and aloof finger-pointers -- but the plus side heavily outweighs the negative: hospitals, education, a community of care and support in hard times, local welfare, source for volunteerism, civility and goodwill, social movements, a sense of purpose and meaning, connectedness, morality, cards for the sick, meals for new mommies, a place for learning the habits of patience, self-reliance, self-sacrifice, commitment, love of neighbor, risk.

Active and intact religious communities – whether Protestant, Roman Catholic, Mormon, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu -- anchor the critical mass for communities to thrive regardless of income level. Hint: a variety of people assume church only promises spiritual benefits to be enjoyed in the sweet bye-and-bye. Fact is, most of the benefits from belonging to a religious community are practical for successful living, for building a good life. That's something to be proud of.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

1 August, 2019

"A Brother's Disagreement"

Word Count: 750

It's interesting when you realize your father is flawed and fallible. It's also healthy.

Since eighth grade, I rarely agreed with Dad about politics. That's putting it kindly. Mom tried to intervene and lower the temperature when we'd get into rough political fights. Back in those fun days, whenever the news broadcasted clips of war protesters in Washington DC, Dad would shut off the TV. He feared he would see me. Once or twice he did.

The worst moment came when I returned from college one evening unexpectedly. Mom and Dad were entertaining their best friends. The four of them were out on the porch having a few drinks. Hardy, Dad's best friend, had his usual few too many highballs. With guy friendships, it's a fuzzy line between loyalty and rivalry. Hardy's boys were athletes. They were wrestlers, football players. Each one of his three sons joined a fraternity. Hardy's third son, my parallel, recently had won the egg eating contest at Lehigh.

Dad's three sons couldn't hold a candle to Hardy's boys. He had little to boast about when it came to his rebellious and unabashedly liberal boys. No fraternities for us. No egg contests. No trophies. It got worse: Sensitive, seminary-bound soccer playing me gravitated toward working with the American Friends Service Committee exposing our government's lie called Tonkin and cruelty called Tiger Cages.

As the weird and whimsical demi-gods would decree it, of all the sons guess which son won the lowest number in the draft lottery and had the highest chance of visiting beautiful Vietnam? Which is why I had come home. I had been summoned to appear the next day before the draft board.

This news was red meat to Hardy. "Now, why do you have to go before the draft board?"

"My hearing. I'm applying for 1-AO status." Dad paled even though I had tried to avoid using its more common appellation.

"1-AO?" Hardy pressed. "What is that?"

It was inevitable. "It means non-combatant status. I'll go but it means I won't carry a gun for Nixon." Hardy swelled, waiting for me to deliver the punch line. "It means CO -- Conscientious Objector."

Hardy grinned. "CO? Doesn't that really mean 'coward?'"

What bothered me most weren't Hardy's comments. You needn't take a blowhard's mockery personal. The empty drum bangs loudest. My father's silence gutted me. His best friend was calling me a coward and Dad was too ashamed to speak. Perhaps Dad's must get smaller in their sons eyes before they can get larger again. Unexpectedly, Nixon later limited the draft call-up just before my number.

These days I'm trying to decipher if those times were nastier and more divided than now, or is our current climate more vengeful, malicious, snotty?

It feels as if my brother and I now are fighting worse than how Dad and I fought. Email is partly to blame. He's offended by things I write. Perhaps I take offense at his position, although I hope mines more disappointment.

Who is right and who is wrong? Or is that the wrong question? Conflicts harden when we refuse to see that conflicts really are about your good versus my good.

It's more than a brother's disagreement. It isn't fun. Worse, I'm uncertain if we still share common values, such as: respecting each as fighting for America, regarding each other as patriotic, wanting to listen, viewing criticism as necessary, rejecting lies and false witness, giving loyalty to ideals before persons, focusing on issues and avoiding contemptuous insults and threats. Resorting to 'ad hominin' attacks (attacking the person versus behaviors), exposes cowardice, moral bankruptcy, spiritual weakness, lack of intelligent ideas.

Sure, I'll fight for what I think is right. I better fight hard. I don't have to accept his version of good. Too much is at stake. My heart always has rebelled against bullies and mobs. Still, whenever it's winning by playing dirty, unfair, and unprincipled, everyone loses.

I'm also uncertain if we even agree on common facts and information. That's a bridge-less chasm. These two principles -- common values and common facts -- remain essential for any resolution, for any better future.

Fortunately, today's conflict pales before the time when several of my great-great uncles left their plantation to serve in the South Carolina infantry while my great-grandfather fought in the 154th New York and my great-great uncle rode for Sheridan in the Shenandoah. Funny, my own family could have killed each other.

We're not as bad as our Civil War. Yet.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
August 8, 2019
"Grandbabies"
Word Count: 750

This will be our second grandbaby. The first, our younger daughter's little boy named Harrison, was richly loved his few days. Part of expectant elder daughter's worry is the normal fear of giving birth. It's all new. But she and her husband keep busy turning a closet into a nursery (it is Oakland where few can afford two-bedroom apartments). Grandma busies herself collecting children's books and anticipating the phone call. Me? I'm dubbed: 'Grump-pa.'

Our daughter, sadly, increasingly worries about the society into which baby will be born. Will baby be welcomed? Will we offer him or her a land where integrity, faith, promise, hope, have become disposable?

Boy or girl? Blissfully, they decided to be surprised by baby's gender. Baby's name will be our surprise. Baby also will be the product of our daughter and her husband whose own father is African-American, his mother is Jewish. Perhaps there's a few in my church who might disapprove of such a match. Some of my family might be self-conscious. Regardless, baby will arrive soon. Love works.

Five days after the horror of 9/11, I baptized a baby girl. The sermon was a letter to her, for she was born into a world most uncertain. This was a part of what I said: "Child of mine, dearest Lydia, among all our promises, we also wish we could promise you a safe world. But we cannot. We never could. Such is the price of birth. Such also is birth's gift. It is in the lack of safety our God is known more clearly. For today you are baptized. Bright promise in the midst of terror and sorrow and fear. You, child, are our shining declaration of hope. My child. Our child. You, while the world may twist and writhe, are our incandescent declaration today that our future and our times, and yours, shall pursue where salvation beckons."

There's a difference, however, between then and now. Lydia entered a world where evil was done unto us. Today's America is being determined by evil we're doing unto ourselves. Will this world welcome our grandbaby?

I still believe we can make America good so she can become great. I believe in the America that is large and kind, generous and just, where, quoting from the movie, 'Hidden Figures:' "Here at NASA we all pee the same color." There's another compelling line from that movie. A white woman says to her black

employee: "Despite what you may think, I have nothing against y'all." The employee replies: "I know, I know you probably believe that."

I believe in an America where leaders sympathize that not everyone can choose where they can live, that many, unlike their landlords, have no choice but to live in housing projects. I believe in an America where we spurn cynical leaders who think so little of us that after agitating and infecting the crowd they turn away and smirk, counting on us to fester with fear, hostility, resentment, the pus of judging as enemies those with whom we disagree. I believe in an America that differentiates between opportunity and opportunism. I believe in an America where I wouldn't have to doubt the mental health or moral courage of our leadership.

I believe in the America defined not by the KKK but by the NAACP. I believe in the America defined not by the confederate battle flag but by the Stars and Stripes, by my great-grandfather who fought to begin cleansing America from our cancer of slavery. I believe in the America defined not by the America that turned away Jewish refugees and sent them back to the Holocaust but the America that worked out giving a chance to our ancestors. I believe in the America defined not by Jerry Falwell Jr., but by the Reverend William Barber. I believe in the America defined not by Rush Limbaugh but Fred Rogers. I believe in the America defined not by Ted Nugent but by Bruce Springsteen and Woody Guthrie. I believe in the America defined not by Steve Bannon but Doris Kearns Goodwin. I believe in the America defined not by the Dow Jones but by paychecks. I believe in the America defined not by hypocrites or those indifferent but by the families I love who come to church on Sunday morning, their children rushing to get their crayons for coloring in the pew, by the people I love who welcome newcomers and who always ask: "How's so and so doing?"

Do you still believe?

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
August 15, 2019
"Glory Days"
Word Count: 750

Was anyone you know really there? How many people do you know think they were there? Woodstock, of course. When did you last listen to the album? "New York State thruway's closed, man. Lots of freaks!" "There's always a little bit of heaven in a disaster area."

What ever happened to Woodstock 50, promoted as a celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of Woodstock 1969? It was supposed to take place at the same time, same place. August 15-17. It didn't happen. The idea of recreating the original and serendipitous Woodstock Festival is as pathetic as a really bad comb-over. The idea of Woodstock 50 is as pitiful as me trying to fit into my bell bottom blue suit (polyester, padded shoulders), size 28 waist. The idea of trying to relive the festival is as pathetic as the famed high school athlete sipping a beer and still talking about the day his team won the championship. John Updike's haunting poem, 'Ex-Basketball Player,' captures this painfully: Flick the high school hero working in the garage, pumping gas and fixing flats, amusing the locals by dribbling an inner tube.

Woodstock 50 was a bad idea. Bad ideas should be cancelled. From what I read, Woodstock 50 was a goner months ago. Somebody's dream turned into a nightmare, the plans disintegrating like Styrofoam

sprayed with acetone. Shaky planning. Performers bailing. Backers withdrawing. Zoning permits denied. Forced to relocate.

Some things shouldn't be messed with. Gone is gone. We don't need grave robbers. Just enjoy the album, the music, and the memories.

Songs do that to us. I bet you have a few tunes that when you hear them bring to mind something special. Memories beckoned by certain songs. "Freedom, freedom, freedom – sometimes I feel like a motherless child..." "Well it's a marvelous night for a moon dance with the stars up above in your eyes, a fantabulous night to make romance..."

I'd love to know which songs conjure up those special memories for you. Perhaps bittersweet, unplanned moments? You treasure them. You also realize it desecrates the memory when you try to recreate the moments. Should we really say in parting: "Have a great day?" Or should we be wonderfully pompous and say instead: "Make it a great day?" I lean toward pompous, with a little help from my friends. Appreciate what was and move on. Appreciate the chance to create new things to appreciate, the chance to be surprised by new memories.

A classical 19th century church building in Chester County burnt to the ground one night. After much debate, the congregation resolved to rebuild. They made a huge mistake. They rebuilt the church exactly as it had been. They could have built a newer, more creative building fit for the 21st century. They didn't. Retro can be fun. Phonographs. Vinyl. Nintendo. Fountain pens. Classic cars. Fedoras. What they did was a wasted opportunity. And dumb.

"Glory days, well they'll pass you by. Glory days in the wink of a young girl's eye." So sings Bruce Springsteen. Glory days past? Or glorious days to come? Yes, I know all too well how addictive trying to recapture the past can be, that embarrassment of nostalgia -- "I've drunk of the cup and its intoxication I can well remember."

After grandpa died, dad and mom shipped their three boys to spend several weeks with grandma at the house on Cuba Lake, New York. Dad was smart, a stroke of genius: give mom a rest and distract a grieving grandma. Climb up the aluminum steps from the Newark Airport tarmac, take your seat in the Mohawk Airlines airplane, hear the propellers whine, vomit several times in transit, land in Bradford, get picked up by grandma in the sedan with bench seats, stop off at Cosby's for black-&-white milkshakes, snap peas, bake cakes, play with the ceramic ducks decorating the lawn, tease the swarming bats at sunset with a tennis ball, fish the lake, boat in the lake, swim in the lake. It was boy heaven.

Two generations later, I drove my own kids to visit grandma, enjoy milkshakes, and pay a call on the old lake-house which had been sold off long ago. The tall hedge was still there, but I was stunned to see how much Cuba Lake had shrunken. It hadn't. I just got bigger and my eyes realistic. Weird.

During the funeral of William Jeffreys the other week, I chuckled when I quoted Chekov: "Only entropy is easy." Let it be, let it be.

Robert John Andrews
The Danville News
August 22, 2019
“Guns, Slaves, Rights”
Word Count: 750

Brother Ricky, being the more brutally realistic among us (he became a CEO), played war in the backyard with his green plastic World War II soldiers. I, touched with a romantic soul, played with my blue and gray Civil War soldiers. One figurine held the ramrod, others knelt or crawled and fired their rifles, others stood in march formation. I even collected small metal cannons as souvenirs when we'd visit battlefields. I still have them. We'd stuff the barrels with shaved sparkler powder and ignite them. It looked cool. We nearly manufactured our own gun powder. Firecrackers would be tossed into the formation of soldiers. We were a bloodthirsty lot. Although, shooting them with rubber band munitions made for a glorious battle. Better was to break out dad's boyhood BB gun and sniper down the enemy.

Let's have some fun today with guns, especially discussing the second amendment, which declares: *“A well regulated Militia being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.”*

I recommend reading “Hamilton” by Ron Chernow. I learnt how the Bill of Rights was a concession to the States that objected to a constitution, States fretful that centralized government threatened the autonomy and authority of the States (and the rich elite governing those States). Virginia and New York especially opposed a constitution. That's why the Bill of Rights was drafted as amendments to the contested Constitution (finally approved after tough debate and ruthless political maneuvering). Foreshadowing America's two party system, the battle over the Constitution was waged between the Federalists who advocated strong central government and the Anti-federalists who preferred the loose confederation of States (which they viewed as their countries).

Anti-federalists opposed a national army. A standing army smacked too much of European monarchy. Those men who served with George Washington, like Hamilton, realized by their wounds and suffering how they nearly lost the Revolutionary War because the States consistently refused to fund the Continental Army. An army without funds results in desertions, starvation, ill-equipped soldiers. The French saved our butts.

The Anti-federalists, such as Jefferson, preferred citizen-soldiers serving in State Militias, hence the insertion of the second amendment. Today's NRA shouts about the right to keep and bear arms (after kissing Putin's tushie for his donation) but there's nary a whisper about the reason for keeping and bearing arms: a well regulated Militia. Hold on, you mean the second amendment requires regulation? That's interesting.

All amendments in the Bill of Rights invite regulation. None is absolute. That's why we have slander and libel laws. We regulate what qualifies as a cult versus an established religion, whether polygamy is legal or illegal. A death-threat letter to government isn't a proper petition of redress. We get permits for certain type of assemblies. Dear me, who wants chanting madmen bearing torches marching through town threatening people they hate.

Why did the States want Militias rather than a national standing army? Why? To protect their interests. To protect the States from their enemies, which included Native-Americans, Europeans, Canadians, and

neighboring States which might feel threatened by tariffs and custom fees (which the Federalists argued should be the responsibility of central government). The key reason for these State Militias, however, was experienced by Alexander Hamilton himself (the key architect of the Constitution) when a young man living in Saint Croix. It was the duty of every white male over sixteen “to serve in the militia and attend monthly drills with arms and ammunition at the ready.” The militia stood guard when ‘renegade’ slaves were executed lest other slaves dare protest or interfere.

The southern planters of southern States, where whites were oft outnumbered by their slaves, especially feared vengeful slave revolts. They were justified to fear slave revolts. Any sensible human would revolt against such inhumanity. Because our self-interest makes us forget, we might wish to remember what was stated in the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence.

So, a strict constitutionalist like me, who requires a literal application of the Constitution unlike snowflake liberals, stands on steady lawful ground when defending two points: 1). We citizens of these States shall not be denied the right to own and use a flintlock musket (I’ll take two shots a minute over 9 dead in 30 seconds, 28 injured); and 2). Ownership of said flintlock is predicated upon required service in a State Militia, which includes drilling on the town square every Sunday. See you there!

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
August 29, 2019
“Labor Day Words”
Word Count: 750

“Shenandoah” is a favorite Civil War movie. The farm family gathers at suppertime. Patriarch Jimmy Stewart offers grace: “Lord, we cleared this land. We plowed it, sowed it, and harvest it. We cook the harvest. It wouldn't be here and we wouldn't be eating it if we hadn't done it all ourselves. We worked dog-bone hard for every crumb and morsel, but we thank you Lord just the same for the food we're about to eat, amen.”

Despite the idle, inert, indolent, and the lazy (especially the privileged rich), we today salute the Protestant Work Ethic.

What happens when we don't work? When you expect someone else to do it? Don't weed your garden. Don't mow the lawn. Don't do your laundry. Don't wash the dishes. Don't change the oil. Don't sweat hard for every crumb and morsel.

The blessing of work is a daily competition against everything natural that works to bring us down. Life is a daily competition to make something against nature's tilt toward chaos and decay. We work for a reason, for several reasons. What are you working for? For whom are you working? As much as we advocate for the Protestant Work Ethic and applaud the virtue of work, we want to avoid the sloppy conclusion that worldly success automatically indicates you're more blessed, superior, or virtuous than others. Tell that to my father whose business failed despite him pouring his entire life into it.

Despite work often being drudgery, despite work today often being more about checklists than being freed to do your job, despite little reason today given by corporations to inspire loyalty or for you to do your best, we find some motivation to work hard by turning to the Gospel According to the Simpsons and the episode called “Maggie Makes Three.” Homer was living his dream job at the bowling alley,

until Marge told him another baby was on the way. Swallowing pride, he returned and begged for his old job from his cruel boss. Mr. Burns humiliated him further by fixing a sign in front of his work station: "Don't forget: you're here forever." Maggie was born. Homer was thrilled with her. He took her baby photos to work and taped them onto the sign so it now read: "Do it for her."

Dignity and purpose in work. There's a refreshing concept. Working for those you love. The New Testaments adds that you work and earn money so you can contribute toward helping others. My Jesus talked more about money than about prayer.

America's employment figures and wealth are more Humpty Dumpty than Paul Bunyan (you're wrong Donald). Workforce trends are alarming. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average number of jobs will be 11.7 for those aged 18-48. Number of careers is difficult to compute, though statistics lean toward at least 4 or more career changes in a lifetime. 1/3 of young adults, aged 18-34, live in their parents' home. 1 in 4 of those aged 18-24 is idle, neither working nor going to school. Delayed marriage is the norm -- not until age 45 are 8 in 10 married. Only 14% of young women, aged 25-34 years, work as homemakers. Most alarming, 41% of young men (and increasingly) earn below \$30,000 a year. Average percentage of housing costs is 43% of family budgets (compared with 22% in the 1950's). Add to this: Crushing college loans (median millennial debt is \$18,000), predatory credit card companies, stagnant or deflated real earnings, healthcare costs, surviving upon the widening whirlpool of part-time employment.

You do realize that it's logistically impossible to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps.

In developed countries a century ago, the majority worked with their hands: farming, domestic service, craft shops, few in factories. 50 years ago 50% were manual laborers with over half in factories. Today? 15% of workforce labor in factories, with "Knowledge Workers," the fastest growing group, those whose jobs require formal and advance schooling.

Let's toss into this modern workforce mix innovative technologies replacing old jobs, where new jobs have to be invented, where some of the old ones can't find young folks who want to install new furnaces or water heaters even if it means making more money than training as a computer programmer.

At a church meeting we were asked what is the key social justice issue confronting us today. Hunger, racism, poverty, militarism, falsehoods, global warming were voiced. I suggested a good job, worthwhile work, decent pay.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
September 5, 2019
"True Actions"
Word Count: 750

A young man who is going through a bad time because of bad choices asked me: "How can you know what's good and bad, what's right and wrong?" I replied how our Bible is clear about this. "You can tell by what is produced," I answered.

There's danger whenever we frame things as either good or bad, right or wrong. Why? Because our self-centeredness takes every good and perverts it into a bad yet still names it as good. Is your good

my good? The good of motherhood can sink into smothering. The terrorists' good of patriotism and religion is what led them to murder on 9/11. Convicts justify crime by blaming the victim – he disrespected me!

Because my heart pulses with rebellious Scottish blood, because Presbyterianism demands tough-mindedness, because I'm Christian, I enjoy being contrary and thus counter-cultural. We take what is and turn it upside-down, inside-out.

Take, for instance, State of the Union speeches. Do you groan when listening to what they have become: a string of slogans interspersed with applause lines? Give us a speech! I've written each of the Presidents since Reagan, pleading that they tell the assembled dignitaries to refrain clapping. Oh, to have been present when Lincoln delivered his Second Inaugural Address – how it would've ruined America's greatest Presidential speech (nay, sermon) had he written it with applause lines.

Take, for instance, the inauguration itself. Likely, I'll write the winner of the 2020 election pleading with her or him to scale down the glamor, the hoopla, the extravagance. These hardly are times for ostentatious display and self-indulgence. These are times for simplicity, humility, graciousness.

Take, for instance, G7 gatherings. I'm sick of elitist fancy dinners at resorts, photographs, the mugging of worldly power. Some argue that next year's G7 should be held at rustic Camp David. That's a fitting notion – a site for hard work not photo shoots, treaties not deals, tough alliances not grandstanding. Still, Camp David doesn't go far enough. How about the G7 summit be held at El Paso, Texas? Yes, I'm a mischievous contrarian.

With that troubled young man I further shared what a wise theologian taught. Instead of being guided by corruptible concepts of good and evil, right and wrong, we are best guided by what are TRUE ACTIONS versus FALSE ACTIONS as mediated by the person of Jesus. TRUE ACTIONS produce true results of justice, peace, reconciliation, forgiveness, kindness, compassion, hope, courage, love. The opposite produces what is false, degrading humanity and civilization.

We persevere. Admirable is how clubs and organizations require that members subscribe to certain standards of true behavior. As club soccer coaches, we are expected to comport ourselves in a manner that promotes gallant sportsmanship.

Rotary trumpets its Four Way Test: Is it TRUTH? It is FAIR to all concerned? Will it build GOODWILL and BETTER FRIENDSHIPS? Will it be BENEFICIAL to all concerned?

The Elks pledge the Golden Rule.

The Danville School District reminds athletes and fans over the loud-speaker that we abide by a code of "Sportsmanship and Fan Decorum at Athletic Contests"

Girl Scouts and Boys Scouts inculcate virtuous behavior among their Scouts.

Girl Scouts promise in their law: "I will do my best to be honest and fair, friendly and helpful, considerate and caring, courageous and strong, and responsible for what I say and do, and to respect myself and others, respect authority, use resources wisely, make the world a better place, and be a sister to every Girl Scout."

Boy Scouts in their Law promise they'll try to be: "Trustworthy, Loyal, Helpful, Friendly, Courteous, Kind, Obedient, Cheerful, Thrifty, Brave, Clean, Reverent."

Admirable traits, oaths, and promises all, which gets confusing when those who uphold such truths permit those who don't. If you see concentric ripples in the pond you know something slapped the water. If what you see produced are lies, betrayals, lawlessness, illegalities, fear-mongering, division, rancorous slurs, harm, neglect, greed, cruelty, vendetta, desperation to be thanked and praised, you can deduce the source is false, damaged, disunited.

Wouldn't it be therapeutic (indeed, refreshing) if all our political parties and leaders subscribed to TRUE ACTIONS? I especially pray that the debased Vichy Republican officials might recover their souls by refusing to act as gelded eunuchs or Stepford wives.

Lord, who we really are and what we really need is now shamefully exposed. Please, Lord, raise up leaders of sound judgment who love the people and who will elicit, solicit, and integrate the genius of America's best and brightest.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
September 12, 2019
"You Know"
Word Count: 750

How often have you heard someone being questioned push back by saying: "You know this, you know this to be true?" I keep hoping for the interviewer to rebut, replying: "No, I don't." This phrase, "you know," can drive you nuts if you prefer healthy discussion and conversation. Why? Because this phrase is a rude, disingenuous, and pushy tactic. The speaker demands agreement. It avoids the speaker trying to persuade you with reason and intelligent facts. Listen for 'you know' next time you watch the news.

This phrase, "you know," also is a pet peeve when heard as meaningless filler. For years I've tried to purge this bad habit from my extemporaneous speaking. Muttering, "you know," conveys a speaker's nervousness, them hesitating till they figure out what to say next. Listen to newscasters and pundits and count the how often they carelessly insert this phrase.

I'm sorry I asked you to do this. Now you'll end up doing what I do. I find myself fixating on how many times they repeat this annoying filler that I miss the bigger message they are trying to say.

How are we distracted today from the big picture? The distraction is how government officials (can't call them 'leaders') scramble to blame mental illness for our epidemic of mass murders. My profession nibbles around the edges of addressing mental illnesses so I have some familiarity with how difficult diagnosis and treatment can be.

Separating the mentally ill from weaponry has humane merit. This point I am not arguing. I've done it. Data proves 'red flag laws' work. It especially has merit in suicide prevention, a major cause of death by guns in our country. Question: how do you preempt someone mentally ill from purchasing a weapon? Have they been previously diagnosed and treated? Would full background checks prevent such a

purchase? Is it constitutionally unfair to deny someone declared cleared from obtaining a weapon? Have they been professionally declared no longer a threat to themselves or others? How do you revoke a person's right to bear arms? How prolonged is the process of family seeking intervention, psychiatric evaluation, judicial decree?

Is our nation's shame of mass murder a problem of mental illness or of moral illness? Is the problem of gun violence on our streets, our schools, our churches, our shopping centers a problem of mental illness or moral unfitness? Were the killers mentally ill or morally deranged? Likely, they were emotionally ill. How does one detect and protect in those situations? By what criteria, then, can we legally seek to preclude or remove weaponry from those judged morally or emotionally dangerous?

We're overcomplicating this problem infecting our country. Measures which are designed to preclude or remove guns from the mentally ill are reactive interventions. They respond to an indicated ailment that is professionally and judicially determined. Wouldn't it be wise, efficient, and effective to be proactive rather than reactive, preventative rather than interventionist? An analogy: Is it easier to treat diabetes after the fact or to prevent diabetes?

How do thorough universal background checks for all gun sales and gun possession contradict the second amendment? Private sales? If I sell my car, I must get the title changed. Same question for longer waiting periods before obtaining a gun. If we're required to take tests to obtain driver's licenses, is there merit in requiring that all gun purchasers get certified from a gun safety course before ownership? We can ban assault weapons or we can allow for semi-automatic and machine guns to be owned, provided they're stored and fired exclusively at gun clubs. Empty all the magazines you want at targets, not persons. Recent mass murders have put a lie to the bravado that the best way to stop a killer with a gun is a citizen with a gun.

Today's national emergency demands reasonable and conscientious debate by Congress about gun violence. The majority leader of the Senate, by repressing fair debate, shows disdain for the people's government. What gives Mitch the right to deny legislation? We demand fairness. McConnell won't act unless there's guaranteed success from our weather-vane executive? If that's the case, why ever enter a horse in the Kentucky Derby? Failure to debate substantive preventive measures makes McConnell complicit in future assaults. If our times reveal our character, our character determines our times.

Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin wrote: "President Lincoln believed that 'with public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed.'" National public sentiment demands honest debate. We know.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
19 September, 2019
"Falling Leaves"
Word Count: 750

Poets write how the fall is the signal of death approaching. Perhaps. See the autumn leaves. Feel the autumn wind. Sense the autumn of our lives.

Poet John Keats whined and whimpered, albeit beautifully, in his three stanza 'Ode to Autumn' about our seasonal journey from abundance and fruit and swelling gourds to granary floors and readiness then

to the goodbyes and mourning gnats. Juvenile romantics have a talent for lacking the fight that triumphs even in love's loss.

We should listen to the naturalists more than the poets. Autumn, beginning next Monday with the Equinox, hardly is an ending, rather the process of beginning. Not ending, but trees resting. Dormant. Preparing. Surviving a climate that's changing around them. Adaptation. Survival. Working with the weather. Dormant autumn, soon enough to awaken and make way for the new, for new growth; no tedious reincarnation this but transformation, entirely new leaves. Change.

Like prayer – tedious as transactional, wondrous when transformational. How often, a preacher once preached, do we pray, beg, bargain with God for our circumstances to change? We beg for a new job. We beg for our parents not to divorce. We beg to be healed. God forgives us, even when we think of God as vending machine or Aladdin's lamp. Rub it and magic Genie grants our wish. Insert our coins, pull the lever, an out pops a new job, a new marriage, good health. That is transactional prayer. Transformative pray draws you closer to the sacred and in that relationship your character is changed. With a changed character you might be able to change your circumstances.

Look to a tree and learn how to be human. Did you know that at the first light of dawn, all the trees bow toward the sun?

Roots, trunk, branches. Water, earth, and sunlight. And change. The tree of last autumn isn't the same tree of this autumn. Forget this nonsense of the cycle of nature. I prefer beginnings and endings rather than reruns.

See these falling leaves of autumn's palette and cherish them, rejoice in the flourish of color. Our Susquehanna valley is showing off who she is, displaying her natural endowments for us to behold and enjoy. For in the dark sky beyond the beyond, Mother Earth wobbles and tilts. The amount of sunlight shortens. The source of water and light lessens and weakens as the darkness increases and the cold earth freezes. The trees slow their consumption and stop nourishing themselves. A bedbound appetite. The time of rest has come. The busy work of photosynthesis goes on sabbatical. And the busy world is hushed. Green cells fade. As green fades, the hidden colors in the leaves get revealed.

Rejoice and cherish, for most of the world will never see such leaves as these we see thickening the hills of this Susquehanna valley. We are privileged. We belong to a rare club that is most, most special. A club to which eastern North America belongs, plus Europe, Japan, sections of eastern China, plus a smattering of other select places in the world. We belong to the club of the temperate deciduous forest where here alone will you find the pattern and rhythm of these four seasons, along with abundant enough rainfall and temperature that range from hot to cold.

The temperate deciduous forest.

We alone. Not western U.S. Not Central or South America, except tiny tips way down south. Not Russia. Not the Mideast. Not most of China. Not Australia, except a sliver along the coast and fortunate New Zealand. Not Africa. Not Micronesia. Not the Arctic or Antarctic. Only we of the temperate deciduous forest where seasons of snow, bloom, harvest, and falling leaves pattern us distinctively on Mother Earth, a pattern of adaptation and change, adversity and abundance. We are the temperate deciduous forest, this region of nature's moderation where we do not suffer longish durations of either cold or heat. We alone celebrate this shedding time of 'we all fall down,' in these

forests blessed by the variety of oak and beech and elm lest we take it all for granted. Lest we forget how these gifts and blessings are meant to be a blessing and gift to others.

A girlfriend once buttonholed her boyfriend and told him why she was annoyed and less than inclined to be amorous. “You take me for granted,” she complained. And rightly so she complained.

It is a great sin to take beauty and love for granted. Indeed. Love inspires paying attention.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Thursday, 26 September, 2019

“Christianity 2019”

Word Count: 750

A colleague from across the room challenged me after my strategic rant. Why was my rant strategic? Because church conferences usually are tedious exercises in frustration for those of us who prefer getting down to business and debate hard problems. I perhaps should be more charitable toward cloying testimonials and touchy-feely, sentimental spirituality. But I don't chant well.

We were supposed to address the ‘Elephant in the Room,’ that is, the dying of many of our congregations and the cultural tsunami eroding institutional Christianity. What to do with small congregations whose main purpose in life seems to want someone around to bury them? I can name ten such churches in my Presbytery (our body of 36 congregations from Berwick to Emporium). Regardless, we did what we always do. Same old hamster wheel. We dodged the responsibility and began scribbling on the easel tablet nice ways we can provide care and support.

After all, only 14% of Pennsylvanians attend church on Sundays. 65% of those are from the WWII generation. Lots of folks call themselves Christian, which is interesting, curious, funny, plus a tad hypocritical because Christianity necessitates being part of a community of faith. Oh well.

The reality is that 23 congregations in the USA shutter every day. When churches are reduced to 75 members that is the optimal time for them to begin the faithful discussion of their future. Every church follows the same life cycle as you and I: birth to frenzied activity over goals to nostalgia to decline and conflict, then death. One speaker quipped: “None of the churches started by the Apostle Paul is alive today.” The question we face is not resuscitation but what form will resurrection take? This compares to working with troubled couples: their hope isn't found in recovering the old marriage that got them into their trouble but creating a new marriage.

Many sense that our decline could actually inspire Christianity. We know two things. First, we know that Christianity is going gang-busters elsewhere and that the vibrant center of Christianity is south of the equator, not white but brown and black. Second, we know that the American church in which I grew up in the fifties and sixties was a post-war aberration. Marketing to reclaim those days is a forlorn hope. That we actually might be returning to a Christianity that resembles more of the first century church might ignite commitment, vigor, purpose, joy, and boldly living the gospel in a strange land. Better this than milquetoast gospel-lite from comfy churches. This also means we better start training pastors fit for this new age. We probably ought to revise how we understand pastoral success. Funny thing about church work: things open up when pastors and certain members, convinced they're the saviors, stop trying to engineer their agendas.

My rant in the room? Yes! I shouted. We're doing all the predictable proper things: finding part time pastors, training lay pastors, advocating creative models for ministry, exploring technology, supporting struggling congregations as best we can pastorally, spiritually, fiscally, programmatically. We help them see what resources they might have: physically, spiritually, individually, institutionally, economically, their local connections. If, however, their spiritual quotient is low and they lack individuals not yet utterly drained of energy and commitment, the other resources don't matter much. Is there joy and meaning in your work and worship? If you were to close, what would the community miss? Do you spend more money on the building than on mission and ministry?

Due to limited resources most of what we offer them really is benign neglect.

I complained how we keep rehashing old formulas! Why support declining churches in declining towns? Be kind to them, but wouldn't it be wiser to support the most functional and effective congregation in that town regardless the denomination? Good for both town and church. I argue this because a church's future is inexorably linked to the town's future, and conversely. Demographics is institutional destiny.

How to build up both town and church? Religious communities and pastors must be civic leaders. Author Tim Carney offers these suggestions: Fostering, intentionally and publicly, civil society; Shaping our public schools; Encouraging entrepreneurs; Promoting town designs that improve neighborliness, walkability, community shopping, green spaces; Engaging in charitable work that creates self-sufficiency; Sponsoring community family events; Reducing policies that makes homes costlier and bigger.

My colleague pressed me, quite rightly: "So what is your Presbytery doing to help towns?"

"Nothing," I answered, and that's a problem. "Yet," I should have added.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Thursday, 3 October, 2019
"Enough Opinions"
Word Count: 750

Do clichés skip generations? If so, this tired cliché might sound fresh: When you ASSUME, you make an ASS out of U and ME.

A fellow walking his dog noticed the homeowner sitting in a lawn chair hoeing his garden. What a lazy bum, thought the fellow, until he noticed the crutches beside the chair.

One night in a New Jersey village the police spotted an old man wandering the streets and peering into the shop windows. He was poorly dressed. After following him for an hour, the police decided to approach him. He lacked identification. He had neither wallet nor cash. He spoke with a foreign accent. They took him down to the station to charge him with vagrancy. There they discovered this vagrant was Aristotle Onassis, one of the richest men in the world. He was visiting the village so his wife, Jackie Kennedy, could go horseback riding.

Beware lazy assumptions. Get the facts, Jack. Just the facts, ma'am.

My default position is to ask questions. Whenever I'm invited to negotiate a church conflict, I take soundings by asking questions. Clarify the landscape, the time-table, the agendas, the issues. Who? What? When? Where? How? Why? I listen to opinions but I especially am interested in what led them to their opinions.

It's necessary to distill opinion, belief, viewpoint, mood, perspective, feelings from fact. Maturity requires being able to discriminate between fact and opinion. Political maturity requires being able to discriminate between truth and propaganda. Too many are quick with opinions, so writes this opinion writer. Misconstruing, we misbehave, misspeak, mistreat. We foster distrust. We deepen the civil divide. We suffer an unpatriotic unwillingness to suspend self-interest. We suffer an absence of fairness, common sense, due diligence, and questioning of assumptions. Another cliché: You see what you want to see. It's called 'confirmation bias.' Example: he expected the party to be a waste of time. He made it so. Example: I deserve the award I didn't receive, therefore the selection process must be rigged.

In a list about Leadership Attributes based upon Doris Kearns Goodwin's book on Lincoln, this attribute is ranked first: "Lincoln's capacity to listen to differing points of view, to let his advisors argue with him, question his assumptions. He created a climate in which people felt free to disagree without fear of consequences."

We would be advised to remember Goebbels' propaganda playbook of smears, vindictive insults, and lies, that 'If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it.' The survivor is he who shoves everyone else off the raft.

Treasury Secretary Mnuchin labeled the Intelligence officer whistleblower as politically motivated. On what basis did he justify this claim? Trump called this whistleblower partisan, disloyal, despite saying he didn't know who it was. Give proof. It's hard to trust pathological liars. Likewise, to condemn Biden as corrupt without evidence lacks credence; Indeed, this accusation subverts well established vindication. Worrisome about the current administration is their persistent unconstitutional campaign to prevent or distort facts from being brought to light and resolved. If you are really transparent, why the oversized cloak of executive privilege? It doesn't help you, it doesn't help America. If you're clean, welcome the facts. Tragic. He really believes he's a great man. Does he understand right and wrong?

Similarly, Democrats rushed to pronounce their verdict and denounce Trump for Ukraine extortion because the narrative reinforced their opinion. Are you so clean? Eventually, we received reporting, a telephone summary, testimony, as well as Trump and Giuliani's admissions, but news articles, hearings, and crazy uncle statements aren't proof. Thankfully, the news points us toward debunking or corroborating facts, which is the vital job of journalists. How many of us expect our leaders to do what's right? If not them, then the public must. The fisticuffs of truth. For governmental sanity, I keep looking to Independent Senator Angus King.

Let's refuse to form judgments based on internet or TV news. We require more than soundbites from Joe Scarborough or Sean Hannity to deduce truth. Are we so dumb as to get our news from social media, that cesspool of propaganda, rumor, conspiracies, innuendo? Well, are we?

This caterwaul of truthiness and doublespeak, this ideological feeding frenzy shoving aside disinterested, bi-partisan, and intelligent deliberation partly explains how Donald was elected and could be re-elected.

Enough jaded voters (thus emotionally tractable) were angry, alienated, and afraid. So they tossed a grenade into the works. Boom! And we're surprised there's shrapnel?

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

October 10, 2019

"Cowbirds"

Word Count: 750

The debate continues whether or not bison roamed our Susquehanna valley. Some are convinced they once did. We boast of a Buffalo Creek, Buffalo Valley, Buffalo Township, East Buffalo Township. Bucknell University boasts of its Bison. Just to clear the air, it was European settlers who called the American Bison a buffalo even though buffalos only are found in Asia and Africa.

We can prove bison grazing in the eastern regions of the Midwest plains. Visit the famous Buffalo Trace that extended from Kentucky into Indiana, the salt-licks and grasslands teeming with bison herds migrating. Who's to argue that a few curious bison slipped through the back door to enjoy the grasses along the Susquehanna west branch?

Whether or not bison roamed our region, one fact's certain: we ended up pestered by the Brown-headed Cowbird, companion to these beasts, mistaking pioneer milk cows for buffalo on the roam.

Brown-headed Cowbird traveled the trace with the roaming herds. Dining on seeds in dung. Pecking insects from bison hide or grasshoppers stirred up by bison hooves. Brown-headed Cowbird flapping down to swallow loose seeds of grain.

Brood parasite this bird. They take advantage to get what they want. Neither male nor female Brown-headed Cowbird cares about setting up housekeeping and building a nest. No. Brown-headed Cowbirds call the trace their place. No nests for them. Well, not their own nest.

You want to see a great nest? It is best seen by boat, lest the nesting area be overrun by noisy tourists and our Susquehanna Bald Eagles decide they'd prefer a quieter neighborhood.

They started constructing their nest long before they set up housekeeping, moved in, laid those eggs, hatched those eggs. It's a serious investment. Hundreds of sticks, grass, moss, soft stalks to make it comfy inside. It took months, male and female building it together.

Some Bald Eagle nests can weigh two tons, even break limbs, located very high above in the trees. Rare for them not to reuse old nest. Every year they build onto it, improving it.

Nest also is water-front property. Convenient shopping. You can leave the eaglets alone for a short trip. A quick swoop, presto: wiggling smallmouth bass for all hungry little ones opening their beaks and screeching, cheeping.

Home has appeal. Nest familiarity, it is called. You settle in, get into a routine. Only when forced to move do you accept the harshness of moving. If home gets destroyed. A bigger bird arrives and wants to take over your territory. A fight with your mate. Fish supply runs out. Or too many bird watchers

below fussing, shouting, snapping photographs, scaring away the loons, rabbits, house pets that you and your eaglet enjoy.

Off you go. Another refugee family forced to move out. Can't even call it migration because when you migrate at least you are heading someplace.

Bears have their dens. Rabbits their warrens. Mountain lions their lairs. Cows their barns. Horses their stalls. Bees their hives. Foxes their logs. Groundhogs their burrows. Beavers their lodges. Skunks their woodpiles. Owls the hollow of their tree. And eagles their nests.

That nesting instinct. Time to paint the nursery. Time to fold jamies. Time to stitch the quilt. Time to outfit the crib. Time to snuggle with your mate and dream of what soon will be.

Pretty nice to call someplace home and cuddle up there awhile. No fun having no place to call home.

Unless you are a Brown-headed Cowbird. What does she do with the eggs she lays?

Fertile, wanton, opportunistic momma Cowbird lays more eggs than do most species of bird. When time comes, she lays her eggs in the nests of other birds then flies off leaving the host birds to incubate her eggs. Nary a kiss goodbye. Not only is momma Cowbird prolific in egg production, her eggs hatch quicker than the imposed upon host birds. Surprise! Baby Cowbird hatches out early, this fledgling an early bloomer, forcing host foster parent birds to go out and get food. Bring me food! Baby Cowbird matures quicker than most. Baby Cowbird demands all the attention, all the food, and, bigger than his nest mates, will push out of nest the newer and weaker hatchlings. Lovely nature.

Cowbird wants to win at the expense of other Susquehanna valley birds. Winning for our Cowbird is everything. Winning is the only thing. If you're not a winner, you're a loser.

Since when is winning more important than doing right?

The Brown-headed Cowbird. The bully of birds.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
October 17, 2019
"A Merry Heart"
Word Count: 750

When the going gets tough, it's time for a party. This flippant motto's partly facetious, given certain troubles today. Our school district needs professional leadership. Geisinger is addressing it's recent neonatal tragedy.

Picture a pit with a person stuck below. You can jump into the pit to share the pain. You can stand at the top and say how sorry you are. You can throw a rope and walk away. Or you can grasp a rope and reach down to rescue the person.

Clever kids are kids who when forced to choose between A and B choose C or D, sometimes E. It's an Ernie Kovacs view of life. It's also the difference between humorists and comedians. Comedians are

tolerable, though they tend toward snide. Humorists love the humanity they poke fun at. Ernie Kovacs was a humorist. In one sketch he's attending Scuba Diving School. Naturally, he's sitting at a desk underwater with typewriter. Plus, he's smoking his cigar and blowing smoke underwater (secret: spewing out milk). Who can forget the Nairobi Trio playing instruments to the musical tune, Solfeggio? A personal favorite? A ballet troupe dancing to the Nutcracker Suite, with one slight variation. They're all gorillas in tutus.

Someone with whom I'm friendly feuding over 'hard at the grindstone' politics, advised that I should read more Milne. He probably meant the serious British political writer. My reply? I'd love to read more Milne. A.A. Milne, that is. We could use more Pooh Bears and '100 aker' woods. I'm scared of Hufflepuffs. Tut, tut, looks like rain... Which brings to mind, who are you more like? Rabbit? Tigger? Winnie? Piglet? Owl? Kanga? Roo? Christopher Robin? Okay, who's a gloomy Eeyore?

Where do the children play? Whence their imagination?

Weary of the portentous and judgmental? Let's corral all cynical, humorless, jaded souls and show them Ernie Kovacs episodes. Another Kovacs goodie: for a full half hour silent Eugene makes his way through a house, experiencing oddities, him ending up eating his lunch at a table. His milk doesn't pour straight from thermos to cup. Olives and apples roll along the table onto his lap. The trick? Ernie, a TV pioneer, tilted the camera so it would look level to us viewers. When in doubt, turn things askew. Go for the surreal, the nutsy. Come at problems from entirely different perspectives.

How can you turn a glass of water upside down without spilling the water? Freeze it. What will computers be like two generations from now?

Let's build a Suspension Bridge over the Niagara Falls. How do we get the cable across the wide, turbulent gorge? Shoot a cannon ball? Tow the cable across on a steamer? Shoot a rocket? The engineer decided to award \$5 to the first boy who could fly a kite across the gorge. The boy who succeeded was 16-year-old Homan Walsh who crossed the river upstream and launched his kite from the Canadian side, with the wind at his back. Then a heavier line was attached to the kite string and pulled across, followed by succeeding heavier lines until the main cable.

For sanity's sake, read Dr. Seuss. Many are surprised to learn that behind the rhymes and silliness Seuss offered sidewise allegories for adults who had minds to imagine. Horton, protector of the vulnerable: 'a person's a person no matter how small.' Yertle who builds a throne on the back of his subjects, until Max burps and topples tyrant Yertle into the mud. Gertrude McFuzz, wanting to look as pretty as other birds, pops pills to make her tail feathers grow. They grow and grow until Gertrude no longer can fly. The North-going Zak runs into the South-going Zak. Neither budge. There they remain, remain, remain, while the world moves on. We laugh at Zaks. We cry for Zaks.

Humor's our barometer of spiritual health and well-being. God help those who lack a sense of humor and can't laugh at themselves. I repeat myself: when grandma suffered from Parkinson's we would ask her to mix our drinks for us. She giggled. Percolating with love.

"Humor is a prelude to faith, and laughter is the beginning of prayer," saith a theologian. Humor: the spiritual health and well-being of marriages. Who needs gruesome twosomes? Humor: the spiritual health and well-being of a nation. Best is the merry heart. "It keeps on the windy side of care."

Humor -- because we understand heartache.

So long as we can smile between our tears, we're going to be alright.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
October 24, 2019
"All About Eve"
Word Count: 624

We tried to warn our daughter that her life as she knew it would be over. Did she listen to her parents? Of course not. We tried to warn her that for the rest of her life she'd live in abject terror, but she and her husband went ahead and did it anyway. She had to give birth to our granddaughter. Our daughter's original worry wasn't her life irrevocably altered, it was her apprehension as to what kind of world would her baby inherit, especially given her father is part African-American. Would it be fair to bring a child into an America that hasn't the cleanest record when it comes to race and ethnicity? Although, I suppose every generation looks at the clutter and clamor of world they inhabit and worry about their babies. Somehow or other, regardless the times, babies keep popping out.

Her apprehension about our world was dissolved by the kindness, goodwill, and generosity of all her friends and neighbors. So this is what community means, our daughter realized (with a sparkle) upon our grandbaby's birth. Gifts of onesies, stuffed animals, books, diapers, Grubhub gift cards, and home-cooked meals. She realized the attitude that it is me against the world is the aberration. She realized she wasn't alone. Which makes you ponder about those moms or dads who are alone? And what about those moms and dads forced to endure the awful fear of losing their homes or their baby's because of the folly of human sinfulness known as power, war, greed, self-righteousness, and the worse folly of us standing aside while sin occurs. Babies born should rile us up to fight for the decent world they deserve.

Our daughter disregarded our warning because losing her life as she knew it was beyond her comprehension. Now she gets it. Now I know love, she said, because of the Nightly feedings. Morning feedings. Afternoon feedings. Poopy diapers. Fits of fussiness. Jagged cries. Breath-checks. The abject terror of loving your baby and accepting your baby's utter dependence on you. Wait until she starts to crawl, we again warned. Wait until she starts saying, "NO!" Wait until she learns to drive. Wait until she is wounded.

How unlike foals which walk within hours of birth. How unlike alligators hatched without parental care. The higher the specie, the longer the dependency. Which is why theological me likes to believe that is why our daughter and her husband named our grandbaby, Eve. Eve, from the Hebrew verb meaning, 'to live.' We cherish the Bible's poetry in the story of Adam and Eve. What are they but babies growing up, eventually learning they are apart, they are independent. They are themselves. They learn to rebel and say, "NO!" Babies that disregard nudity soon enough like to go clothes shopping. The great truth of the poetry is that we had to leave the garden. The best thing that happened to us, metaphorically speaking, was to get tossed out of the garden in Eden and into life.

Mark Twain appreciated the poetry of Genesis. His humorous "Diary of Adam and Eve" asks: since whenever did Eden become a matter of geography? Adam discovers the answer only after Eve is about to be tossed out, but, as Twain writes it, Adam can stay. But Adam doesn't. He says, "After all these

years I can see that I was mistaken about Eve in the beginning. It is better to live outside the garden with her than inside it without her. At first I thought she talked too much. But now I should be sorry to have that voice fall silent and pass out of my life..."

And then, later, as Adam says over Eve's grave: "Wheresoever she was, there was Eden."

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Thursday, October 31, 2019

"Halloween Frights"

Word Count: 750

Will ghosts, ghouls, and goblins haunt our streets tonight, lurking about, shadowing between the princesses, hoboes, superheroes? Fun. Those store-bought or home-made costumes, our Halloween alter egos. A horrifying costume tonight would be a marionette wearing dark suit and red tie, the strings operated by someone wearing a Putin mask. Reality always is scariest.

Fun too that we've turned Halloween into a child's festival. Alas, less Edgar Allan Poe, more what will darling child be this year? Then candy. Bags of loot.

Today wasn't originally a day for children. No sir. Nor for young adult parties and sexy kitty costumes – meow! From the Celtic Samhain to the Dia de los Muertos, from the Roman Feralia to the Sumerian Month of Ghosts, we humans have nursed our soul's fear and apprehension of death and darkness, of the macabre and mysterious. Tune up the eerie music, please. Those crazy Celts. Samhain (pronounced 'sow-win') was a New Year Festival, marking twilight time when the harvesting was spent and the realm of darkness ruled, a time when the barrier between the spirit world and reality became porous. The time for spooky visitations, goosebumps of death and danger. Poe would ask: would you care for some Amontillado sherry?

The radio series "Hidden Brain" discussed our fear of mortality, describing our ritualistic ways of avoiding, denying, softening this fear of death, for, evidently, no human yet has ever been able to avoid death itself. Although, it really won't matter as Greek philosopher Epicurus quipped: "Why should I fear death? If I am, then death is not. If Death is, then I am not. Why should I fear that which can only exist when I do not?"

Still, we do fear. We cherish beliefs in hopes for some form of continuity and fulfillment on the other side. Some people strive in life so they may gain a legacy remembered. Still, few achieve being remembered even by their great-grandchildren. There are those who see in mortality a gift, divine comfort, for immortality would be a curse. In "Gulliver's Travels" Swift describes Gulliver discovering the immortal *struldbruggs* in the land of Luggnag. Gulliver is thrilled at the prospect of certain babies born as immortals, until the leader of Luggnag shows him the dreary reality of endless life and increasing decrepitude.

The wiser gain incentive from our finitude. If this is all we got, use it well. Pay attention. Notice what we ignore. Cherish what and who we've been given. Stop worrying about making yourself happy; do your best so that no one is unhappy. Do good, lest, as Ray Bradbury warned, by doing bad dread ghosts will haunt us.

Mirrors and mortality. Perhaps we bipedal ape-descendants envy those insouciant kitty cats. It's the price of being a higher specie. We know too much. We know we know. We know we are. We know we won't be. Cats don't know that. Such is the price of self-consciousness, self-awareness. The higher species talk about death. The higher the specie, the more we are religious and comfort ourselves with ritual, tradition, belief. We bury our dead. Cats don't. The higher species invent clocks so, recklessly, we can number our days. The higher the specie, the more we look at ourselves in the mirror and realize time. Tick-tock. I think I'm not paralyzed by fear of my own death. I say that now, however. What I really dislike about death is how I'll miss out on seeing granddaughter growing up. Keep beating, tell-tale heart!

Mirrors and mortality. Folksinger Stan Rogers sings about the housewife looking into the mirror as she readies herself for the Legion dance with the man who's loved her all her years, and then she sees all those lines in her face: "The pretty maiden trapped inside the ranch wife's toil and care." Lines and lies, along with the accumulation of what we lose over the years. Instant bifocals when you turn forty. I didn't leave soccer, it left me. Twitchy knee and strokes. Harder to drive in rainy nights with all the lights. Mortality and rear-view mirrors.

Years ago an old lady observed how as you age your walls get smaller and smaller. On her windowsill in the nursing home was a black and white photograph of a beautiful young woman wearing flowing chiffon sitting on the windowsill as sunshine beamed upon her. I asked: "Who is that?" She said: "It's me." She spoke in present tense.

Morbid? Macabre? Chills up your spine? There be ghosts. Tick-tock. Happy Halloween.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
November 7, 2019
"A Friendly Feud"
Word Count: 750

Someone I love thinks Trump's an idiot but is leaning toward voting for him again anyway. To be fair, this person has contempt for most people. We argued. This script is sanitized and abridged. You can read the full version on my website.

Him: I contend that policies being put in place are precisely in line with my values, and the insanity of the policies proposed by the democratic contenders are exactly opposite what I want for my country.
Me: you wrongly speak of Democratic contenders as monolithic.

Him: EVERY democratic contender is pushing for the opposite. EVERYONE's seeking power. NOT ONE is motivated by compassion, fairness; they are fools and liars. Me: Everyone? Really? Good thing we have the purity of the Republicans.

Him: Abortion, 50 MILLION dead babies since 1973, 10% in late term abortions makes this POLICY the equivalent of Jewish genocide. Me: You like emotional diatribe, not facts. Before conclusions, ask questions. Who gets abortions? What is the medium age? Why? You might be surprised by the facts. Late term? Do you wish to talk to neonatologists who can't stand governmental intrusion in dreadful medical decisions?

Him: Baby parts for sale, Planned parenthood is the equivalent of Josef Mengele. Me: Tabloid nonsense. Planned Parenthood does more to prevent abortions than any other organization.

Him: VA hospitals, finally giving vets a choice. Me: Fine, if they can travel to the choice. I've had to drive vets an hour away. Our hospital handles some, but should vets get in line ahead of other patients?

Him: Taxes: my children benefitted immeasurably from the tax cuts. Corporations are investing billions in growth. Government inefficiency is legendary. Me: Ours didn't. We paid more. Corporations investing in growth or stuffing pockets? Profit's good, when equitable. Wealth gap, diminishing middle class, slowing economy, highest debt, small businesses hurt, damaging trade wars.

Him: Jobs. Millions more at work now. Me: Jobs, yes, this path has been improving since Obama, but let's factor in those working 2-3 jobs, those dropping out of the work force. What are the wages, salaries, benefits?

Him: Health care, we have the best in the world. Health insurance: too expensive and too many bureaucrats dictating how it should be done. Me: For some. Our hospitals have absorbed costs for decades. Obamacare works. 80% of health costs for last years and first years. We overmedicate and over treat. Which pending bills has McConnell stalled and prevented debate?

Him: Immigration, desperately in need of commonsense changes. We need to show massive compassion to those in need. We need to show zero compassion to the cartels who traffic humans. We need to help these people flourish in their homes and in their cultures. The debate is not about people -- the left wants unfettered immigration not to help people but to get more control of voters. The right hates sharing. I hate the hypocrisy and the way these people are used by everyone. Me: Agreed. We need a Marshall plan for Central America. It might help if we stop destabilizing their governments, deporting our gangs to terrorize their streets, our corporations exploiting them. You're wrong, the left (whoever they are) reject unfettered access. Which bills has McConnell stalled?

Him: Court system finally shifting back to bring constitutional scholars back to the bench. Me: What scholars? All fine jurists appointed by Trump, not an activist judge in the lot. Seems to me that Garland was a scholar.

Him: The EU's been ripping us off for years, needs its butt kicked. Me: 75 years of peace, success, and economic well-being. Why trash that except to please Putin?

Him: So, the sky is not falling because Trump won. The policies proposed by the contenders are both ineffective and a charade, they're all about power. Me: No, the sky is not falling; the ground is heaving, the stability of our nation fissuring. Some contenders offer sane and solid policies. Come now, Trump isn't about power at all: abuse of office, manic lies, betraying his supporters, greed, conspiracy theories, contempt for rule of law, collusion, autocratic authority, debasing the military, rotting the Republican party, nepotism, abusing allies, refusing transparency, corrupting the DOJ, deregulations endangering the environment.

Him: I don't choose Trump, I chose policies that work to make lives better. Me: No. When you vote, you choose a person. Funny, because he doesn't advocate the policies and values you want.

This someone hasn't yet replied to my reply. I also noticed he didn't talk about gun safety legislation.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
November 14, 2019
“Young Blood”
Word Count: 750

Sunday was the last game of the season. It was another loss, dignity recovered second half. Come spring we have one season left before the boys move onto High School. Then ‘Team Diggers’ might be no more. I shall miss it.

Will they remember Sunday’s score? Doubt it. Will they remember their record? Doubt it. Decades from now, scores and standings ebb into horizons, washed away by memories worth remembering, the real trophies.

What they might remember, if they’re lucky, will be one pass, a goal, a move, a mistake, a moment. What they will remember will be the best times in a boy’s life. Mud and sunshine days before adulthood. They’ll go on to other best times, bound for other bests. They will mature. They’ll face good times, experience bad times. But these young blood days will remain incandescent. They will lose touch with most of their teammates, each going their own ways, perhaps forgetting their names.

But they will remember busting each other on the field. Calling to each other by nickname or last name – hey, you, Bowman! The teasing that’s adolescent affection, though they’d never admit that. Goofing around days, for boys never run. It’s unnatural. These gawky, clumsy boys gallop, dash, romp, leap, tussle, stampede like thundering Buffalo, and sometimes get distracted and dawdle over to check out a sound in the bushes. Free from parents checking to see if they did their homework. Free, they make rude noises from both ends and snicker at rude jokes, although hesitant and uncertain as to why it is rude. The smell of boy.

Boy smell is far different from the smell of girls as our daughter discovered after her brother and his buddies spent hours in the basement punching each other, trying to catch darts, wrestling, playing video games. Boy stuff. Penelope wanted to retrieve something from the basement but after opening the door she refused to step any farther, complaining: “It smells like boy.”

If you could distill boy smell and seal it in a jar, there’d be a market for it with every old man stored in a nursing home waving his dollars. He’d twist open the cap and inhale, maybe even douse it on his hygienic pillow. Then he could dream of those days when he too galloped, when he tied the baseball in his greased mitt to get the perfect pocket, when he sniffed a stiff sock from inside his sneaker.

It cannot rightly be called a sin when your wife throws out your yellowing letter-sweater that hasn’t fit for a century, or when she tosses out your old soccer boots with the cleats worn to a nub, because, forgive her, she doesn’t get it. For her, these relics take up space in the closet. In reality, they are sacred and protective talismans, even time machines.

After our last game, I did something I rarely do. I resisted temptation. Temptations arrive in many guises, the worst (yet most enticing) is when they appear as a good, a kindness, as advice. I wanted to gather them into a circle and urge them to look at each other, look and remember each other. How they’ll always remember these days.

I resisted the temptation, partly because I'd be doing it for myself, partly because it would cause them to look down at their shoelaces in embarrassment, those who might pause long enough to listen to my wisdom. Mostly, it would spoil their surprise decades from now, like telling them the ending to the next Avenger movie. It would spoil their own adventure of discovery. Best to let it be a surprise late in life. Then, without being told, they'd realize how special were these days, these teammates. Only when you lose it do you cherish it.

Advice is like showing them a photo from a trip to the Grand Canyon when they best see the grandeur for themselves. Besides, my advice wouldn't mean that much to them, at least until they get to that age of looking back. Boys are destined to keep looking forward. And stampede, gallop, leap towards what they cannot see.

Someday, eons from now, they'll shut their eyes and in a forever twinkling they'll all be there: Incessant Seth, Gavin of fluorescent socks and yellow cards, hyper-drive Dane, cucumber cool Conner, redoubtable Grant, steady Ivan and his untied shoelaces, spaniel Samuel, 200% Casey, studious Friscia, feisty Willie, scrappy Benton, eager Griffin, fancy-feet Carter, happy-go-lucky Conlin, brawny Bowman, perfectionist Gage of the wry smile.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
November 21, 2019
"Fred Rogers"
Word Count: 750

With the debut of the movie about Fred Rogers starring Tom Hanks, some might remember years back when the internet revealed shocking news that Fred Rogers of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood had been a Navy seal. Combat proven Fred Rogers fought in Vietnam with over twenty-five confirmed kills to his name. The reason he wore his trademark long sleeve sweater was to cover tattoos on his forearms and biceps. Fred was a master in small arms and hand-to-hand combat. That, at least, was popular fare across the internet. So you know what that means? It was bogus. If it's social media news, it's rot.

Why do people spread such rumors, such nonsense? Why are we gullible? More to the point, why do we relish an appetite for false and tawdry gossip?

It's as if someone as genuine and as sincere, as loving, calming, and gentle as Mr. Rogers couldn't be real. He had to be hiding something. Playing a role. Why do we accept becoming jaded and cynical? But he was real. Really real. What you saw was exactly what you got. He was the same in his Neighborhood with puppets or featuring football great Lynn Swann practice ballet as addressing congress or meeting Eddie Murphy from Saturday Night Live who performed a rude parody of him.

There is room in our world for genuinely meek men. We could use more of them. Real men are meek men. Wrongly do we translate this word to mean spineless or wimpy. Meekness has nothing to do with being a pushover. The French beautifully translate this word: *debonair*. Good and gentle in disposition. Suave. Decent.

It takes a strong man to be a meek man. Fred Rogers exposes Putin and Erdogan (etc.) for the pitiful weaklings they are, men so thin they cannot cast a shadow. Solid public service or vain personal gain?

When your hand's a fist, it's difficult to lift up someone. Meekness? Picture the football quarterback, not readily rattled. Composed, focused, handling pressure, self-controlled. Great quarterbacks are meek enough to avoid letting the opposing team get to them.

Meekness? Picture mommy herding her kids to the supermarket (or getting dressed for church): harried, bullied, frazzled, kids wiggling, pouting, shouting, pulling, pushing, whining in glass shattering decibels – “mommy, give me this, I want that, Nathan's pinching me” – and she is able to emerge victorious from the grocery store without duct taping or selling her children. There's a mistress of meekness.

The timing of the movie's release is perfect, for we need Fred Rogers resurrected, revived. Fred vaccinates us against today's meanness, judgmentalism, hostility, defensiveness.

You might also remember how often he was quoted following the Boston Marathon bombing: “When I was a child and would see scary things on the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. ‘ You will always find people who are helping.”

Here's another saying from Fred worth revisiting: “I believe that for many violent adults the start of it all lies in the earliest years of their lives. We have angry and even violent feelings within us, but most of us learn, as we grow, how to express those feelings in ways that don't hurt either others or ourselves.” We confess any use of violence always is a sign of failure.

Again: “The impact of television must be considered in the light of the possibility that children are exposed to experiences that may be far beyond what their egos can deal with effectively.”

True enough, which is why Fred practiced what he preached (he was, notably, an ordained Presbyterian minister). In a medium that views children as cash crops, in a medium that corrupts shows into extended commercials, in a medium that relies on frequent screen jolts to trick children into watching, in a medium that uses noise, violence, and vulgarity to sell, Fred Rogers pulled on his sweater and replaced his street shoes with comfy sneakers and treated children with respect, with kindness, with honesty, with love. Children could tell this about him. Children possess that incredible radar, an intrinsic lie detector. They can sense the difference between a phony and someone they can trust. We adults lose that ability.

They had such high hopes when they invented television. Imagine, they dreamt, of every home able to experience great concerts, great theatre, great lectures, great discussions of world affairs. Whoops. The inventors forgot that humans prefer idiotic reality TV.

Fred Rogers: a refreshing tonic against lazy nihilism. Will you be his neighbor?

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

November 28, 2019

“Thanksgiving Memories”

Word Count: 750

Thanksgiving was funnest of holidays. Christmas was frenziest, a riot of garish consumption. Easter was pleasantest, chocolate bunny ears gnawed first. July 4th was adventurist, given dueling Roman Candles

and fire crackers tossed at brothers. Halloween was freest, gathering loot late into night (although Mischief Night dwarfed Halloween). Birthdays were boringest, for aside from getting your favorite meal we ignored birthdays. But the commerce free Thanksgivings of my memory were funnest of all holidays, grand traditions observed.

Thanksgiving started by the town gathering on our church steps for the annual bell-ringing observance. Then it was off to the football game against our arch-rivals from Clark, New Jersey. At half time school band played the theme song from 'Exodus' during which all football, marching band, and cheerleading seniors gave way to the juniors.

Mom found it blissfully convenient to have all kids scooted outside while she prepared turkeys (yes, plural), filling, mashed potatoes, green bean casserole, creamed white onions, burnt rolls (obligatory), as well as Granny's fudge balls rolled in chocolate sprinkles. Mom dealt in volume, for in those days places were laid for a minimum of twenty-four. A gathered clan. Tables laden with silver goblets, good china, real silverware, flickering candles, all spread out on linen tablecloths – even at the kid's tables.

We'd exit the house with its ordinary house smells, our nostrils quickly flared by the November chill and football cheers, only to return to a home redolent with the aroma of roasted turkey. We'd barge through the door and this house of culinary machinery would explode into a home chaotic with chatter, giggles, song, stories, bullah-bullahs, cocktails, and pranks between cousins. Instant warmth. And it was good.

Thanksgiving was good because it reminded us of what is good. We never took turns around the table to mention something for which we were thankful, partly because with our numerous and opinionated family it would have taken forever and Laurel and Hardy's 'March of the Wooden Soldiers' would be on TV later, but mostly because it wasn't needed to be said. We just knew it. We were grateful. We felt humbled. For family. For home. For church. For schools. For country. For a republic that has a way of finding its way, if we deserve it. Do we today? We're being tested.

In 1863 Abraham Lincoln proclaimed Thanksgiving a national holiday. A cynical bore once tried to editorialize that Lincoln invented the Thanksgiving holiday to boost flagging Union commitment and military morale at a bad time during the Civil War. Give me a break. To this person I say: "The louder the noise, the smaller the bird." Or as James Thurber joked: "Don't let the chip on your shoulder be your only reason for walking erect." Cynics, hush!

It was hardly a political ploy. Thanksgiving was a call to conscience and repentance. Lincoln preached to us: "We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of Heaven; we have grown in numbers, wealth, and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious Hand which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us, and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us."

The number of places at table may change. Musical chairs, from year to year. Exits and entrances. Is a kid's table still needed? Instead of sitting on bleachers you might stay indoors and watch the parade. You might even eat your Thanksgiving meal with plastic rather than silver. No matter. I still hear the

bells tolled on church steps. Little did I realize how those bells would echo across these decades. Thanksgiving remains a day of humility. As it's a day of humility, it's a day of promise.

From 'Living Prayer' by Anthony Bloom: "Basically, humility is the attitude of one who stands constantly under the judgment of God. It is the attitude of one who is like soil. Humility comes from the Latin word humus, fertile ground. The fertile ground is there, unnoticed, taken for granted, always there to be trodden upon. It is silent, inconspicuous, dark, and yet it is always ready to receive any seed, ready to give it substance and life. The more lowly, the more fruitful."

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
December 5, 2019
"Political Signs"
Word Count: 750

Have you too begun to see Trump-Pence signs appearing on lawns? 'Tis the season. Soon enough they'll be propagating all over our lawns like rabbits.

I begged my wife to let me post a political sign on our lawn. 'She who must be obeyed' won't even let me hang our American flag outside. She knows I'd hang it upside down as the universal signal of distress. At least she doesn't prevent me from affixing flag postage stamps upside down. She not only is far more sensible than I, she's so much nicer. "No signs on our lawn," she decrees.

This doesn't stop me from imagining what my lawn sign could read. The options are enticing.

Biblical, Old Testament: Your sins will find you out. Biblical, New Testament: Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. Military: Cadet Bone-Spurs' Stolen Valor. Attributable: He's Corrupt, Get Over It! Whimsical: Proud Human Scum. Ironic: Here, Right Matters. Mercantile: Trump, Inc. USA. Comical: MAGA - My Attorney Got Arrested. Rhetorical: What Has He Done to Make America Better? Ecological: Pollute America, Vote Republican. Puzzled: Whatever Happened to Gun Control? New Jersey: So, You Like the Russian Mob? Funereal: GOP RIP. Charitable: Would You Donate to His Foundation? Mathematical: Never Trumpers = Real Republicans. Religious: Elect a Christian Candidate – Vote Democrat. Judicial: RGB and Supreme Court, 'nuff Said? Scary: Four More Years of This?

Alright, enough of my naughty silliness. Like Trump at his rallies, I just had to get that out of my system. Frustrations brewing. Even Mister Rogers had a petulant side, though he channeled it more kindly than I do. He worked hard on loving his neighbor.

We enjoyed the movie, "It's a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood." Mercy, I try sometimes to be more like Fred Rogers, I really do try. It doesn't always take. I shall ever be branded with a robust Charles Addams, dark, wicked, wry, risqué sense of humor.

Riddle me this: if a person of honor supports a person without honor, does he still have honor?

We are who we are -- although we can learn new behaviors. When we change our behaviors, we can change the world that angers us. Provocateur becomes healer.

Not only was the movie, “It’s a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood,” tearful, it also was disturbing. It chastened me. Fred Rogers – sweet, kind, decent -- was an incredibly demanding man. At one point in the movie he has the lead character, an angry man, sit quiet for a minute and think about all the persons who loved him into being. For a full minute we watch Tom Hanks as Fred Rogers in close up. It was more than a scene about the man. The audience in the movie theatre was invited to do the same. Fred Rogers lived a radical gospel compassion that made you vulnerable, penetrating your angers, fears, hurts, and hatreds with compassion. Fred Rogers showed this man how even his pain led him to become the talented journalist he was.

In the article written about Fred Rogers by this journalist, “Can You Say...Hero?,” he writes how Fred Rogers “once saw an advertisement of an airline trying to push its international service. ‘Hmmm,’ Mister Rogers said, ‘*that’s* a strange ad. ‘Most people think of us as a great domestic airline. We *hate* that.’ Hmmm. *Hate* is such a strong word to use so lightly. If they can hate something like that, you wonder how easy it would be for them to hate something more important.”

I need to work on my own radical compassion, especially if I want to be on the right side of history. Can’t change him or others, can change me. I know I need to pray deeper. I know I need others to pray for me. I know I need to read more and truly understand people and history. I know I need to liberate myself from listening only to voices that reinforce my opinions and behavior. I know I need to build up others more. I know I need to avoid letting hate sabotage me from being what I can be. Most of all, I know I need to worry more about children, how if we would harness all our positive energies on caring for children, appreciating childhood, we will discover the future we hope for. May I/We learn to be more gracious, so grace may abound. Mister Rogers, like Jesus, was a big fan of grace.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
December 12, 2019
“Walmart Zen”
Word Count: 750

My mother’s spirit channeled through me before I could contain it. It came my turn to ring up my groceries. The cashier apologized, sighing: “Sorry for the wait.” Mom replied in my voice: “If you can’t wait in line in a grocery store, you’ve got bigger problems.”

Do you get impatient? Are you agitated by your expectations? Why do you get angry? What’s really bugging you? What’s the threat? Why are you taking it personally? It’s a great chance for self-examination. Being forced to wait can become an opportunity to chat with the cashier or other shoppers. Or imagine cooking the food you’ve purchased. Consider it a Zen moment, a time for connections. Meditate on this. Are you closing doors or openings doors? How overworked is the cashier? What’s with all the stress squeaking out sideways from everyone like jelly from a squished jelly sandwich. Is this a chance for you to grow, to mature. What might an expression of kindness create today?

Trust me, I’m rarely this insufferably sage. My own violent temper has taught me much about myself over many explosive years. Take a deep breath. Inhale. Exhale. Your feelings are signals. What are they telling you? If you’re listening.

We were in High school, thus quick to mock. We decided to go and see a trendy movie of the era, called "Five Easy Pieces." I don't remember all the movies I watched in my youth, but this one remains indelible. It haunts me still, neither for the acting nor the plot but for the way most in the audience responded to one scene. The lead character, a rich, self-indulgent young man in search of himself played by Jack Nicholson, enters a diner. The waitress drops the menus on the table. He wants a substitution for his order. The waitress tells him he can choose what's on the menu. He doesn't want that. His sarcasm increases. Finally, the conflict crescendos when he wittily insults the waitress, sweeps glasses off the table, and exits triumphant.

And the audience sneered and cheered at the young man mocking the waitress. That's what has bothered me ever since. The crowd. My friends. Why are they applauding this ill-mannered jerk? When I worked in the family store selling paint I waited on disrespectful people like this young man. I resented their obnoxious attitude, especially when I wasn't in a sane and centered place. I eventually learnt, however, to avoiding letting them and their behavior determine mine own.

Years later I enjoyed a radio interview with one of my favorite writers, journalist Studs Terkel, who had just published his epic work, titled, "Working." It's a collection of interviews with folks about their work. Studs was asked about this scene from this movie. He answered: "I forget the exact scene, but they want a substitute. There's no substitute, and she's behaving so bad that he throws out the stuff on the floor, and the kids in the audience seeing this stood up and they cheered. I'm saying, you little so and so, you don't even know who this waitress is. This is set up. Is she tired? How are her varicose veins? ... Why is she a waitress? The husband left her. He's dead. He's sick. Kids in trouble. How tired is she? Did she have a fight with the chef just then behind the doors? They know nothing about her. They cheered when he was showing her up. I was so furious about that because it tells those kids these people who work aren't much."

I'm reminded of my daughter's experience working food service at Geisinger. There were many a time she'd be pushing her foot cart down the hallway toward the Children's Hospital and there'd be a gaggle of medical residents walking toward her. Rarely did they move aside for her. One time they did move out of her way. That was when the Chief of Surgery walked up behind our daughter and greeted her: "Hello, Penny, how are you today?" The gaggle moved to the side.

Life is tough enough, so why do we make it tougher on others and on ourselves? Besides, how we respond to irritations and troubles decides the kind of civilization in which we want ourselves and our children to live. How we respond to minor irritations determines how we will handle big ones.

Now, the real Zen test would be shopping at rush hour at Walmart. Folks: the only real war on Christmas is waged by ourselves.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
December 19, 2019
"King Jesus"
Word Count: 750

Advent is upon us, singing Christians toward Christmastide. Christian hymns and carols are filled with Jesus titles. Christ is a good title (no, it's not his last name), meaning savior, deliverer, messiah (yes, we need to get tough-loved out of our messes).

Another fine title is when we call Jesus brother. It sounds nice. Although, whereas my brothers and I cherish our filial bond, we aren't close. We each have gone our own way. We've allowed ourselves to drift, failing to remain brotherly.

Good Shepherd is a sweet title, especially when you realize shepherds were Israel's migrant laborers -- tough, rugged, misfit men.

My least favorite title applied to Jesus is King: "Glory to the newborn King;" "Born the King of angels." I value the intent behind the carol writers, but the term king makes me wince, squirm, and worry.

My half-English wife enjoyed watching the series called, "The Crown." It's the story of modern Britain's Queen Elizabeth -- history, documentary, lots of Buckingham Palace soap opera. For us rebels, there's no species as royalty. If the United Kingdom citizens wish to refer to Elizabeth as Queen or Charles as Prince, go ahead. We won't. In our republic, a literate, alert citizenry is supposed to reject aristocracy in all forms and temptations. We require accountability, not privilege.

I stand with the essayist of the American Revolution, Thomas Paine. Monarchy is bad government. Paine warned in his treatise, 'Common Sense,' that: "The king is not to be trusted without being looked after, or in other words, that a thirst for absolute power is the natural disease of monarchy." He wrote how God warned the Hebrews that monarchy is sinful. Monarchs, prone to becoming unsettled with fear and anger, turn suspicious and contemptuous toward the people they're called to serve. Personal interest becomes equated with state interest, then becomes more important. Kings inevitably, Paine predicted, demand obsequious fealty. Inevitably, Kings will assume they alone get to decide what's right and true. Criticism becomes threatening, those who disagree become enemies. Soon: tyranny.

Monarchs dread any hint of vulnerability. They push away being loved and being loving. They mishandle what real love invites, making society suffer their spiritual and emotional weakness. Consider instead the legend of Caesar Marcus Aurelius whose servant followed him around so that whenever someone praised him the servant whispered in his ear: "You are only a man, you are mortal." Consider wise King Canute whose sycophants at court flattered him as all-powerful, until he made them watch him try to command the tide to stop. Even pastors need to be reminded they're not indispensable, not that important.

Paine goes on to mock the practice of hereditary succession as a divine right to rule. Why should someone unworthy be crowned simply because of sperm and ovum? There are better reasons to choose leaders than by birth and blood.

I also stand with Plato, who warned in Book VIII of 'The Republic:' "The people have always some champion whom they set over them and nurse into greatness... This and no other is the root from which a tyrant springs; when he first appears he is a protector." Beware, Plato added, the tyrant who boasts a mob at his command.

Jesus realized the temptation behind the title, King. They wanted him to become king. That's why he rejected their demand. They wanted him to make life right for them. Jesus was smart enough, spiritual enough, to realize kingship was a path to corruption and chaos. It always has been. Power invariably leads to abuse of power and violating the people's trust.

So which Jesus title is my favorite? Which title moves me, humbles me, inspires me? It is when I call Jesus my friend and he calls me his friend.

Friends aren't commodities. Friendship is a love that must be merited by friends "standing side by side, shoulder to shoulder." Friendship is a bond of grace. Friendship is a dependable kind of love forged in hardship by mutual respect, confidence, and admiration, by frank honesty and common goals. With friends there is intimacy, trust, sincerity. With friends, you don't have to keep on performing. Friends, ever patient, build you up. Best, friends know all about you and still like you.

How many real friends have you been blessed by in your life? Not acquaintances, not associates, not side-kicks, not patrons, not sycophants, not colleagues, not fellow club members, not someone you want to use, but friends.

How fortunate you are to have a friend.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
December 26, 2019
"The Vanishing"
Word Count: 750

He had fallen asleep watching television when it happened. Falling asleep watching television wasn't unusual for him, even when watching a favorite holiday classic. He'd settle into his recliner, a drink on the coaster. Soon enough he'd be snoozing. Sometimes he'd wake before the credits. Sometimes.

This time he wasn't sure if he had fully awakened. Was this some kind of dream? Or a dream within a dream? Late night TV had become morning and he was taking a walk around the block. Newspapers still lay on the front steps of his neighbors' homes. The morning light cast odd shadows. A cloud obscured the sun and he suddenly shivered, feeling alone. What difference did his senses sense? Forget the six senses. There is a seventh, called balance. His seventh sense tingled the loudest alarm. He felt out of balance. Then he saw why. Actually, it was what he didn't see, this perverse unwelcomed rapture.

If his neighbors had known it had once been there, they would have noticed its vanishing. But then those who might have been there to notice the vanishing, they too wouldn't have been there, they too would have vanished. With the vanishing, all the contributions vanished too.

None noticed, except for him. This man alone. The others passing around him downtown never knew what they had lost. He could. He did. Why him? It's not as if church interested him that much. Why him? His attitude was hardly unique. Quite common, actually. Most of his friends, like him, felt it fine if others thought church important. He wasn't hostile, just indifferent. He wasn't opposed to their choices, it just wasn't for him. So why him?

Each time the man blinked, another church disappeared, along with all its influence throughout the years since the church's founding. The algorithm of falling dominoes. Blink. No more stone church up the street. It never had been. A church denied even the mystique of obscurity. Blink. No more upper room sanctuary at the cemetery crossroad. It never had been. Blink. No bell tolling from the bell tower. It never had been. Blink. No small chapel filled with song. It never had been. Blink.

He walked the buckling sidewalk another block, kicking a stone into the gutter.

He was the only man left in town who remembered there once was a church in this spot. He alone sees what now is, now that what was is gone. All has changed. The landscape isn't the same. Nor is the neighborhood. Nor the town. The folks he sees are different from the ones he knew. He reaches out to grab hold of an iron handrail only to grasp air and stumble.

All those baptized there had never been baptized.

All those married there had never been married.

Funerals there were never held, burials bereft of Scripture, loved ones denied even a whisper of requiescat in pace.

All those who were found by Jesus there, were never found, never comforted, never called to something deeper, never forgiven, never converted, never welcomed. Sins were never exposed to be redeemed.

He reaches out again but fingers find nothing there to hold onto. All those variegated, incarnated acts of the gospel – comfort and support amidst of tragedies, unconditional love and sacrifice for others, helping strangers obtain their own homes, the first school to help children learn to read, a Sabbath to think and talk and listen to people, meals for the needy, finger blood stains on the lady's quilts, meals for struggling new parents, ice cream socials, outside ashtrays surrounded by recovering men, arguments over the color of the rugs, the challenge of learning to love the unlikeable, children and youths realizing here's someone they can trust, visits at hospitals, a quiet sanctuary, the formation of the town's hospital itself, leadership of the community's social and moral fabric, orphanages, abolitionists brave enough to preach, advocates of civil rights, women ordained as elders, concerts, children pageants and nativity plays with Joseph in bathrobe tussling with Mary, squeaky solos from beautifully shy souls, the comfort of prayer, salted-tears in quiet pews, tasked to decide who is his neighbor, pot-luck suppers and fellowship, Red Cross blood-drives, countless election polls, thirsty clods quenched alive and appreciative, an awe at beholding the mystery of life itself -- never took place.

The man blinked and the last church in town disappeared. Surprising himself, he wished he could blink and vanish too, for now he did not wish to live in this world that is.

2020

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
January 2, 2020
“Why Made?”
Word Count: 750

What are we for? Why did God make us? This is a question a little boy one Sunday asked me. It’s a beautiful question for beginning a new year.

There are questions, often asked by children, that are comparable to asking the improbable, the impossible. Theologian-philosopher C.S. Lewis teased: is yellow square or round? How many hours are there in a mile? Will we ever truly comprehend? Are impossible questions nonsense questions? No. We try. It’s our nature. We humans must know. Our minds probe the unknowable.

Why did God make us? This little boy went right to it, didn’t he? How you answer this question pretty much determines your destiny.

I read where kittens suffer severe stress hormones if their feral mother is forced to be away from her kittens for long periods in search for food. Those stress hormones cause those kittens to lose the ability to bond and trust. Similarly, cat experts have learnt that if kittens fail to learn to trust humans when they are eight to ten weeks old, they almost never can be domesticated as house cats and will never relate well with humans.

What can we learn about ourselves from kittens? What do frightened kittens teach us about trust? About faith?

How many of us think that what we call God is a cosmic sadist, or a trickster, or we’re Aladdin rubbing a God-lamp, or a convenient sky-god myth? How many of us think God as non-existent? How many of us believe God is reality, not that God exists or is non-existent, but that God is the very verb of existence, what a favorite theologian described as ‘the Ground of Being.’ God: not a being but the Ground of All Being.

Again, as C.S. Lewis wrote: “You can’t really test the strength of a rope until you are asked to hang from it over a cliff.”

Why did God make us?

Your destiny is determined by how you answer this question. Were you made for trust or distrust? For belonging or for being apart? Did you coming into being, into existence, so you would be liked by everyone? Please, I’m desperate: ‘friend’ me! Were you made so you could suck the world dry so you will be rich and happy, leap-frogging to the head of the line? Were you made so you could become the incredible martyr and get your jollies and worth by letting everyone walk all over you? Were you made so you would medicate yourself so you never feel any pain? Were you made so you could muddle through until it is over? Were you made so you could get rewarded here by God with spiritual blessings or with material blessings? Were you made so you could get rewarded at the end with heaven, heaven as escape?

Or were you made – both as a biological entity and a spiritual reality -- to glorify God and enjoy Godness forever? That is our classical answer to the meaning of life. You don't need to climb a Tibetan mountain to talk to a guru to discover the meaning of life. It's right in front of us, plain as day. We are meant to ever draw closer to divine truth until we eventually push through the saran wrap layer of time and space and become one with truth unto goodness?

Which pretty much means that we can distill this phrase down into a still finer blend. What were you made for? How about what Jesus himself says: 'to love God and love your neighbor as yourself.'

The screwdriver was made for a purpose. Designed and crafted for a particular purpose. Tough to sew a button with a screwdriver, but perfect for tightening a bolt or screwing a kitchen rack into the stud. So too a pocket watch or penknife or book or kitten. Each is designed for a purpose.

We too. Designed for life and life's opportunities. Designed as matter that matters. Designed for love. Designed for hope. Designed for faith. Designed for everything positive. Designed to see each other as our neighbor and for us to be neighborly. Designed to create heaven on earth as a precursor of things to come. Designed for God by God.

Frankly, to be filled with doom and gloom, to enter the gift of this New Year with dread and fear, is a surrender to faithlessness, a denial of who we are meant to be, a denial of who we are, a denial of God's faith in you.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
January 9, 2020
"The Political Calling"
Word Count: 750

Is there a candidate waiting in the wings, ready for their entrance to come on stage for the 9th Congressional District? Current Representative Dan Meuser is ready to run for reelection on the Republican ticket. No Democrat candidate has filed as of this writing. There's little time left before the April 28 primary. Filing deadline is February 18. You only need a \$150 filing fee, your nomination papers, and a nomination petition containing a minimum of 1,000 signatures. I've asked the Pennsylvania Democratic Party several times if they have recruited and backed a candidate. They've thanked me for my inquiry and solicited a donation. Perhaps I should contact the county parties (Berks, Carbon, Columbia, Lebanon, Luzerne, Montour, Northumberland, Schuylkill) to see if they have a candidate ready to run. You'd think somebody was on the ball.

Sure, Meuser is the incumbent. Sure, it would be tough to defeat him in November. So? Is winning the seat the only purpose to stand a candidate? Isn't it also the chance to voice policies, debate the kind of United States we wish our children to inherit, raise civic awareness, influence the voters, and invigorate more voters (whether Democrats, independents, unaffiliated, uninterested, or real Republicans) to support whoever challenges Trump for the presidency?

The Saturday before Christmas we had the pleasure of being introduced a young man who is running in the primary to become of the Democratic candidate for the 10th Congressional District. It was at a local 'Meet and Greet' held here in Mahoning Township. Our hosts offered nibbles, beverages, and

sandwiches. We mingled, we chatted. The young man spoke and answered questions in the living room. It was classic retail politics with youthful energy.

Why was he talking to us here in Montour Country? He explained how he may be from Hershey but if he is chosen to the US House of Representatives, he serves all of us. 'Meet and Greet' also means fundraiser. He mentioned how he began his campaign in February 2019. He was well coached by veteran campaigners. He discovered he needed \$100,000 to jump-start his campaign. He predicted it would take a million dollars to be competitive. It's easy to become critical about money in politics, harder is to be realistic given current climate and rules. Advertisements, staff, commercials, flyers, transportation, phones – they cost. Can we gripe today, given that the average price to attend a prom is about \$1,000?

The young man, Tom Brier, was smart, articulate, personable, and down-to-earth. He's an athlete and author. My gut says we'll hear more about him in the future. We need fair and fresh politicians of caliber, temperament, courage, commitment, integrity, and intelligence. My spider-sense tingled that he possesses that rare leadership gene. I felt confident that he has the courage to do what is right when right is required. I appreciated his moderate pragmatism when it came to discussing policies, domestic and foreign. I liked how, given today's acrimonious feuds and negativity, he trusts us to do our duty as citizens of this Republic to be engaged, active, questioning, learning. He's banking on his conviction that we citizens are fed up with the reckless extremism of Trump on the right and Ocasio-Cortez on the left. Isn't it amazing how similarly noisy those two are? I prefer positive common sense. We require candidates wise enough to reject imbalanced ideology. We want purveyors of the possible.

What I most appreciated about this young man was his sense of calling to a political profession. If I weren't aware that envy is one of the Seven Deadly Sins, I could be jealous of this young man and his ambition to serve the public good. I confess a public secret: my youthful ambition was to enter politics. I dreamt of becoming a Senator. I might have pursued that path had I not been sidetracked by the Civil Rights and the Anti-Vietnam War movements. I found my calling not in legislation but in souls transformed by the Gospel.

In my tradition of the Reformed Faith, the highest calling a person could receive from God would be to shoulder the duty of politics and become a public servant. Yes, the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution are documents that express the social and political will of Reformed Theology. There is honor in the elected obligation of governmental leadership. What could be a greater honor than to protect the people's inalienable rights, to insure domestic tranquility, to maintain justice for all?

Refreshing, isn't it?

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
16 January, 2020
"Nice Try, Marc Theissen"
Word count: 750

Are friendly rebuttals of other columnists permitted? I realize Marc Theissen's a big shot at the Washington Post Writers' Group and I'm a lowly local scribbler. Regardless, mismanaged current events demand comment. Silence is complicity. His column appeared December 28th. His column listed "10

best things Trump has done in 2019.” Friends: it’s unacceptable to oppose Trump simply because he’s an immoral, lying, scheming clown. I oppose him because his administration’s inept and amateurish policies have failed America and his supporters especially.

Theissen’s #10: *He continued to deliver for the forgotten Americans.* Okay, the stock market economy continues a helium trend, a course set courtesy of the Obama administration. Yet neither Obama nor Trump have narrowed the wage gap. Unemployment may be down, so is the ability of wage earners to increase their overall wealth. It’s desperate for most to pay bills. How many workers take on two or three jobs to cover escalating housing, auto, food, and medical costs? How many workers have dropped out of the workforce? The rich brag a rising tide floats all boats. That’s true if you own a boat or at least wear a life preserver. Otherwise, you drown. More and more of Trump’s voters are drowning because they don’t receive stock dividends and because of his folly to restore a false nostalgic past rather than foster a modern economy. More of his voters suffer, by slashed environmental regulations, foul air and polluted water. Poor whites should listen and learn from poor blacks. Trump’s no friend of the working man or woman.

Theissen’s #9: *He implemented tighter work requirements for food stamps.* Protestant work ethic me endorses accountability. Work promotes self-respect. Yet, I also know that a working mother struggling to make ends meet can get ejected from the social welfare systems that enable her to keep working. She can make more money by stop working. The whole system needs an overhaul. Our son once was laid off but because he worked another job he received no unemployment compensation unlike the other workers who enjoyed their funded holiday.

Theissen’s #8: *He has got NATO allies to cough up more money for our collective security.* Increases had been agreed to years ago. Nations were moving in this direction. But imitating a mob boss damages, to Putin’s delight, the cohesion of this essential alliance, dismantling 75 years of peace, stability, and economic growth.

Theissen’s #7: *He stood with the people of Hong Kong.* A few platitudes of support don’t excuse an insecure, self-serving Trump from fearing China, him desperate for applause for trade wins. Trump doesn’t defend democracy. Money matters more.

I’ll combine Theissen’s #6 with #5: *His withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty is delivering China and North Korea a strategic setback. His maximum pressure campaign is crippling Iran.* You’re joking, right? They don’t seem to be quivering in their boots. His warped sense of being a tough guy has worsened international relationships. Jealous of Obama, he trashes effective diplomacy and treaties that achieved collective results and instead tries to unilaterally intimidate nations to do his ignorantly dangerous bidding. It’s foreign policy by whim, ego, fiat. Win/lose never is sane foreign policy but a recipe for lose/lose, and more dead.

Theissen’s #4: *His tariff threats forced Mexico to crack down on illegal immigration.* Do you mean the immigration patterns that already were plummeting? Why is it that Trump’s default method is threat for short-sighted propaganda gains rather than the hard, disciplined work of intelligent collaboration to solve severe systemic issues?

Theissen’s #3: *He delivered the biggest blow to Planned Parenthood in three decades.* And thus cruelly punished the most effective health care organization preventing abortions, helping women with health care and birth control, and stemming the tide of sexually transmitted diseases.

Theissen's #2: *He ordered the operation that killed Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.* You mean he did his job? His other decisions have given terrorists their juiciest recruiting tool.

Theissen's #1: *He has continued to appoint conservative judges at a record pace.* Yes, at a record pace he has installed the most incompetent and activist judges in the history of any Presidency. Do you know the reason for this record pace? Because McConnell refused to let the Senate do its job and review Obama's appointees, most of whom were qualified moderate jurists acceptable to both parties.

I'll credit Theissen for mentioning how his next column will list the 10 worst things Trump did in 2019. Maybe he'll mention something deserving rebuttal. Maybe.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
23 January, 2020
"Everyday Heroes"
Word Count: 750

The hero of a short story by one of my top three favorite authors, Ray Bradbury, is a man named, Ricardo. Photographers and fashion models have invaded the barrio where he lives, exploiting the contrast their magazine would capture between the beautiful models and the shabby buildings, rusted railings, cracked walls. Ricardo, in a pique of dignity, disrupts every photograph by dropping his pants. Says Ricardo: "We are not a studio. We are people and must be given attention as people."

Bradbury's story reminded me of when we lived for eleven years in Lancaster County amongst the Amish. My wife told me this story for she had witnessed it. She was driving along one of our countless back roads. Where we lived, all roads were backroads. Potato field to the right, corn stalks to the left. The car in front of her bore Ohio plates which explained everything. We who bore Pennsylvania plates would have passed the Amish buggy lickity split. Ohio plates indicated that she was trapped behind yet another miserable tourist enchanted by the Amish buggy, tourists letting themselves putter along the two-lane road as slowly as the picturesque horse plodded in front. Arrghh, silently screamed my Jersey girl wife, white-knuckling the steering wheel. She could see the elderly couple in the car waving at the cute little Amish boy sitting in the back of the buggy, them vainly trying to get his attention. The couple, likely, tittered at the prospect of a cute photograph to take home and show their friends, little Amish boy in his cute straw hat. Little boy finally turned to smile at them. Up swiftly from Grandma's lap came the camera. Little boy's timing was perfect: raising his hand backwards and giving them the finger just as shutter snapped.

Do you have a collection of heroes? That little boy ranks among my favorites.

For years I've been working on the topic about how more important than church members serving the church is how the church serves the members so they can practice the humanity of their faith in their homes, where they work, play, volunteer, serve. Everyday heroes. Like the hokey pokey, that's what church is all about.

I streamed a conference over my computer. Midway, the speaker chuckled about how church folk are supposed to be involved in public affairs, wisecracking: "Our faith requires all of us to be whistleblowers." It takes no faith at all, no courage at all, to remain silent in the face of malice or

wrong-doing. Silence gives evil permission. When we confess our sins, we confess we are sorry for the things we have done as well as for the things we should have done but didn't. Sins of commission, sins of omission. We promise to step up. It also takes no heroism at all to remain silent when you hear nasty jokes, vulgar comments, or mean insults. 'Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me,' so goes the childish sing-song. Sing-song is dead wrong. Bones mend. Hateful speech is a wasp that enters through the ear and burrows into the mind where wasp stings forever.

Former Navy seal Eddie Gallagher may look pretty in his dress whites. Perhaps at one time he might have been a hero. It's hard to tell what damages and dishonors a man on the inside, stealing his humanity. World War II front lines cartoonist, Bill Mauldin (whom I've quoted before), wrote about the American soldier: "The combat man isn't the same clean-cut lad because you don't fight a kraut by Marquis of Queensberry rules. You shoot him in the back, you blow him apart with mines. You kill him the quickest and most effective way you can with the least danger to yourself... But you don't become a killer. No normal man who has smelled and associated with death ever wants to see any more of it. In fact, the only men who are even going to want to bloody noses in a fist fight after this war will be those who want people to think they were tough combat men, when they weren't. The surest way to become a pacifist is to join the infantry."

Hey Eddie, I'm sorry for you. It isn't wearing a uniform that makes you a hero, it is what you do wearing that uniform. It's easy to kill. Anybody can kill. Anybody can destroy. Harder indeed is to create. Would my Lord condone me celebrating the death of any man?

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
30 January, 2020
"Dissolutions"
Word Count: 750

Many times in my career, as part of my duties to the wider church, I've been recruited to help a pastor leave his or her church. We call it: 'dissolution of the pastoral relationship.' You see, we Presbyterian pastors are elected by the congregation, then again by the larger governing body. This body is our Presbytery comprised by all professional Presbyterian Ministers in our region and by Ruling Elders from each congregation. With a nod to representative democracy, Ruling Elders must constitute the majority. Laity has final say. Usually this dissolution is consensual, mutual. Pastor decides Holy Spirit is whispering that it's time for a new call.

Ten times I had to negotiate a pastor's departure when it's been neither mutual nor consensual. Twice it was because the pastor got frustrated with the congregation's lack of vision to adapt, learn, change. So be it then to start the process where congregation must vote to dissolve the relationship. Onto better things. Some congregations need a good hard look into the ministerial mirror.

In two of these ten cases it was because a majority of the congregation wanted the pastor out. One pastor insulted from the pulpit. Another pastor was lazy. We gave them chances for mending their performance, but neither did. Sadly, the lazy pastor was my friend who became unhappy when it became my duty to force him out against his will. In the divine scheme of things, trusting the work and wisdom of Holy Spirit, he was happier and more successful in secular work.

Church conflicts are almost as nasty as academic, marital, or political conflicts. It's personal. Certain principles apply when trying to negotiate such conflicts. First, lower the temperature. Everyone needs to calm down and slow down. Can the participants stop taking everything personally? Second, remove all barriers and hindrances to clear communication. Third, the conflicted parties need to agree on the evidence of the situation. Just the facts. Avoid rushing to conclusions. Purge assumptions. Get past denial. What is the common reality to which all parties can subscribe? A wise approach is for them to agree to the timeline that led them to where they are. What happened? When did it happen? Who was involved? Why did it happen? For example, when faced with an ethical dilemma, hospital Bioethics committees avoid setting itself up as a court or tribunal to judge cases. Instead, it operates best when it asks questions and clarifies a situation so that a direction can become apparent.

Six times, however, the dissolution of the pastoral relationship was due to the pastor's misconduct. Sins of flesh or (more common) sins of the spirit? Is anyone clean? Who can avoid accountability? Can any of us be fully exonerated? Ideally, we expect personal self-examination, repentance, correction. When that doesn't happen, we Presbyterians, inventors of constitutions, follow a thorough process for determining if discipline is warranted: Committees of inquiry investigate; Advocates represent the accused; Commissions review evidence and hear testimonies behind closed doors; Then there is the trial with judgment rendered. Just cause must be proven. We provide for appeals.

Judgment of a pastor's misconduct normally involves removal from church service with counseling for a period of time. Only thrice have I experienced a pastor actually accept this judgment and discipline. In all the other situations, the pastors side-stepped the disciplinary judgment by demitting their ordination and renouncing the jurisdiction of the church, which means since they resigned their ordination they no longer are pastors. They resigned, sadly cheating themselves of the chance for hard redemption. This may have seemed to let the congregations move on but it really prevented them from their necessary self-examination, confession, forgiveness.

Forcibly removing pastors from office, even when done decently and in order, always is messy. It invariably engenders bitter resentments. Even when done fairly and justly, it can be perceived as punitive rather than remedial. Nonetheless, we keep trying to insure that the intent of the process is remedial rather than punitive. Truth heals. It's the gospel that matters foremost. Judgment is necessary for the redemption of the malefactor, whether the congregation is in the wrong or the pastor. We ill serve the malefactor when we sugar coat, excuse, or reinforce bad behavior, when we fail to honestly explore the reasons for the anger, hurt, loneliness, misconduct.

The entire purpose of this uncomfortable process is to help everyone heal. Dissolutions, howsoever painful, can become opportunities for redemption. When consensus is achieved and trust restored, redemption can begin for all.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
February 6, 2020
"Ministerium"
Word Count: 750

The differences became clearer the more I talked. I had been invited by our local ministerial association to return and help guide our local religious leaders in a discussion of the ministerium's purpose and mission in Danville. I suppose I had been asked because I'm the local relic. Call me Methuselah. Today is

markedly different from when I arrived to serve my church and this community in 1989. When I described how we benefitted from such a thing as Wednesday Night, eyes in the room widened along with wistful smiles. The school district forbade any activities to take place on Wednesdays. Wednesday was protected church night. That reality eroded by 1991. "Those were the days my friend," goes the nostalgic song, "we thought they'd never end." I even remember when the town would shut down at noon every Good Friday to accommodate those who wanted to attend the three hour "Seven Last Words of Christ" ecumenical worship service. That service drifted into nostalgia land by 1996.

What became clear to me was how different were the expectations then of local clergy and ministerial association. It was assumed we'd offer ecumenical witness as well as worship services at local nursing homes. We were expected to fill a seat at many civic tables: Red Cross, Recreation Commission, Geisinger's bioethics committee, the school district's scholarship committee and safety committee, providing comfort and counsel following a student's death, offering prayers for municipal councils or special occasions such as Memorial Day. We partnered with Geisinger's Pastoral Care Department (appropriately renamed the Spiritual Care Department). We even spanked Glen Steele when he first came to town and callously initiated the first lay-offs at Geisinger. To his credit, he listened. Merck and Geisinger would invite us to their community forums to gather local input. The ministerial association also served as the vehicle through which congregations launched ministries in town: Good Samaritan, Gate House, Jubilee Kitchen, Food Banks. Predictably, once all these ministries took off and became separate missions, the clergy role became irrelevant.

"Those were the days my friend, we thought they'd never end." But they did.

What came clear to me by the end of this afternoon conversation was how I have lived the transition from the former programmatic church to today's church which is trying to discern its role in this new climate, a climate where religion no longer plays a central or relevant role in our communities. I recalled remarking years ago to one young pastor who explained that he didn't care to participate in the ministerium because it didn't suit his needs. My cranky reply: "I don't care if it doesn't suit your needs, do your job." The problem was that I was talking from my old fashioned frame of reference. Given changing trends, I wonder how much interest there is on the part of the clergy in getting invited to sit at civic tables? Or is the exhaustion level of survival and ministering to congregational needs sapping the energy of serving the civic community. My congregation expected me to become involved those ways -- it also suited my temperament. Then, again, I'm a relic. "Memories, all alone in the moonlight, I can smile at the old days...."

Perhaps it's time to sing another song, singing along with Warren Zevon: "Poor, poor, pitiful me..."

What the Danville Ministerial Association is trying to figure out parallels exactly what every main-line denomination is trying to figure out. Given modern trends, given decline in attendance, where's the place of church today in Montour County? One thing we never fully addressed because it wasn't a pressing issue: Are we an ecumenical Christian association or multi-religious?

With my own history as the paradigm, I sense that the ministerium has moved beyond the program model of church into a more spiritual, healing, and justice seeking voice, the same direction to which our congregations need to travel. Less institution, more association. Less formal seats at the table and more yeasty Christian influencers -- congregations "just and generous" inspiring us to love our planet, love the poor, love peace, cultivating love of self, others, enemies into our politics and religion.

Towards the end of our hour together, I began to sense that the church's future direction is obvious: Go where the people are crying. Who is addressing the hurting? If we are addressing the lonely, the wounded, the stranger, then it won't matter if we are Christian only, we will end up walking with whoever shows compassion and brings hope.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
February 13, 2020
"Guardrails"
Word Count: 750

What if there were no guardrails off the right lane shoulder of Route 180? What if? Likely, I'd not be writing this. I'd be dead. If not dead, then at least banged up enough to enjoy Geisinger's intensive care.

Saturday morning didn't exactly pan out the way I had expected. Up at 5 AM. Brewed coffee. Fed the cat. Shaved and showered. Suited up for the important meeting. Reviewed my sermon and keynote address. Grabbed car keys. Looked at my winter coat but left it hanging. I'd be fine without it. It's only rainy. Did grab my fedora.

Thirty-five minutes later I'm spinning circles in my wife's car. No, it wasn't a ride at Knoebel's Amusement Park. I'm in the passing lane on Route 180 south of Muncy. Rain had become ice. Tried to correct. Tried to compensate. Despite memories in slow motion, either the tail of the car spun to the front or the front spun toward the rear. Either way, car slammed sideways into the guardrail before bouncing me back in front of the oncoming car, headlights approaching fast.

I like seat belts. I'm now a major fan of guardrails. The sideways slam prevented me from tumbling downhill toward the gorge. Does Subaru install air bags in the roof? Imagine a highway without guardrails. It's one thing if I suffer from the accident. It would be horrible to have injured any passengers. Surprise, I was able to walk away rather than be carried out from the crash that totaled my wife's car. I even made the meeting on time.

A week later, we watched the epic World War I movie, "1917." It put life into perspective. The story puts to shame those of us who think we've got troubles.

Imagine life without guardrails. Parents are guardrails, at least until we're mature enough to choose invisible guardrails of our own. This is your bedtime. These are your chores. You will brush your teeth. No guardrails? You end up acting like an adolescent brat, even if you're seventy-three. So, it's a disgrace for athletes to kneel during the National Anthem but it's okay for your president to mock it at the Superbowl? Hypocrisy is as hypocrisy does. Come on folks, are you going to excuse this one also? How many more? Are there any guardrails left? Any pride, honor? I keep at it hoping my grandchildren will be proud of where I stood.

Funny. The Republican Party still thinks I'm one of theirs. They phoned me to participate in a telephone Town Hall with Congressman Meuser. I took advantage of the offer to ask a question, although they never asked it. I entered the code. A sweet young thing answered. I asked: "Impeachment aside, would Meuser support censure of Trump?" She hesitated. Not what she expected. I always felt

censure rather than impeachment was the wiser tact against Trumptocracy. Republican opportunism would never allow them to vote for impeachment (except for Romney, the last remaining Republican). A tougher test of responsible moral courage would have been to force them to either condone Trump's conduct or judge his conduct as wrong, deserving formal reproach. Chuckle, chuckle, the documents will come out.

John Calvin, father of my denomination, was a realist about humanity. Judgment is healthy. We avoid confusing judgment with judgmentalism. We must judge ideas, behaviors, deeds. John Calvin rejected the facile notion of categorizing people as either good or evil. What he understood was how easily our goodness can be corrupted, distorted, dangerous. Humanity is far more slippery, ambiguous, and complicated. Calvinism warns how our greatest evils are done in the name of the greatest good. Like security and safety. Calvin was no fool. Akin to Martin Luther, he realized "the world will not be ruled by a rosary." This reveals why Calvin had such high regard for the purpose and necessity of civil government.

Because we don't always drive the way we should, we require guardrails. Maybe also a playful tweak. Recently, I followed a pick-up truck that bore a decal of a black and white American flag. In the center was a 'punisher' skull. In the field was the Roman numeral 'III,' referencing the 3% of citizens who fought tyranny in the American Revolution, likely indicating the driver as pro para-military who'll fight for his version of America, which itself is ironically tyrannical. Next time I see that decal I will pass and flash the peace sign. Guardrails. Hello, as historian Jon Meacham said: "We're the jury now."

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
February 20, 2020
"Virus"
Word Count: 750

Reports about this Coronavirus are still scary. Yet, there's a worse virus attacking. Why aren't the media reporting on a virus more virulent than Coronavirus, one tougher to quarantine?

The symptoms? When you contract it you're dead but you're still alive because it rots you from inside. It swells your tongue so it's hard to say anything that builds others up, anything generous. This virus atrophies open palms into fists making it impossible to shake an outstretched hand. This virus assaults the eyes with cobwebs of cataracts so you cannot see another person clearly, preventing you from seeing their humanity, from seeing them as your brother and sister. It makes blood ready to hate, mind ready to condemn, spleen ready for revenge, throat ready to swallow lies, conscience ready to justify injustice. It's a virus cultured in fear, from petri dishes of prideful, defensive, self-aggrandizing spirits. It's a virus that turns the carriers toward hating themselves. They hate how it nakedly reveals their sickness to others and, worse, to themselves.

Maya Angelou said: "Hate, it has caused a lot of problems in the world, but has not solved one yet."

Symptoms indicating we're sick? Suicides. Violence. Vengeance. Addictions. Arrogance. Abuse. Distrust. Disrespect. Dishonesty. Division.

Martin Luther King, Jr., preached: "Hate begets hate, toughness begets toughness, and it is all a descending spiral, ultimately ending up in the destruction for all and everybody... There's another

reason why you should love your enemies, and that is because hate distorts the personality of the hater. So Jesus says love, because hate destroys the hater as well as the hated.”

We can treat those infected by Coronavirus. Is there medicine to cure us from this fatal virus called, anger?

Is this virus in the water? In the air? In the stars? Contracted from someone else? Sorry, it is inside us.

It's been six years since I've punched anyone. We were playing soccer. I had a breakaway. He fouled me. I regarded it a personal insult. Frustrated, I punched him and got carded. Him too. Fouls happen. It's part of the game. The problem wasn't him, it was me. I, aging, felt less fit to compete. I was angry at myself for my poor performance. Yes, he fouled me, but I punched out of my foolish weakness, his children watching. It's the weak man who hurts. I had let the virus infect me.

This punch was another scar for me to carry, this one inside. A similar scar I carry on my hand, five stitches when angry I punched my fist through the glass door because nobody answered. The frame to my daughter's bedroom still exhibits the crack when I kicked the door during one fight.

I've had few fights in my life. I've had lots of struggles, lots of clashes, but few fights. Of those, fewer physical fights. It always went bad when my soul was bent, unreconciled, self-preoccupied. When in a resilient place, I handle conflict with wit and a cup of healing Jesus elixir.

Forget teaching Russian literature in Middle School. Let them read Bradbury. "The Other Foot" is a 1951 short story by Ray Bradbury. Black people in the United States, fed up with racism, surprised their white neighbors and relocated to Mars. Twenty years later, they receive reports that a rocket from Earth is coming to Mars bearing a white man. They get ready to receive the white man. The men rally themselves to 'do unto him as done unto them.' They knot lynch nooses. They paint segregation signs in buses. They rope off 'white only' sections in the movie theatre. They delight to imagine white people shining their shoes, cleaning their homes. 'Do until them as done unto us.'

The rocket lands. A pathetic white man emerges. He describes how, as fools driven by fearful anger, hatred, prejudice, they destroyed their world. He has come to them apologetic, homeless, hoping they will let them use their rockets to help them come to Mars, for they destroyed their world. They know their sin. They burned it all down. Seeing the white man's fall and desperation, they drink the elixir: 'Do unto others, as you....' The Martians discard nooses, paint over signs, remove segregation barriers. The angriest of the black men now concludes: "The time for being fools is over. We got to be something else except fools. Now everything's even. We can start all over again, on the same level."

Are you able to drink of this cup? Hope so.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
February 27, 2020
"Leap Day"
Word Count: 750

In two days a Leap Day gets added to our calendar, February 29! Wow! Are we getting an extra day, a bonus day this year? But why did they add it onto February? Why did February get this extra day? It

doesn't deserve it. Who chose awful February to receive it? February is the one month you want to be the shortest month of the year. Whoever decided February would get this Leap Day must be some gloomy fellow who revels in cold nights, grey skies, and enjoys it when everyone else is as miserable as he is. The Old English got it right by calling this month, 'Solmonath,' meaning 'mud month.' When we throw the ball for our insane Terrier, we towel him off before coming back inside. The Asian custom of removing shoes before trekking about the house has become our tradition.

Why cold, dank, miserable, dismal, grey February? Why couldn't they have added this special Leap day to a month that deserves it, October or May? Award this bonus day to a cheerful month. Melancholy is one thing, depression is another. Melancholy is brooding and rueful, conjured by deep empathy toward the human condition, human struggles, social unfairness. Depression is a condition of despair and isolation, listlessness and hopelessness. Melancholy nudges you toward others. Depression, warranting care, patience, and treatment, pulls you away from others.

We blame the Romans for this February Leap Day. Bad, Romans, bad! February was originally inserted as the last month of the year. March was designated the first month of the year. That fits, for March is Spring's herald month, Vernal Equinox and all. Yes, those are daffodils and tulips poking their heads up through the midden of old leaves and onion grass. February's name comes from the Roman festival of Februa, the month of fasting, purification, purgation. February got trimmed, so it had room to spare. They at least stuck Valentine's Day in the middle. February: the time in winter, even in Italy, when larder is bare. Old Mother Hubbard ain't got nothing to spare. Similar to the Christian liturgical season of Lent, introduced by yesterday's Ash Wednesday (and those fun filled, frolicking words of "Remember man, that thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return"), those pagan Romans conducted purification rituals to get ready for a new year. Clear out the old, bring in the new. Shrive and shrove. Clear it out, ready for new.

I've been wrong. Calling Leap Day, February 29, an extra day is misleading. Leap Day is more accurately a correction day. According to my handy Farmer's Almanac: "Earth takes a fraction longer than the Gregorian calendar's 365 days to complete its orbit around the Sun – about .2422 of a day more. Adding an extra day to the calendar every 4 years or so keeps it synchronized with the four seasons. Without Leap Days, the calendar would be off by about 5 hours, 48 minutes, 45 seconds each year." Can't have that, however artificial is how we keep time. Our calendars, our clocks, are contrived, adjustable. Time and speed aren't. Nature isn't. Leap Day. Leap Year. What's this business about Daylight Saving Time? If nature is Mother Nature, she can be a demanding disciplinarian.

So it's wrong to call it an extra day, a bonus day. It's as cruel as how we trick kids into thinking a snow day is a freebie. Sorry, they just tack on those class days to the end of the school year when their sneakers are bursting to run free. For shame, you cruel academic monsters! February 29 is a horologist's correction day. It's a recalculation day, a recalibration day. It's not as if Mother Nature is going to change to suit us.

Earth is going to do what earth does. We're tricksters, tricking ourselves into thinking somehow we're in charge. Often we'd prefer to change our realities if we could. If we could. How often can we change those realities? It depends on the reality. Mostly, we're left with us changing us, us becoming the change required. We adapt, we adjust, we recalibrate. It's up to us to adjust to realities that remain immutable and inalterable. True for the Earth's orbit around the sun, true for global warming and climate change, true for human nature, true for illness and aging and death.

Nature does its thing and we respond as best, as wisely, as cleverly as we can. Either adapt or deny. We can guess where denial leads us.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

March 5, 2020

“Generations”

Word Count: 750

The author, interviewed on TV, argued how the worldview of modern generations differs from the worldview of the Baby Boom generation. Enter the young! She suggested how socialism to Boomers comes out of a Soviet Cold War mentality. Socialism to the modern generations means Sweden, Norway. Our times shape our world views, the author continued, describing how the experiences of the modern generations -- 300% increase in tuition, epidemics of mass killings, 9-11, war in Afghanistan and Iraq, global recession, exploitative merchandizing -- has shaped their opinions, choices, candidates, their votes. Those of us who are gray and arthritic might wish to remember that anyone today under 21 years old grew up with laptops, internet, social media, mobile phones, cable television, reality TV, organized sports, pervasive video surveillance, plus co-habitation as normative.

True, but what else is new? All generations are affected by the events of their times. It's how the generation responds to their times that matters. Consider the struggles we Baby Boomers experienced: the Cold War and duck and cover, Vietnam, the Cuban Missile Crisis, Nixon, race riots, assassinations, cruel colonialism in chaos, revolutions, HIV-Aids, and our reckless self-indulgence.

My parents' generation and my grandparents' generation had their struggles and their triumphs. We joked how mom handled five pregnancies in ten years courtesy of Winstons and Whisky Sours. I warp farther back and imagine the struggles of my forbears. One was hanged as a witch in Salem. Later, her descendent fought against the British at Lexington. Still later, one side of my family fought for South Carolina and the preservation of their plantations. They lost, fortunately. Two other sides fought to preserve the Union and abolish slavery. Quaintly, the sister of the rebel side married a brother from the Union side. See, there is hope today for a cranky USA. Each generation can describe its travails and each can claim its triumphs. We are our histories, we also create our histories (although, we usually fail to realize it while we're doing it).

My grandmothers were privileged to be alive to see the ratification of the 19th Amendment on August 18, 1920, the Susan B. Anthony Amendment granting women the right to vote. It seems incredible today to think that for the first part of their adult lives they were prohibited from voting because they wore dresses. No wonder neither never ever missed a chance to vote in an election. Then again, they also were born before the invention of airplanes, before affordable automobiles, before the onslaught of packaged snack foods, before telephones were common. Grandmas Margaret and Florence also survived the 1918 influenza epidemic that killed more persons than did World War I.

Let us then also applaud the triumphs experienced by Baby Boomers: the Civil Rights movement, the anti-war movement, the demand for equal rights, decisions by the Supreme Court, woman's liberation, moon landings, Lamaze classes, cigarette cancer warnings, removing lead from paint and from gasoline, polio vaccines, open heart surgery, medical transplants, the rise of internationalism, the first Earth Day, Rock and Roll, girls permitted to wear slacks at school instead of mandatory skirts or jumpers, even our hippy flippancy. At least our wars resulted in fewer deaths than the wars of the so-dubbed Greatest

Generation. It's been a privilege to be part of this dizzying, dancing, glorious Boomer carnival, despite our many failures.

All generations also have their failures. Today's newer generations are responding to the world we gave them. Family collapsing. Church collapsing. Unions collapsing. Civic organizations collapsing. Satisfying work collapsing. Leaders, authorities, institutions unworthy of respect.

Add other factors of instability. The young doubting that people are good, doubting improvement. Gender roles confusing. Violent reaction at the browning of the nation. Defensive, un-listening tribalism. Population shifts, the young (who can) migrating from home towns. Young people turned off by scriptural pabulum and theological certitude. Young men reacting to wives and girl-friends as bread winners. Outrageous housing costs. Healthcare costs. Grandmas raising grand-daughters. Debasement of speech. Debasement of truth. Debasement of moral integrity. Debasement of science. Dreams on the ash heap.

Ours was a colorful, dramatic, oft traumatic, kaleidoscopic generation, go-go boots and feelin' groovy. Theirs seems weary, introspective, burdened. A daughter summed up her years in High School as chronically sad, given the number of tragic deaths they endured every year.

What triumphs will our children celebrate? The foremost triumph they told me was the election of President Obama. Another suggested marriage equality and Me Too. What will they claim as glorious?

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
March 12, 2020
"Second Choice"
Word Count: 750

Brokered conventions can be more entertaining than coronations of someone whose primary victories has locked up the requisite number of delegates. Until the 1970's, there were few Presidential primaries. Convention's chose. One warning: the nominees of the last brokered conventions (1948, 1952) both lost. The parties also took seriously their platform and insisted that the candidate fit the platform rather than party fit the candidate. The most significant brokered convention in U.S. history occurred in 1860. Republican delegates and party chiefs gathered mid-May in the newly built Convention Hall in Chicago (nick-named the Wigwam) to elect their Presidential candidate. Custom expected the candidates to stay home and let their managers campaign for them.

Because of a brokered convention, Abraham Lincoln arose. Lincoln wasn't the Republicans' first choice.

How many of us have been first choice? To pastors who discover the church wanted others before you but were turned down, here's my little ditty: *Don't get so full of yourself or puffed up neither, You probably weren't God's first choice either. But don't fret, worry, or turn all grumpily, Given Peter and Paul you're in good company.*

Who were the candidates seeking 1860 Presidential nomination? What follows comes from Doris Kearns Goodwin's masterpiece, "Team of Rivals."

William Seward, with his distinguished career as New York Governor and Senator, was the favorite, especially among Eastern establishment Republicans. He troubled Midwestern delegates, however, because he was viewed as a radical on the subject of slavery, the key issue destroying the nation. Seward's reputation as a liberal leader in the abolitionist movement worried conservative Midwestern delegates who feared supporting Seward would damage their state elections. Goodwin explains: "No one challenged Seward's ability. No one questioned his credentials as a statesman of the party. He was opposed simply because it was thought he would damage the prospects of the Republican Party and hurt Republican candidates in local elections."

Salmon Chase from Ohio sought nomination, although he was an unpopular candidate. He expected he'd be anointed the nominee. Edward Bates from Missouri sought nomination, but was viewed as too conservative for the Easterners.

Lincoln, favorite son of Illinois, was the fourth candidate, largely due to his climb into national prominence from his debates and speeches about slavery and the Union. Lincoln was viewed as a moderating voice, a centrist in policy and temperament.

The first ballot was held, resulting in 173½ votes for Seward, 102 for Lincoln (surprising the Wigwag but not Lincoln's horse-trading managers), 49 for Chase, 48 for Bates. 233 votes were needed to capture the nomination to run as the Republican Presidential nominee. Chase was especially deflated.

On the second ballot, Seward increased slightly, to 184½ votes. Lincoln rose to 181 votes, with thanks to Pennsylvania for casting 44 of its 48 votes for Lincoln, plus defections from the Chase and Bates' camps. To the delegates, it was obvious neither Chase nor Bates would accrue enough momentum to pull delegates away from Lincoln or Seward to forge ahead. It was up to the delegates to switch. Lincoln's managers gave them more incentive to switch than did Seward's managers who assumed Seward would walk away with the nomination.

Third Ballot: Lincoln picked up 4 from Massachusetts, 4 more from Pennsylvania, and 15 from Ohio, giving Lincoln 231½, just shy on the nomination by 1½. Four delegates from Ohio rose and switched their votes from Chase to Lincoln. Although devastated, Seward telegraphed word that out of his love for the Party he requested that his New York delegates switch their votes to Lincoln. It became unanimous.

Months later, after winning the Presidential election against his old adversary, Democrat Stephen Douglas, as well as Southern Democrat John Breckinridge and Constitutional Union candidate John Bell, came the moment for Lincoln's humble wisdom to shine. For the good of the nation, he asked Seward to serve as Secretary of State (the foremost position in the cabinet), Chase as Treasury Secretary, and Bates as Attorney General. This was an act of highest statesmanship. Decent, honest Lincoln needed their voices, their viewpoints, their differences, them questioning his assumptions. Lincoln wanted them to disagree with him without fear of consequence. They sharpened him, honed his judgment. Stabilize a broken America first, then progress.

Second choice, moderate Lincoln was called forth to steady and then redeem America's soul. Except for a bullet, he would have healed us too.

Sidebar: Lincoln used the Presidential pardon power liberally. He granted mercy upon soldiers who fell asleep on duty or boys who ran from battle.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
March 19, 2020
“It Feels Different”
Word Count: 750

Some romance their future wives with jewelry. Some with fancy restaurants. Some with dining and dancing. I romanced my future wife with buckets of mud and mops. We met courtesy of Ann, a good friend of mine from church youth fellowship who befriended my future wife in their college dormitory. Ann had hoped she could match another friend with Elaine, but he couldn't make the party. I could. I did. It started off promising. Three months later Hurricane Agnes struck. With us home for the summer, our church fellowship rallied and spent most every July weekend traveling to Wilkes Barre to help in the recovery efforts. We got to know each other cleaning out flooded houses. That mud smell returns every now and then.

How do I flood thee? Let me count the ways. Since coming to Danville in 1989, we've faced a few floods together. Floods have a way of bringing people together. Before the town flood system was installed, I remember shoveling sand into bags alongside surgeons, high school football players, guys from the street department. We worked together against the common threat, willing to rescue our neighbors, sharing pumps to drain a neighbor's basement. It is what you do at a time of trouble, threat, and emergency. This is the duty and privilege of community mobilization. We've had a few floods since. My favorite was when raw sewage backed up into my buddy's basement. When a buddy calls, you go. That was a fun day, almost as entertaining as the flood when my sump pump broke down. The water won over me carrying pails upstairs.

Who remembers the worship services held the evening of 9/11? Singing together, offering our thoughts and prayers together, mourning together, standing together, patriots together. We cooperated. We collaborated. Together we faced the common threat to the common good, shoulder to shoulder.

This feels different today.

At a recent gathering a fellow was dismissive when I balked at shaking hands with him. I offered my elbow instead. He quipped: "So you're one of those afraid of this virus thing. I've been through worse. We're fussing too much over this Coronavirus." I later tried to explain to him that it's not about his health, it's about the health of others. What did Grandma counsel? An ounce of prevention....

A wonderful member of my congregation died after a excruciating battle with cancer. When hospitalized during a bad time she was agitated at how visitors were required to gown up, putting on gloves, masks, eye shields. It made her feel so dirty, so unclean, everybody protecting themselves from being contaminated by her. We finally were able to convince her that this protocol wasn't required to prevent her from contaminating us but from us contaminating her. With her lowered immune system, she was endangered by us.

The fellow who shrugged at my caution at shaking hands is a fine fellow, but his attitude seemed irresponsible. And that is why it feels different today. If it were a flood, he'd be the first out in a boat helping his neighbors. But this virus, this threat separates us. This threat doesn't pull us together, it wants us selfish. It's forcing us to cut ourselves off and look out for ourselves and our own. We avoid each other, we hide from each other. I better get mine before there's nothing left. It's about me rather

than about us. Ammo is sold out. There's the real danger, this insidious panic. This moat and mine mentality. My neighbor is my competitor. My neighbor is my threat, even if my neighbor is a friend of mine. The danger is each other.

It doesn't have to be this way. It shouldn't be this way. It cannot be this way. How we handle this emergency is a choice. We must make the extra effort to be neighborly. I'm proud of one small church taking advantage of their smallness by preparing to maintain steady communication with each other about each other's needs. If someone runs out of toilet paper, another member will share some of theirs. If an older member is worried about going to the supermarket, another member will shop for her. If a nurse or grocery clerk needs child-care so she can go to work, another member will become grandma. It is what you do for each other. Regardless how individualistic is the threat, we are in it together. The question isn't: who is my neighbor? The only question is: have I been neighborly?

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Thursday, March 26, 2020

"It Takes Effort"

Word Count: 750

The line of shoppers extended to the back of the store. Did anyone butt in line? Were there scuffles, insults, or fist-fights? No. There was a hint of adventure and festivity to the occasion. Nobody liked waiting. But folks chatted, joked, and encouraged each other. After all, what are you going to do? When the going gets tough, it's time for a party!

Montour County: give yourselves a round of applause. Pat yourselves on your backs. So far, so good, unlike news I'm hearing from my family who live in denser and more stressed parts of the country. My sister, who works at a Trader Joe's, was setting up the strawberry display when management opened the doors. Two hundred frantic customers pushed in. A woman raced to grab strawberries. Instead, she punched my sister's face. The customer didn't apologize. I suggested that my sister should have coughed on her.

At a supermarket in Fort Collins, an angry man demanded that he buy the big bottle of sanitizer on the counter. The manager said he couldn't sell it. This bottle was necessary for the staff. Irate, the man yanked off the lid and dumped his coffee into it, shouting: "If I can't have it, nobody can." I bet his wife or children are real happy to be stuck inside their house with him.

Those of us raised in the Reformed Tradition aren't surprised at people acting badly. We're persuaded that if we were a bunch of English school boys stranded on a deserted island we'd divide into tribes, make spears, hunt each other. The novel, "Lord of the Flies" pretty much sums up our Calvinistic grim view of human nature, unless a divine inner spirit detours us toward civilized and humane behavior.

Would you be surprised to learn that two famous English poets, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey, yearned to come to this region of the Susquehanna? They planned to marry and bring their young brides here to revel in this new world Eden. As transcendental romantics, they envisioned the beatific bliss and idyllic ease of this native paradise. Back to nature. One with nature. In 1794, Coleridge even wrote a poem about us, called, "Pantisocracy." An excerpt: "*Sublime of Hope I seek the cottag'd Dell, Where Virtue calm with careless step may stray, And dancing to the moonlight Roundelay.*" Well now, that sounds like Danville and Northumberland. How's your Roundelay these days?

They called off their dream when they learnt they'd have to fell trees, build those cottages, haul water, plough fields. They called off their dream quicker when they heard how the Susquehannocks weren't exactly receptive to newcomers. They immediately called off coming here when they were told scores of Scotsmen already had arrived.

We shall see what happens when bottles of whisky, wine, and beer run out at homes around here. I suggested to my sister that since she lives in New Jersey where non-state liquor stores remain open, her son and daughter could fill up the trunk of their SUV and drive here to sell bottles at a 50% profit. There's a worthy career for two kids whose colleges shuttered because of this virus -- bootlegging!

Uncivilized behavior can be partly blamed on the density factor: too many folks competing for fewer resources. Did you survive the Great Toilet Paper War? Consider it also the Donner Party factor. When food runs out, you're either the cannibal or on the menu.

At times of abundance, we can be quite civilized. When times turn tough, it takes mightier efforts to remain kind, compassionate, faithful, indeed, civilized. Yet, that is what will be required of us for more than mutual survival. Will we be able to look back on these days as days when our faith and character improved? When you look back on these days, do you want to look back on your behavior with pride, gratitude, or with shame? I don't want to look back on these days (assuming I survive the virus) and be embarrassed at how I acted. Imagine it like being onboard the Titanic. I would much rather have drowned with dignity, as did most men on that sinking ship, than sneak out wearing a dress and hide in a lifeboat.

Right now around here, we're pretty relaxed and amicable, but for how long? Humanity takes effort. What are you doing to maintain and cultivate your goodwill, patience, understanding, and hope? What habits help foster the good in you? Tell us, please. Write, email.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
April 2, 2020
"Mom Was Right"
Word Count: 750

The late Dr. Kenneth Bailey, renown Biblical scholar and missionary, taught at the Near East School of Theology, Beirut, Lebanon, until violence forced his return to the USA. He refused to leave during the early months of the sectarian violence, when dozens of religious and political militias battled each other. Beirut, the Paris of Lebanon, was ravaged by assassinations, ethnic cleansing, explosions (including Bailey's house). Many religious leaders strove for peace amongst the factions. Bailey described how at one of their critical meetings, it was revealed that their spokesman was marked for death. That wasn't a surprise. The surprise came at how the others reacted to this imminent threat. Not all stood by their brother. Bailey described what took place around the table when put to this test: the indecisive showed their indecision, the faithful revealed themselves as faithful, the brave revealed themselves as brave, the cowards revealed themselves as cowards.

When has someone shown you their true nature? I bet you know those whose word you can trust with a handshake and those for whom you want three witnesses and the contract signed in triplicate. Or the barstool hero who never saw combat. The know-it-all who's too dumb to be smart enough to admit

what he doesn't know. Or a good friend who remains an honest friend when everyone else takes sides. The mocker who can't stand being mocked. The wealthy person who's a stingy tipper. If they cheat on taxes, who else do they cheat? The complainer about government who never votes. The rooster who takes credit for the sunrise. There are bright shining suns and there are black holes who you let drain your life.

What's in the well comes up in the bucket. Guaranteed. Back in high school my club coordinated where student organizations would be assigned to spread through town and knock on doors collecting for the scholarship fund. Our rival club, snooty Key Club, always was thrilled to receive maps to canvass the richest neighborhoods in town. Our club assigned ourselves the blue collar side of town. Funny – somehow we always won the competition for raising the most donations.

If a stranger drops a ten dollar bill unawares, what do you do? Every day is judgment day. Emergencies, crises, are especially telling. How do you respond under fire, when character is required for the sake and safety of others? We're in it together.

Months ago we had to report to the gate agent to get our seat assignments for our flight. She asked if we were willing to sit in the emergency exit seats. I joked to darling wife that those are the best seats because if there's an emergency we can kick out the window and are first to escape. The agent was not amused. She corrected me, insisting how we must be able to help others exit. I nodded and smiled, saying that given my role as a pastor I'm supposed to be last out anyway. Pastors are expendable. Again, she was not amused but awarded those seats to us regardless.

Careful now, your true nature is showing. Many a grieving person has confided how surprised they were following the death of their loved one. They were disappointed in friends who they expected to comfort but didn't, how surprised they were to be comforted by persons they least expected.

When has someone shown you their true nature? Was anyone surprised by feckless, dyspeptic Donald Trump, Jr. exploiting the Coronavirus to slander Democrats, spreading the malign lie that they want millions to die for political advantage? What is that life lesson from poet Maya Angelou? "When people show you who they are, believe them."

Mom was right. We really are the company we keep. Who your friends are tells us everything we need to know about you.

Morally castrated Donny boy might benefit from heeding these words by John F. Kennedy, delivered at the Loyola College Alumni Banquet, 1958: *"Let us not despair but act. Let us not seek the Republican answer or the Democratic answer but the right answer. Let us not seek to fix the blame for the past – let us accept our own responsibilities for the future."*

Let's get words right. The word apocalypse is bandied about these days, wrongly. It's a Greek word, 'apokalupsis,' meaning revelation, to reveal, to disclose, an uncovering. The Biblical apocalypse was a vision revealed to John. The vision paints trials and tribulations, failures and triumphs. How we respond to our times is the revelation.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Thursday, April 9, 2020
“Virus Road”
Word Count: 750

It was a tonic for my blue funk. The Blue Meanies were after me again. Yes, one of my coping mechanisms is to watch via VCR (yes, VCR) movies like the Beatle’s “Yellow Submarine.” Within reach on my bookshelf I boast figurines from that animated delight: Chief Blue Meanie, Old Fred, a Snapping Turtle-Turk, and George Harrison in his Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band uniform, with tuba.

Yes, mine was a blue Saturday: colorless, mopey, music muted, puttering, feeling bloody impotent. I was at 20%, my wife contributing the extra 80%. The best end up taking turns being encouraging. She’s also wiser at switching off the dreadful drone of depressing TV news. I guess I shouldn’t be tracking several times a day the reported total cases and deaths. I also don’t do cooped up well. There’s a restless reason I crave road trips. So Sunday turned out to be a blessed tonic. The tonic? A drive to rendezvous with my nephew and brother-in-law at the Delaware Water Gap for vital family business, combined with taking a journalistic road trip to observe social effects of this virus. I was on a mission from God. I add here that all hygienic protocols were religiously upheld. A doctor warned us about nurses, cleaners, food service workers, technicians, physicians laboring and risking on the front lines: “If we don’t cooperate, all their sacrifices will be in vain.”

Driving through Bloomsburg, I didn’t see one University student. Then I realized it was Sunday morning - even without the virus I wouldn’t expect to see students. Fascinating were the number of cars parked at those affordable motels along Route 11. Each appeared two-thirds full. Talk about being cooped up. How do they cook? Are they solo or families?

Yes, imagining how others might be hurting makes me alert to how undeservedly fortunate I am. First, I’m with someone special. It makes me appreciate the small role I can play. It makes me appreciate neighbors taking walks, saying, “Hi.” Yes, appreciative of newspapers, postal carriers, grocery clerks and stockers, garbage collectors. Luddite me, long wary of cell phones, is gradually appreciating how technology is aiding our ability to cope, even thrive, even contribute toward others (which, after all, is the name of the game).

Busiest were the grocery store parking lots and fast food drive-through lanes. Other shops and churches? Not so much. Empty lots. Lights off. It wasn’t as weird as when in 1972 I traveled around Belfast during the troubles, frisked by British soldiers, streets absent of pedestrians and cars, but it had a similar feel that the bottom had dropped out, a similar surreal feel. ‘Surreal’ is an apt description. How did this happen so abruptly? Yet it has. Yes, a month ago in my daily diary I was writing about meetings I attended or where we ate dinner or which church at which I was privileged to preach. Now I’m dutifully recording this virus death count.

Once I began heading east on Route 80, I noticed few passenger vehicles, very few bearing out-of-state plates, though I did spot several from New York and Jersey, one from Maryland. Most on the road were trucks. By my Sunday ratio, ten trucks for every passenger vehicle. Only one rest area was open, that near Stroudsburg. The one nearest Berwick had barriers erected. Electric signs blinked advice: Stay Home, Limit Travel, Practice Social Distancing (wrong, it should be Physical Distancing, we need the social). In those stretches between towns, mine was the only car, excepting those trucks. Spotted were

several FedEx trucks, several Amazon Prime vans heading west. Sheetz tank-trucks were common. The parking lot of the shops at Crossings was utterly vacant. Oddly, the only time I saw a police cruiser was in Bloomsburg. Perhaps State Police saw me. Since I drive the speed limit I never fret. Although, I did wonder if I'd be stopped and politely advised to return. Most of the intersection gas stations were open, but I wondered about mom and pop Diners that depended on travel trade. At least our restaurants around here can make a buck on take-out.

Somebody had nailed a crude, small sign on a tree. It contained a painting of the US Flag accompanied by these pure words: "Thank you truckers." Yes, thank you. Never before had I realized how important an artery was Route 80. All these roadways are arteries feeding us, keeping us safe. This virus road is a highway of hope and promise.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Thursday, April 16, 2020

"A Moveable Feast"

Word Count: 750

I feel sorry for non-religious kids. We starve them when every day is the monotonous, unremarkable same. I'm fond of Easter rituals. I always loved welcoming the little church girls getting the chance to show off their 'posh frocks.' Even those pagan rituals of bunnies and eggs are delightful, giggly traditions. Such rituals kindle in us something sacred and wonderful: new days, new beginnings, fertility and abundance, something sweet after months of winter drab. Pastels instead of grey. Pussy willows, lilies, and taffeta frocks. Something special's afoot. Wait for it. It's coming. Hope blooms. Did you ever see a lily bulb before it flowers? All that extra-ordinary spring potential comes from a lumpish bulb buried in autumn dirt.

We also might admit it can be more difficult for our modern kids to appreciate how special Easter rituals can be. Is an Easter dress as special when Amazon can deliver new dresses weekly? Great-grandma might remember how her new dress was measured and sewn by her mom and grandma during blustery winter. It can be foreign for our kids to appreciate how special an Easter basket can be with its peeps, treats, and chocolate bunnies to eat, when they get treats all the time. We dull them with too much. Given easy abundance, we cheat the remarkable. Will an Easter interrupted make us appreciate what for too long we have taken for granted?

Easter is what's called a Moveable Feast. How propitious! Easter switches Sundays each year. It moves around, based upon the first full moon following the Spring Equinox. Let's throw liturgical decorum to the wind. Let's make Easter the first Sunday we can join together for worship. Besides, for us believers Easter really is every Sunday. Plus, we know which is the better story: Life without Easter or life with Easter?

Yes, there's a bulb-blessing inside these terrible, dirty virus days. What a bold witness is Easter. Easter – right here in the midst of this disease where Easter is supposed to be. You get to Easter through Maundy Thursday, through Good Friday, and through that trembling, silent Saturday. Resurrection only comes through the cross.

How are we preparing now for how we will come out of this? What can we do now to prepare for the months to come? I'm talking about more than a Roosevelt inspired New New Deal. God forgive us if all we do is return to the way it was.

At first I conceived of this 'stay at home' as an inconvenient pause to everyday life. Now it's beginning to dawn on me that this is no pause. When I hit the pause button on my remote control for my DVD player so I can grab a ginger ale from the fridge, I come back, hit play and we pick up right where we left off.

Ain't gonna happen with this. This is no pause. This likely will result in fundamental changes to our society, our values, our church life, our work life, our economic life, our spiritual life, pushing those who will be clever and courageous enough into a deeper and richer understanding of our fragility, vulnerability, and mutual dependence (and mutual interdependence). It's changing us.

It's making us revisit how we regard death and loss. It's making us consider what matters to us. It's making us realize who and what we have taken for granted. It's making us learn what we can live without and what we need to live. It's making us learn to ration. It's making us regret how wasteful we have been, how careless too – and not just with things. It's making us learn what annoys us and why we get annoyed. It's making us discover who we can (and cannot) trust. It's making us appreciate each other. It's making us remember the effort of sacrifice for something more important than ourselves. It's making us realize quick fixes are cheap fixes and easy answers are just that: easy. Hence, shoddy and unreliable, dime-store trinkets. It's making us see clearly the idols we worship. It's making us learn to repent.

As Lincoln is believed to have said: "I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had no where else to go. My own wisdom and that of all about me seemed insufficient for that day."

For those of us who believe because of Easter, even though we believe that we don't have to earn salvation or forgiveness, we sure have to earn discipleship.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
April 23, 2020
"Thank You, Libraries"
Word Count: 750

My house is an armory. I cannot brag that I possess the largest arsenal of weaponry in Montour County, but I can confidently profess that my collection is formidable. Beware, enemies who threaten my rights. I'm armed. The NRA can't compete. Every room contains weapons, none with official permits. What caliber? The finest. Books. What's more fearsome than books?

Mom kindled a hunger for books and learning, she who regretted never finishing college. Nursery bedtime meant A.A. Milne. Soon it was Dickens. How I loved exploring dictionaries and encyclopedias! Computers are myopic mediums of information. Richer is seeing the connections within an entire page rather than the binocular view, the difference between Rand McNally and GPS. Fun were summertime reading contests sponsored by our town library. Every Civil War book at the Fanwood Library showed my name borrowing it.

When boyish I loved playing with dinosaurs. Triceratops goring Brontosaurus, Stegosaurus battling Tyrannosaurus. Except, Stegosaurus and T-Rex could never have fought. Jurassic Stegosaurus already had been extinct 80 million years before Cretaceous Tyrannosaurus. Prickly facts!

Books fed my family and my heritage. Scotland was the poorest nation of Europe, but by end of the 18th Century it boasted the highest literacy rate in the world (75%). It took England a century to catch up.

In 1560, John Knox, father of Presbyterianism, demanded a national system of education so that both boys and girls could learn to read. Literacy is a right, a blessing, a necessity. This Scottish demand for learning and education explains Scotland's instinctively rebellious distaste for entitlement, for privilege, for class advantage, for the rich or 'highborn' claiming they're superior.

The 1696 Act of Setting Schools established schools in every Scottish parish not already equipped with one. If the Scots were going to effect progress, they needed an effective weapon: knowledge, knowledge preserved to inform future generations. Euclid teaches us still. So too Plato, Shakespeare, Einstein, the prophet Amos. A Scottish peasant who could read was equal to, if not better than, any illiterate English prince. I read where a library in Perthshire shows book borrowings from 1747. The readers? Blacksmith, cooper, baker, farmer, stonemason.

Scottish literacy fostered the Scottish Enlightenment, which itself achieved world-wide advancements in medicine, physical sciences, theology, engineering, natural law, moral philosophy, mathematics, economics, even the arts. Most universities established during America's colonial days were based upon the Scottish system of education, staffed by Scottish professors. There's a reason Thomas Jefferson paraphrased Scottish Philosopher Francis Hutcheson's social and political vision when he wrote the Declaration of Independence. Hutcheson himself enlarged upon the vision of John Locke. So it goes.

Which prompts us to salute National Library Week, April 19-25. How appropriate to honor public libraries as lighthouses of knowledge during today's dark global emergency. Knowledge equips us to challenge fear and panic. Author Ray Bradbury applauded the benefit of free libraries: "I don't believe in colleges and universities. I believe in libraries because most students don't have any money. When I graduated from high school, it was during the Depression and we had no money. I couldn't go to college, so I went to the library three days a week for 10 years."

An ignorant man is easily subjugated. No libraries, no liberty. An uninformed man is easily controlled. No libraries, no democracy. Adams, Jefferson, Washington, Franklin, upheld this formula as gospel. When we subsidize libraries so they remain accessible to all, we invest in our nation and our freedoms. All other forms of government require conformity, convincing a misled public to swallow what they're told. Democracy, however, requires that citizens work on being informed citizens. Good patriots ask questions, question sources, make leaders justify themselves, reject nonsense, demand truth, facts, accountability, personal responsibility. Are leaders acting in good faith? Democracies require that citizens think for themselves. "Freedom is found through the portals of our nation's libraries," historian David McCullough commended during a speech at the Library of Congress.

Knowledge, information, education, rational faculties, ideas, research, intellect, freedom of thought -- this is what libraries represent. These are more than desirable traits, these are indispensable ingredients for any society wanting hard answers rather than self-gratifying pep rallies. If you get to publicly wear a MAGA cap, I get to publicly tell you what I think. "Whatever the cost of our libraries,"

journalist Walter Cronkite observed, “the price is cheap compared to that of an ignorant nation.” Or as my wife bluntly complained: “I don’t understand why people want to be stupid.”

What are you reading?

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

April 30, 2020

“Counting Losses”

Word Count: 750

This may sound silly to you but it’s important to me. Coronavirus prevented me from helping coach my Diggers. This spring was supposed to be our last club soccer team season together. Next fall they advance to high school. Trivial? In the scheme of things, yes. Still, it’s another loss.

How many losses have we suffered? Things lost, trust lost, IRA’s lost, loved ones lost. Gone , gone. What have you lost because of this virus? Prom, graduation, employment, income, your sense of security, your hopes, time with grandbabies? Still, it’s impressive how many folks are being clever about their losses. The game isn’t over yet. They keep trying to improvise and not let the virus win, such as with cheers at 7 PM or Zoom music festivals or Facetime story time or virtual proms or even postponing proms until August.

Even stubborn me has learnt to improvise. I am technological now, participating in about five zoom virtual meetings a week. I even got to help teach, remotely, eight middle school classes in Greeley, Colorado. They were studying the Civil War. I was invited to speak and answer their questions. Half of them thought I had fought in the Civil War. We talked about how the evil of slavery was the reason for the war. State’s rights was the excuse to keep slaves. We described how over 400,000 soldiers died of disease, twice those dead by combat. They ‘yucked’ when I described how typhoid, the most murderous disease, was caused by drinking fouled water. Don’t dig latrines upstream. Whatever’s upstream flows downstream. Clean is good. Given today’s virus they were stunned that between performing amputations Civil War surgeons didn’t wash their hands, how medical experts of that era lacked knowledge of germs. They had no word for infection.

We adapt, improvise, adjust to our losses and our changing world. It’s survival of the fittest, which means survival not of the brawniest but of the smartest, those who fit best, most diverse, best organized, most adaptable. The weakest guy on the street carries the semi-automatic rifle.

Which is why the recent hissy-fits by fringe kooks is counter-productive. As my sister wrote: *“During WWII was there ever any thought that individual rights were more important than the sacrifices needed? Where has this county gone? We should hang our heads in shame. Thank goodness the generation that saved the world is mostly no longer around to see what we have become.”*

Nobody wants sheltering in place. Nobody wants our economy ruined, especially our small businesses, especially those one paycheck from broke. Nobody wants to manipulate this crisis to erode personal liberties. No governor, no mayor wants to keep businesses closed and workers unemployed – there is no conspiracy. Legitimate worries are being exploited by partisan puppeteers, exciting protestors for the sake of shameful ends.

I get how anger and panic makes you selfish (or is it the other way around?). The idea of surveillance tracking by drones might make us suspicious. What I don't get are fringe kooks risking the health of others in order to get their hair done. What I don't get is the lady whose placard proclaimed: 'My body is my own.' So I'm guessing she'd be a big supporter of Planned Parenthood.

Well, let's applaud the protesters who want to be liberated. We thus conclude they would also refuse the imposition of ventilators should they need them to breathe. How magnanimous of you! We salute that anonymous medical worker in scrubs who did his own Tiananmen Square and stood in front of a line of protestors' cars.

By the way, how can a president run as the anti-establishment candidate when he is the establishment? Lord help us, he plants a tree. What we don't see is his administration in the shadows removing essential regulations to protect clean air. Nice Earth Day! Most losses are the result of bad decisions by others, and we suffer. Our real hope, promise, and resilience comes from our governors and mayors listening to our heroes. Thank you, you true Americans: Fauci, Cuomo, Lu, Gupta, Acton, Canale, Andres, Birx, among others.

Let me share something about my wonderful Diggers: It drove us coaches crazy how every game they were always lazy in the first half. In the second half, partly because they always had to fight their way out of the hole, they picked up their game and got tough. It was in the second half they showed their mettle, their character, their spirit.

Will we?

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Thursday, May 7, 2020
"A Day of Mourning"
Word Count: 529

We approach the forthcoming annual celebration of Mother's Day, May 10, 2020, in the midst of separation, anxiety, and death. As we celebrate Motherhood, humanity's incarnation of sacrificial love and devotion, we are reminded daily of a disease resulting in manifold deaths of God's precious children. We weep at the losses we have borne these days, of our mothers, children, fathers, grandparents, siblings, friends, and beloved strangers. A mother's heart is heartbroken over the suffering of others, especially of the innocent. A mother's heart aches with hope and promise.

Those who bring forth life by experiencing the agony of labor pains, deeply experience the relentless agony of mourning. Such is the protective price of love, of a blessed humanity. The world is saved by those who sing lullabies.

Those who cry with indescribable joy when the child is placed on their breasts, weep fully the tears of implacable grief and rage. *A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.*
Jeremiah 31: 15

We gather on Mother's Day as a day of honoring love. This year, we honor love by acknowledging deep and abiding grief over the terrible sorrows of these days. We honor the gift of life by mourning its loss. *"As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you...."*

Isaiah 66:13

We invite and request that the members of our congregations, indeed, we invite and welcome all persons, to pause for 10 minutes from 3 PM Eastern Time to 3:10 PM during this Mother's Day, May 10, 2020, that we together may render such prayers and confessions, expressing both our griefs and our hopes during these days of the coronavirus. May we be defined not by the virus but by our love. This is our time to be honest, to be vulnerable, to be open. It is in our suffering and in our wounds that we begin to be healed. We claim the advantage of the broken heart.

We invite all people to join together in a spirit of repentance, for we are not God, despite ourselves.

We invite all people to join together in a spirit of prayer, seeking divine courage and wisdom for the facing of these days.

We invite all people to join together in the spirit of mourning for the lives taken from us by this virus. Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from henceforth...

We invite all people to join together in the spirit of hope embodied by those care-givers who have held the hands our loved ones on all our behalf.

We invite all people to join together as one people for these ten minutes. Ten minutes is requested because when a new mother's contractions occur at intervals of less than 10 minutes it is often an indication that labor has begun. Out of such labor enters the gift of life. May it be so among us all.

"But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me."

Psalm 121

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

May 14, 2020

"My Country"

Word Count: 750

What I consider playful, witty criticism, someone I love thinks is hateful. He took offense at lines I added to my email signature. One line observed that if Trump needs to sign the stimulus checks, he should autograph the body bags. Another line asked: "Who next will Herod Trump sacrifice on the altar of Molech?"

He asked me: "How are these comments not hateful?" Fair question. Over the top? Perhaps. Mocking sarcasm isn't always playful. The trap is ending up hating those you call hateful. We, however, can love the person while hating the actions. I must be careful about blurring the lines. An unhealthy strain of arrogant righteousness infects my family's DNA.

Three things I suggested. First, I'll prayerfully examine my soul. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached how "Jesus says love, because hate destroys the hater as well as the hated." Second, I suggested he revisit what he emailed me and ask himself the same question. Last, I invited us to turn positive and join the work of the organization, "Repairers of the Breach," championed by The Reverend William Barber. From its website: "Repairers of the Breach ... seeks to build a moral agenda rooted in a framework that uplifts our deepest moral and constitutional values to redeem the heart and soul of our country. ...we declare that the moral public concerns of our faith traditions are how our society treats the poor, women, LGBTQ people, children, workers, immigrants, communities of color, and the sick. Our deepest moral traditions point to equal protection under the law, the desire for peace within and among nations, the dignity of all people, and the responsibility to care for our common home."

Something positive! This sounds like something we should support. This we need.

Given this virus, does anyone really believe we are going to return to the way we were (sorry, Barbara Streisand)? How many small businesses have already taken down their signs? How many more will succumb? How many folks have been forced to gut their savings and annuities, no cushion left? Consider those who never had the luxury of a cushion. How heavy will be the debt load? How many businesses that do survive will be unable or disinclined to invite back all the furloughed employees? How many workers in industries, newspapers, school districts, universities, churches, hospitals, and municipalities will be downsized, let go permanently? What employment will there be for our graduates (I've advocated National Service since Carter's administration)? How many persons will lose their health insurance?

If current trends are any indication, America's sinful wealth gap will widen into the Grand Canyon. Worry, friends, about the 'collective rage' of the impoverished, indebted, dispossessed, disappointed, disenfranchised, abused. The next 36 months could be bleak and angry. Donald, we're not your warriors. Chris Christie, if death by virus is the sacrificial price of economic recovery, how about you go first? From gated communities, the Dow Jones aristocrats will watch us as we turn on each other. Unless...

...unless we choose to create a just economy. A green economy. A moral economy. For vast numbers of Americans, there was nothing great about Trump's pre-virus helium economy. I may sound like a prophet of doom, but I'm not. I am far more optimistic, positive, and hopeful than lots of folks to whom I've listened who can't stand where we are being misled. I believe this ordeal is going to inspire us to repair and redeem America, if we the people make it so.

Back in 1939, world-renowned opera singer Marian Anderson was invited to sing in Washington D.C. Sponsors contacted the Daughters of the American Revolution for her to sing at their Constitution Hall. When the DAR realized she was a black woman, they wouldn't let her sing there. Eleanor Roosevelt, like my grandmother, quit the League because of this shameful prejudice. Eleanor arranged a better venue. On April 9, 1939, Marian Anderson sang on the steps of the once hallowed Lincoln Memorial to a crowd that stretched to the Washington Monument. Her opening song? "My Country, 'Tis of Thee," a song I've long appreciated as a prayer, not a boast.

There always has been an ugly, hateful America. There also is the America that seeks to rise up above ugly America and 'be of Thee.' Now is our time to decide which America we will be.

Marian Anderson changed the third line of her opening song. The original lyrics were: “of thee I sing.” She sang instead: “to thee we sing.”

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

May 21, 2020

“Lists”

Word Count: 750

This may not come as a big surprise, but I am a list maker. Given my chaotic, procrastinating, undisciplined, flippant, Jack Russell Terrier nature (look, a squirrel!), I learnt early in life I must make lists if I wish to be successful. It also helps me to plan so I can plan to be spontaneous when I need to be spontaneous.

My wife laughs at me but I type lists listing the contents of both our garage freezer and our kitchen freezer. Should I mention my list for scheduling dinner menus for a month? In addition to my three planning calendars, I keep a personal ‘to do’ list as well as a professional ‘to do’ list. These come in two forms: short term goals and long term goals. Since 1992, a synopsis of each book I’ve read is recorded by date in a log book, noting publisher, date of publication, and number of pages. I’ve compiled a list of paintings and framed photographs we put in storage in the upstairs closet. I record my first lawn mowing for the year and the last, as well as when our azaleas and day-lilies bloom. I’ve documented how many bags of candy we’ve given out for the last twenty Halloweens. I’ve recorded every Christmas present we’ve given since our kids were born, from rubber ducky’s to airfare. The docket for a church committee I chair ordinarily runs twenty pages.

I review this now and realize I probably should phone my therapist.

Still, when I was working as a preacher, I found it expedient to plan my sermons for the year – texts, titles, and hymns. I should also explain that I like to plan so I can take detours and be ready for interruptions. Any pastor worth his or her salt is going to plan their Decembers well in advance because she or he knows there’s going to be several drastic emergencies over the holidays.

Sixty-two days ago, at the beginning of this valiant sheltering in place, I particularly enjoyed making another list (those of us who make lists relish making lists about lists we need to make). I figured that if it’s selfless to stay indoors, I was going to make the most of it. Finally, here was the chance for achieving varied self-improvement goals. I would start with improving speaking and reading Spanish. Then I would enrich myself by watching all the operas I have collected over the years. I would feast on a video diet of our Shakespeare plays on CD, plus reading all those fat novels I’ve wanted to read. Add to this, dance lessons every afternoon. Elaine and I are pretty cool at swing dancing, but I’d enjoy mastering the waltz. I also pledged that I would write five letters a day, with fountain pen of course. Since we’ve been sheltering in place, I have tracked in my diary twice daily the number of those infected and killed by this virus.

So how come instead of opera I’ve been watching Grit TV and those old TV westerns? I have a sneaking feeling that Mozart is going to yield to Gilligan.

Spanish? If I change my clothes, it’s un buen dia. It’s a good day when I re-arrange again the contents of our kitchen drawers. It’s a day for popping champagne corks and congratulating myself when I connect

more than six pieces of our newly bought jig-saw puzzle. Yes, friends and asylum inmates, we are at the jig-saw puzzle stage of sheltering at home.

Shakespeare? The heck with Hamlet. I stand guard at the front window watching the pandemic promenade taking place on our Maple Street, making sure no little hooligans are stepping on my lawn and dog-walkers are picking up their dog-poop.

Good Lord, I consider it a successful day if I brush my teeth in the morning.

Whatever happened to my Fred Astaire ambitions to perfect the waltz? I had set up in my den my phonograph so I could spin my mother's album of Chopin's waltzes. Instead, for countless times (and counting) I have carted Elaine's Philadelphia Flower Show collection of heavily potted flowers and herbs from the patio to the garage at night and back again in the morning because of these May frosts. Sisyphus had it easy, he wasn't married.

I am recalibrating how I define success. It's enough to find comfort amidst this reality of anxiety. It's enough to find comfort instead of letting anger take control. I must make a list of this.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

May 28, 2020

"We Aren't Closed"

Word Count: 750

The bawdy comedy, "Monty Python and the Holy Grail" was on TV the other afternoon. I would never be so insensitive nor so crass as to make reference during this deadly pandemic to the movie's most quoted comedy scene. For me, the funniest scene is when King Arthur trots up and confronts a group of peasants slopping mud and Arthur demands to know the name of their feudal lord. One peasant woman replies: "I didn't know we had a king. I thought we were an autonomous collective." Arthur insists he is their king, king of the Britons. The woman replies: "Well, I didn't vote for you."

Arthur, exasperated by these upstart, insubordinate, disobedient, disloyal, dismissive, disrespectful peasants, grabs one man by the shoulders, named Dennis, and starts shaking him. Dennis shouts: "Come and see the violence inherent in the system. Help! Help! I'm being repressed!"

Silly Dennis reminds me of certain pastors who whine that governors are violating their first amendment right to assemble in free worship. Help! Help! I'm being repressed! Why is it that the brashest of these complainers happen to be mega-church pastors with a large overhead? Somebody has to pay for their private planes and tailored suits. Sounds also like someone needs an audience. How many angry protestors want haircuts more than church? You can look elsewhere for real repression. Real winning is when lives are saved and not just souls.

There is a difference between being oppressed and being inconvenienced.

A church in Williamsport, which I began helping after their pastor took ill, hasn't been shut down. Their right to worship hasn't been violated. This is a lovely congregation that concluded every Sunday worship service by holding hands and singing, "Blest Be the Tie." They really miss seeing each other in person, sharing those hugs, handshakes, greetings. But they also realized suspending public worship

gatherings was the decent thing to do. It wasn't a matter of demanding their rights, it was a matter of doing what was right. In fact, the church that aggressively does church is the church that has selflessly deferred public worship. I'm betting that the One God of All is smiling at the religious communities of all faiths that first and foremost practice daily the golden rule.

Most churches want to do the right thing, despite personal disappointment and inconvenience. Since when do we need a sanctuary to pray? Since when does it qualify as worship only when I get to preach at you? We pastors need to remember we are called to be shepherds rather than wolves.

We're banking on this situation being temporary. We would rather avoid a return wave. Meanwhile, freedom of worship is being exercised in spectacularly inventive ways. Many congregants have discovered that the Bible has a way of going where they are rather than them having to go where the Bible is. Christianity isn't institutionally confined. Some congregations even see in this ordeal the blessing of rediscovering humility, in recognizing what we have taken for granted. These weeks have been impressive: food bank donations and distributions; members regularly contacting and supporting each other; zoom Bible studies; live-streaming worship service; Instagram devotions; self-serve communion; postponed baptisms; drain that holy water. The saddest part for me is how our beloved dead aren't able to receive the kind of funeral they deserve.

Many churches are now busy figuring out how to SCIENTIFICALLY implement the phases necessary for the safest way to return to the sanctuary. If sick, stay home. Mask wearing still is a must, especially when sing-spraying those hymns. No touch rule. Avoid touching bulletins, hymnals, door knobs, trash cans, and offering plates. Limit large gatherings. Spread out in the sanctuary to avoiding breathing on those in the pew in front of you. Set up sanitizer stations. Sub-divide the congregation into worship units. Teams take turns cleaning and disinfecting. Wash hands.

Why do we wear a face covering? Is it because certain stores won't let us shop there if we don't? Because government demands it? Because we don't want to get infected? Because we haven't shaved and don't want our stubbled faces to be seen in public? No. No. No. We wear a mask and practice physical distancing in order to protect you, because we care for you.

If you are washing your hands, wearing a face covering, practicing physical distancing, you are foot-washing like Jesus. We're more of an autonomous collective, and your Lord and mine would be slogging in the mud with us.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

June 4, 2020

"Graduation Platitudes"

Word Count: 750

Graduates: Sorry. It may be a bummer what you are going through now. It sure wasn't the end of school year you expected – proms canceled, graduations zoomed, internships shot, where your best employment option is to become a Covid tracer -- but , trust me, you will be able to milk this for all its worth in years to come. This is a guilt goldmine.

Think about what you will be able to brag about to your kids when they start complaining that their futuristic version of the smart phone isn't as smart as their friend's. "Well, let me tell you, son,

daughter, about what I had to go through with our fickle internet” — “Yes, dad we’ve heard that before” — “Well, let me tell you about the Spring of 2020.” Their eyes begin to roll. “You’re complaining about your prom theme. Well, let me tell you about how they had to cancel my prom. You dislike your coach? Well, let me tell you about how all sports were canceled. Your school’s curriculum frustrates you? Well, let me tell you about how many days we had to attend class virtually. You don’t like your government leaders? Well, let me tell you about what we had to put up with in my day.”

Graduates: Just think about all the guilt you will be able to dump on your future son or daughter. This is a guilt goldmine. You too will be able to annoy your children by heeding the Zen advice of that guru Rock ‘n Roller: “You don’t always get what you want...” It really isn’t the current events that get you, it is your own expectations of these events. Stuff those expectations in your sock drawer, work on your disposition.

Someone I love didn’t get a new teaching job in a suburban neighborhood she thought she wanted because the commute to where she teaches is a pain. Her semester teaching her struggling students on-line has ended. Many of their parents work in the city’s meat packing plant. But, anybody can teach in privileged schools. Few have the gifts to reach these students. They asked if she would leave them the way most teachers have. She said: “No.” Finally, someone cared. She realized not getting what she thought she wanted was for the best. Neither did I get the jobs I thought wanted before the church here in Danville called me. Thank God. What was best happened because we were disposed and ready to make it happen.

But back to the guilt goldmine. My Dad lectured us when we’d complain, advising us how he had to walk to school in all types of New York State weather – blizzards, floods, famine, drought, locust plagues. Then we visited Olean, New York, where he grew up, and we noticed how all three schools were located within blocks from his home.

Me? I did the same. It’s a Dad thing. I’d lecture my kids when they’d whine about having to trudge their backpacks three blocks to Mahoning Cooper School (we miss the joys of small, local schools): “Well, kids, let me tell you about attending split sessions for three year of my elementary education, bicycling for miles back and forth. The horror, the horror, I endured to get a proper education.”

Spring 2020 is horror in earnest. Possibly, this Fall too, given how cavalierly and recklessly we’re treating this virus lately. It may seem a bother to insulated us, not so to many. The bodies in poorer regions and countries, such as Navaho Reservations, Russia, Honduras, Brazil, Kenya, haven’t even begun to be counted. China? Who knows?

Once I had to visit two boys. Their father had just died from cancer. I began by apologizing to them about how unfair it was they had to learn so early what most of us eventually learn later: that life can stink. Life is unfair. It’s a platitude, but nonetheless true.

We do wish these days were better for you – Jacob, Eli, Sam, Eli, Paige, and all others. I’m not sure if you deserved better, but we wish you could have danced and received diplomas with your friends. Well, maybe it wasn’t all bad. At least, you don’t have to sit and listen to all those predictably portentous speeches. My question to you is: What are you going to do with what you’ve been given?

We cannot rightly say to you: “Happy graduation.” We can sincerely say to you: “Have a blessed graduation. Please, be better than us.”

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Thursday, June 11, 2020
“Flag Day”
Word Count: 750

With Flag Day this Sunday, it'll be fun to revisit the story of our nation's flag. Flag Day, June 14 -- which the New York Times once lamented as the “runty stepchild among American national holidays.” Pull out your Number 2 Pencils, it's time for our Flag Day quiz. These first two questions come from the Immigration Naturalization Test. 1) Why does the flag have thirteen stripes? 2) Why does the flag have fifty stars? 3) Can you name two rules from the official Flag Code? 4) Did you even know there is a Flag Code? 5) When did Congress adopt this national holiday? 6) Why June 14th? 7) What do the flag colors symbolize?

Done? Let's check your answers. 1) Thirteen stripes represent the original thirteen colonies that chose independence over domination by Great Britain and their tyrant king. Abuse of power is failure, revealing unworthiness and weakness. Domination and cruelty fear justice and try to choke human dignity, even life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Thirteen colonies bonded in common cause --our lucky number! 2) Fifty stars represent our fifty states. We started with thirteen stars in a circle. Who will become our fifty-first state? I'm betting on Puerto Rico. America as America is meant to learn, confess, grow, diversify, change, improve. These fifty stars shine from a blue field of heaven, representing “a new constellation in the firmament.”

Onto numbers 3 and 4. I love this rule in the code: “The flag should never be used as wearing apparel, bedding or drapery.” Should someone remind folks attending political rallies, conventions, or parades on how to respect the flag? You can hug it, blow your nose with it, or live by the principles it signifies. A second rule of etiquette states: “The flag should never be used for advertising purposes in any manner whatsoever. It should not be embroidered on such articles as cushions or handkerchiefs and the like, printed or otherwise impressed on paper napkins or boxes or anything that is designed for temporary use and discard.” It's evidently okay to violate this rule when making a buck. We like Old Glory but the greenback is where we really pledge our allegiance.

We press on. Numbers 5 and 6: Congress officially adopted Flag Day as a national holiday in 1916, although the custom got launched by a Wisconsin teacher in 1885. June 14 is the set date because the Second Continental Congress adopted our flag as our national symbol by resolution on June 14, 1777.

Last, why red, white, and blue? Originally, these colors weren't symbolic of anything. The flag's colors, similar to England's Union Jack or France's Tricolour, were patterned upon classical heraldry with its traditional colors of Gules, Argent, and Azure. The symbolism of our national flag is whatever we want it to mean. We attach meaning to the colors. No wonder scared, needy, and confused white supremacists, Q kooks, and right wing militants washed these colors out. Colorless is the flag they wave at their mob-fests or stick as decals on their vehicles. The last thing they value are what pro-Americans agree these colors symbolize.

Common consensus embraces the interpretation that red represents valor, hardiness, strength, bravery. President Reagan added his own symbolism by suggesting the red represents the sacrificial blood of patriots. I like this, especially since patriots of various skin colors all bleed red. White suggests the

purity and innocence of a “new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” Sometimes we can be delusional, but let’s take the kindlier, hopeful, and optimistic view of the U.S.A. as aspirational. Lincoln obviously did. Blue is thought to symbolize vigilance, perseverance, justice.

The other weekend our grandbaby, Eve, briefly attended her first protest against police brutality, given George Floyd and the sin of racial contempt. I have a feeling it won’t be her last. Mom carried her along the fringe because of the virus and because it was peaceably boisterous. Loud noises startle ten month she. Eve’s America never has been innocent. Time exposes our flaws and failures, therefore we keep fixing this imperfect union. We forget the need for repentance. With our present transformative spasms and lurches, we realize how urgent is working on this grand experiment of ‘We the People.’

Will we have courage and valor sufficient to improve? How we choose and act now will decide if this flag will still wave for Eve all those other beautiful babies.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

June 18, 2020

“Father’s Day”

Word Count: 750

Susie was the first true love of my life. She was sweet of disposition, incredibly smart, affectionate, enthusiastic, eager to please. She was everything I could have ever wanted. We enjoyed taking long walks together, even in the rain. We especially enjoyed special moments of petting. I’ll admit, without shame, to us sleeping together. The other members of my family thought Susie belonged to all of us. Wrong, she was mine, she was my dog, a pure breed Toy Fox Terrier dad brought home one afternoon. My parents were dog people. We still are dog people. Dogs make people better people, surely less selfish and less self-preoccupied. I’ll comment sometime about cat people.

I’ve had other loves since, each one special in their own way. Earthquake (named after Earthquake McGoon from the musical, ‘Li’l Abner’) was my brazen, mischievous, non-neutered companion. A Terrier/Collie mix, he could hop on hind legs for yards trying to track birds. Earthquake once owned Princeton Theological Seminary, for he marked every administrator’s office. At our first church, he’d take advantage of us trying to hustle the kids from the car and bolt for a frolic. I’d run down the sidewalk, shouting: “Earthquake, Earthquake!” The townsfolk found that amusing.

Zoe came next but she really was the kid’s best friend because Zoe was a dumb and happy-go-lucky Black Labrador, enjoying chasing chipmunks, eating chipmunks, vaulting into Lake Chillisquaque, and playing with spraying hoses. After Zoe, my wife presented me with our current dog, Bailey, a high maintenance Irish Jack Russell. He’s all momma’s boy. Safe on momma’s lap. Him most content alongside momma on the couch. Once a lonely and scared little puppy in a cage. Flyswatters frighten Bailey. Tuck tail and hide.

Show me any dog and I can tell you about the character of the owner. Frankly, I’m inclined to trust dog people sooner than non-dog people. Anybody who is dedicated to caring for a dog, willing to be responsible for feeding a dog, taking the dog out for walkies, picking up their poop, letting them make you look silly, is alright in my book. If a dog approves of you, you get a gold star in heaven.

You want a scared, cowering, snarling dog? Brutality will do the trick. You get snarling dogs when you beat them to obey master's authority. Using brutality to establish dominance cannot produce a friendly dog. You want loyal, loving, tail-wagging dogs? Reject domination. Treat them with loyalty, love, kindly discipline, consistent goodness. You reward them. You give them reason to respect you, to want to please you. Good boy!

Hold it, now. It just hit me. The way my dad trained Susie was how he raised me. At least, he didn't make me wear a collar and dog license. Oh, no. This is embarrassing. Dad did put a collar around me. Dad did lead me around with a leash. It's just that both were invisible. They were values and principles. Darn it, dad. You got me. You treated me like a dog, so, I guess, thank you! You taught me that the more authority you are given the more you have to deserve it. You want loyalty? Be loyal.

It's a matter of right authority. It doesn't come with badge, uniform, position, title, baton, or chest-beating rants. Authority must be merited. I may have been ordained – August, 1978. I may have served as a pastor. In those rookie days I may even have worn a clerical collar, especially when I'd visit church members in prison. Experience taught me that a clerical collar helped to avoid getting grief from guards playing at intimidation more than from the inmates. But neither ordination, collar, nor title gave me the right to assume that authority automatically came with my position. Any authority to be heard I may have been blessed to receive, came from trying to do what my God expects of me and, hopefully, gaining the respect of others. Gaining the respect of others begins with you respecting them.

This applies to any position of responsibility. Fatherhood especially. This Father's Day I'm going to try to remember all the corny advice dad was fond of saying to us. More so, I'll remember how he tried to live his words. He treated us kids, his customers, everyone he worked with, the way he wanted to be treated, even when he wasn't treated that way by them.

It is easy becoming a father. It is very tough being a father. Thanks, dad.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
June 25, 2020
"Dear Evangelicals"
Word Count: 750

Dear White Evangelicals: I write to you as a white evangelical. I'm also male, doubly privileged. I'm asking you to help us learn from each other that God may be glorified. It would be no surprise to any of my readers that unlike most white male evangelicals, I find Donald Trump to be neither strong nor a tough defender of my way of life. Neither can I excuse his flaws as a man and especially as president in the belief that he is fighting for me and what I value as a white male evangelical Christian. Perhaps I should begin by asking if you consider me a valid evangelical.

Television commercials say aloud what is whispered in some church hallways and parking lots. He's a bull in the china shop. He's not nice but we need a nasty puncher. Why choose Herod? Help me understand why you seem defensive, feeling victimized? I want to understand why you seem to muffle scripture's clear call – "do not be afraid, do unto others, condemn not, do not be anxious..." – and sanction a pathetic man who cheats to get what he desires. Wanton impulses contaminate. Causing uncertainty is no fruitful goal. Simply, he's not a good man, nor a healthy man.

Scripture. You and I can equally throw scriptures at each other: Psalm 72 and the qualities of a worthy prince; Amos and his harsh prophecies against unrighteous Israel; The dissonance between White House policies and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

Couplets from Proverbs are particularly stinging. Proverbs 15:4: "Gentle words bring life and health; a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit." Proverbs 11:29: "He that troubleth his own house shall inherit the wind: and the fool shall be servant to the wise of heart."

Solace and conviction comes by returning to key New Testament texts. Luke 12:48: "From everyone to whom much has been given, much more will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded." Galatians 6:7: "...you reap whatever you sow." Matthew 7:15: "A good tree cannot bear bad fruit nor can a bad tree bear good fruit." I Corinthians 14:26: "Let all things be done for building up."

Enough white evangelical males regard Trump's petulant grievance and deceptive narratives as useful tools. Who's using who? Franklin Graham idolizes him as saving and restoring America. Restore what? I just don't get it. I'd really like to talk with Franklin, my white male evangelical brother. Franklin and I read the same Bible but we emerge with a very different gospel.

Four more years of this? Is this what we want America and America's children to look like? Please, help me understand why you're willing to endorse this reality. I'll make the coffee.

A long time ago, despite myself, I realized I needed to anchor my ministry in the insight that "the purpose of church isn't transforming society but transforming the transformers of society." Once upon a time I assumed I'd be a crusader. I discovered how social improvement begins with regenerate persons. Regenerate persons create a regenerate society. Obscured by a slurry of tweets, slogans, retrenchments, anger, anxieties over societal shifts, and fears over loss of control, the hidden piece is the necessity of sincere penitence.

We know where the alternative leaves us. Divine judgment is otherwise known and named as moral consequence, ethical cause and effect. We bring the catastrophes upon ourselves. We are to blame. We create the world, the society, we get. We create the government we get. I'll listen to you. Please, listen to me. I've begun to believe your man is due judgment upon our national sins.

I'll take the hard-headed realism of the gospel any day over what the world offers. Will you?

Restoration, revolution, and redemption are very different goals. Society rightly demands justice and equality. Church asks its white members: Would you today choose to be black skinned? How you answer says everything. Society demands law and order. Church asks: Whose law and whose order? Church asks: Where do you need to repent? Society arbitrates what are our legal rights. Church asks: Are you doing what is righteous? Society cries out for vengeance or escape. Church proclaims a God who can fulfill God's will even from our sins and catastrophes. Society worships power. Church proclaims: "God's power is perfected in weakness." Society is based upon a social contract. Church upholds a covenant of grace. Society says: "Wait" Church laments: "How long, o' Lord, how long?"

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
July 2, 2020
“Past Is Present”
Word Count: 750

July 4th commemorates our Declaration of Independence. Do you know how each of the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence sacrificed and suffered enormously to create government? “Nothing wrong with suffering, if you’re suffering for a purpose.” Government is both necessary and Biblical, worthy of sacrifice. “Our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.” True patriots embrace a popular government of the people, by the people, for the people – not just my kind of people.

This holiday we likewise commemorate another declaration that took place on July 7, 1864, a year after the battles of Gettysburg and Vicksburg. We honor Abraham Lincoln’s proclamation, calling the nation to engage in a Day of Prayer. It wasn’t his first call to national prayer. Wasn’t his last. Two in 1861. One in 1862. Three in 1863. Three in 1864. Nine in total. He was preparing the tenth – a prayer for reconciliation -- before he was assassinated.

One day during the Civil War, humble Honest Abe was told by an admirer that the welfare of the nation was said to depend on 'God and Abraham Lincoln.' Lincoln's reply? "You’re half right!"

Noteworthy is how each proclamation – from Days of Prayer to Days of Thanksgiving -- was to take place on a Thursday. Thursday? Yes, because Lincoln wanted us to gather in prayer, neither as Christians nor Jews, not as Roman Catholic, Protestants, or Quakers, but as Americans. Thursday could not be claimed by any religious group.

Key to Lincoln’s practical and legal understanding was that the citizens of the south were not the enemy. Nor had the southern states seceded. They couldn’t. We were one nation still. The Civil War was not a war against another nation, for legally there was no despicable Confederacy. Hence the war was a police action against persons rebellious and belligerent, hostile to the lawful national government.

Lincoln also believed that the North would ultimately prevail, but still could fail. Given the bloodshed and the weakening political climate, the war stood on a precipice. From May to June alone, given the battles of Wilderness, Spotsylvania, Cold Harbor, and the beginning of the siege of Petersburg, total casualties amounted to 82,000 men, both south and north, more men than U.S. soldiers who died in all the tragic years of Vietnam.

Lincoln knew it would be shameful to boast or taunt in victory. Do not be proud of this. In war, there is no true victory. What is called for is respect, sorrow, repentance. Malice is inconsistent with God. Charity is consistent with God’s nature. It is one thing to quote Scripture, altogether another matter to live Scripture. Our universe, Lincoln firmly believed, is the theatre for working out the moral law.

Lincoln also was keenly alert to the danger of idolatry of nation. He firmly believed that no nation is truly sovereign as all nations stand under divine judgment. This is what the phrase “under God” means. It is not a boast. It does not mean that we are spiritually pure or morally superior – this sin of slavery proved that -- it means we’re under God’s almighty judgment. I’ve said before, when you say “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance, be very afraid.

Hence his call for a Day of Prayer. His words still ring true. They deserve(need) to be again heard and practiced in our age: *“To confess and to repent of [our] manifold sins. To implore Him to enlighten the mind of the nation to know and do His will, humbly believing that it is in accordance with His will that our place should be maintained as a united people among the family of nations. To implore Him to grant to our armed defenders and the masses of the people that courage, power of resistance, and endurance necessary to secure that result. To implore Him in His infinite goodness to soften the hearts, enlighten the minds, and quicken the consciences of those in rebellion, that they may lay down their arms and speedily return to their allegiance to the United States, that they may not be utterly destroyed, that the effusion of blood may be stayed, and that unity and fraternity may be restored and peace established throughout all our borders.”*

One day during the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln was amused by a certain White House visitor's hackneyed boast, him saying: "We trust, sir, that God is on our side." Lincoln purportedly replied: "It is more important, however, to know that we are on God's side."

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
July 9, 2020
“An Excess of Dumb”
Word Count: 750

Caution: removing caulking from around the tub can get expensive. It can when you rip off the tiles that were glued to a splash wall made of cardboard. Solution? Duct tape, lest shower leak and rot woodwork. I worried that my daily bubble bath might plummet into the kitchen.

There's no more duct tape. Instead, there's a completely remodeled bathroom, thanks to a skilled contractor. He did his thing. I followed up with my thing, which mostly involved painting. I enjoy painting. In my profession where you rarely accomplish anything (because you're dealing with people), a freshly painted room is most satisfying. Although, if it were only painting, all would have been fine. But no. Bruce 'the boss' Springsteen got it right when he sang: *“We've given each other some hard lessons lately; But we ain't learnin'; We're the same sad story, that's a fact; One step up and two steps back.”*

The floor tile required underlayment. Closet door could swing open but now would jam on the mat. Time to remove the door off rusty hinges, cart it to the garage, pull out the jigsaw and cut an inch off the bottom. Repaint it again. Rehang the door. When I tried to close the door, given extra paint, it began splintering the hinge frame. Borrow wood chisels and scrape frame and door. Two longer screws added too. The towel rod toggle anchors resulted in three hours of audible exasperation. I've learnt to appreciate drills and drywall anchors.

Next came the main door. We wanted matching doorknobs. New doorknob required chisel work to fit the new rectangular faceplate. Dang! Too much carving. The wayward chisel ripped off a section of the wallpaper-like plywood. Door damaged. Need new door. Buy new door. Paint new door. Cart new door upstairs. Fit door into doorway. Why doesn't door fit? Standardized doors are fine when doorways are standardized. Now I had to saw a half inch off the bottom and a quarter inch from door's height. I knew enough to cut the bottom and hinge side to avoid messing up the doorknob measurements. I further knew enough to call for help from a friend who has a table saw. Do it right.

One step up, two steps back. He's an 'A to Z' kind of guy. He said I'm more 'R to L.' Yes, I had to repaint the door. Not funny. Okay, he thought it funny.

I've learnt to respect my limits. I do a fantastic funeral, but I don't do plumbing, electrical, or table saws. I'm smart enough to know how dumb I am. Another example? For thirty years I've been dragging 8,000' of hose from the garage spigot to water our backyard patio flowers, then haul 8,000' back, and, grumbling, wrap 8,000' around the hanger. Last month it occurred to me to attach a 25' hose to the spigot. I simply could attach that hose to another length of hose reeled up on a hose-mobile stored behind the garage. It takes clumsy, stubborn, conservative me a while to catch on.

It's frightening how dumb I can be. The battery in my Miata car key died during soccer practice one evening. I pressed it repeatedly. Nothing. I panicked. How was I going to get into my car? The head coach suggested I use the actual key. Oh yeah, right...

Strength is knowing what you don't know. What I don't know is plenty more than what I know.

A long time ago at my first congregation, a one stop sign town along Lancaster County, I joined the volunteer fire company. The Fire Chief assumed since I had attended college and was supposedly educated I should go to pumper school and learn how to operate the truck rather than work a hose. After two days of trying to figure out pressure per inch per velocity per circumference, I gave up. Flow Pressure Reach, gallons per minute, per size of hose. What?

I'm not proud. I respect various kinds of smarts. When I was earning my teacher's certificate, I heard boys complaining they weren't good at math. But just ask them about their batting average. A young girl thought she was stupid, yet she could memorize an entire musical script.

Let's be grateful for smart people, those smart enough to combine information with wisdom, common sense with the gift of laughing at yourself. A Roman Centurion walks into a bar, raises his hand, holds up two fingers, and says: "Five beers, please."

Now that's funny.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
July 16, 2020
"Weightier Matters"
Word Count: 750

Space aliens really didn't erect those legendary big headed statues on Easter Island. Sorry. There's a quarry on the island with lots of stone faces partially carved with the tools still littered about. Let's not muddy matters with reason. Or should we?

Easter Island probably was settled by Polynesian colonists around 900 AD. It offered a fragile eco-system, but for over 800 years the nine mile long island sustained as many persons as live in Montour County today.

Jared Diamond's book, "Collapse," describes how the Easter Islanders divided the island among themselves like a pie, a dozen slices for a dozen clans. For a while they all survived happily ever after

because they shared their limited resources, until one day when some clan chief erected one of those monuments, symbolic of power, prominence, pride (also likely staking out fresh water sources). Basically, the chief was telling everyone else: "This is mine. My heritage deserves to be immortalized."

Neighboring chief looked at the statue, took it as a personal affront, shouting: "Hey, who do you think you are? I can do one better." So it went. Venerating persons always is a big mistake.

The size of these statues and platforms increased over time, suggesting the rivalry intensified throughout the island.

Now, to haul these monuments they needed lots of wood for making rope and sleds. Easter Island was subtropical, resembling Hawaii. Botanists believe Easter Island boasted a large type of palm tree, until the Islanders cut them down in this frenzy of 'in your face' competition – making that specie of palm extinct. Soon all trees were gone, resulting in no more wood for building canoes to continue trade with other islands or deep sea fishing, resulting in soil erosion, less rainfall, fewer food sources, increasing poverty, starvation, and thirst – eventually deteriorating into clan feuds, toppling those statues, raids for food, and (naturally) cannibalism.

That was real smart: Building indulgent monuments while neglecting how you're going to eat. They didn't pay attention. Their frenzy obscured their reality. That's how civilizations collapse. Hollow hucksters peddle 'bread and circuses' so the masses might be seduced from facing the hard work of uncomfortable problems, thoughtful discussions, difficult decisions. Folks in denial, angry and confused, will follow a banging drum. Thankfully, we'd never fall into this trap of neglecting weightier matters. Are you tithing your mint and cumin?

Do you want to erect lasting monuments for the ages? Forget stone. Better are monuments of flesh and blood and ideals. Create living memorials. Shadow or substance? How shall we comprehensively mitigate this rapacious disease until we discover a cure? How stitch together access to affordable healthcare? How ratchet tight a solid modern economy that diminishes the wealth gap, offers dignity of work, and makes poverty, hunger, and lack of decent housing aberrations of the past? How restore a foreign policy where we again are a respected leader among nations, standing tall among nations that cherish liberty, human rights, and democracy? How solve the challenges of immigration so we truly become a shining beacon of hope? How reject the temptation of false nostalgia, for attacking today's human justice corrections to our imperfect society, like medicine to an ill body? Understand, "truth alone will set us free," but, as recovering alcoholics learn, "it first will hurt like hell."

Balanced progress further requires the pluck of personal change: What wrong must I own? Where do I need to listen and learn? Where do I need to curb my selfishness? Where do I need to resist Easter Islander folly and commit myself to addressing these weightier matters?

This is worth doing. Otherwise, inattentive island America will chop down its palm trees. We're lucky to live in such times. Our grandchildren are our best living memorials, far more exciting than the idolatry implicit in a row of cold statues.

Few remember Lazlo Toth. He made a name for himself in 1972 when he barged from the tour group visiting St. Peter's Basilica and assaulted Michelangelo's marble statue, 'The Pieta.' Swinging a hammer and shouting, "I am Jesus Christ risen from the dead", he broke the Virgin's arm at the elbow, knocked off a chunk of her nose, and chipped an eyelid.

What an uproar! A entire world denounced this desecration of great art. But I remember my mother's comments as she listened while the news accounts amplified all the clamor and outrage at the desecration. Mom quietly said: "Why are we more concerned about a piece of rock rather than the man?"

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

July 23, 2020

"Why Government?"

Word Count: 750

Danville, among other school districts, is proposing how to open school. We cannot accurately call it 'reopening' school because school never truly closed; It just transmogrified into an unsatisfying cyber version. How shall we restart this fall? What about extra-curricular activities, such as drama, forensics, band, and sports?

Trump wants schools to open. Who doesn't? Ask those parents forced to suspend their careers. Let's have Donald volunteer to teach civics in Greeley, Fort Collins, where our daughter teaches language arts to the children of Greeley's meat packing plant. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos demands schools open, or else. How about she drive a school bus? How about Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany spend a week as lunch lady?

Decades ago my church's leadership made a wise decision when we were contemplating a building expansion. Almost everyone in the congregation agreed to the concept and necessity. Our Sunday school classrooms were unsafe and unpleasant. The leadership of the church, however, concluded we wouldn't begin the project until certain conditions were met, in particular, until consensus was reached by attaining contributions amounting to 1/3 of the project's cost. Conditions were met. The expansion was built. It was paid off within two years. Our church leaders provided good government. Good government yields good results. The converse also is true.

Which conditions must be met before schools open for in-class sessions? Ask South Korea, Canada, Germany, even Italy. We can learn from them.

Maybe we do need to go back to school. Back to basics: What is the purpose of government, whether Congress or School Boards? Warning: there will be a test.

In the Declaration of Independence our framers declared Governments are instituted to secure our inalienable rights, among them life liberty and pursuit of happiness. Happiness, in that era, didn't mean personal indulgence (tavern pints, Miami sunbathing). Moral philosophy defines happiness as the temperament and discipline of moral goodness promoting common opportunity and prosperity. Good start.

Later, the U.S. Constitution was drafted and adopted "to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity." Good checklist.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, on January 6, 1941, confronting world war, delivered a speech highlighting Four Freedoms that all worthy nations must defend: *“The first is freedom of speech and expression – everywhere in the world. The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way – everywhere in the world. The third is freedom from want – which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants – everywhere in the world. The fourth is freedom from fear – which means a world-wide reduction of armaments...in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor – anywhere in the world.”*

We add two more: freedom from ignorance and freedom from trammelled, suppressed voting.

Are you ready for the test now? It'll be true/false, multiple choice, and essay. Surprise, we are the test. This is the test. What's the latest Covid body count? How many people have lost their health insurance? What's happening to small businesses? What's the real kitchen economy these days, as opposed to the helium Dow Jones economy? How is our citizen's ability to vote being stifled? Do we hallow truth, facts, data? Has the White House investigated if Putin's bounties happened? How many children – from Flint to El Paso – are unhappy pawns in a cruel power play? Where is the temperament and discipline of moral goodness creating personal and social happiness? Do we see how challenges create opportunities, how solutions are revealed by the problems?

What's our grade? A? B? C? D? Or have we flunked? No grading on a curve. What's our grade point average compared to the world? Once upon a time we were ranked top of the class, respected and admired by the world as Guardian of Good Government, government securing inalienable rights and freedoms. Why do so many other countries now pity us sulking in the corner of the classroom with a dunce cap on our head?

So why government? Government's job is to insure these freedoms and rights. The duty of citizenship is to insure that our neighbors benefit from these freedoms and rights. How we choose to use our freedoms and rights is up to us each.

America had better go back to school.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
30 July 2020
“Dear Mayfly”
Word Count: 750

Midges are smaller than Mayflies. Midges have a smaller wing-span too. Midges prefer slow moving or standing water. Midges congregate on lights or porch ceilings.

Mayfly relies upon our Susquehanna River during these summer hatchings. Mayflies begin their lives in all variety of creeks, streams, rivers, so long as the waters remain clean, healthy, unpolluted, flowing. Mayflies signal this water is good. Their larvae grow wings underwater. After a time, these water nymphs surface and soar, ever rising as they must from beneath the water surface up into to wind and sky. What a fish buffet! Bass leaps up and snares them midair.

Water nymphs become duns, almost adult Mayflies, mimicked by fly fishermen. These duns swirl and

swarm in bunches, testing their wings, attracting the attention of fish below. As a concentrated fish ball of herring makes easy pickings for dolphin, so too this dun mass to bass.

Three stages: Several years in water for our friend the Mayfly; Second, splish splash, time to use those wings for what they were intended; Last, in air now, unable to return to life beneath the water's surface, they transform quickly into their final adult stage.

Smaller midge and larger Mayfly both swarm, although the midge swarm is a stag party. The adult Mayfly swarm is a co-ed affair, which makes sense because they mate while flying, which is why the adult Mayfly is flying and swarming in the first place. Only when fully mature, our Mayflies swarm above the water surface in what is called their courtship dance. Agile them, they mate in the air. It's a frenetic, frantic orgy in the sky. She then lays her fertilized eggs back in the water. And is done.

After all, they only have so much time. One species of Mayfly lives merely five minutes after becoming an adult. Mayflies even lack functional mouths. Why? Who needs a mouth? No time to eat. They don't need to eat. They won't last that long. Mayfly is making the most of what little time Mayfly has left. Only a day or two to live.

Makes you wonder: How do you want to spend your remaining lifetime? Not as if Mayflies realize they have a day or so to live. For them it is a lifetime. A lifetime is a relative term -- each day a life to make life worthwhile and leave something behind.

Which brings me to brooding about retirement. Friends and family have retired, several to luxurious gated retirement villages (those with the dollars) where they golf, play tennis, enjoy cook-outs and cocktails, then play another round of golf. Okay for them. For me? Sounds awful. I tried golf. It didn't take. A stick, a ball, a walk. Hardly a substitute for rugged old guy soccer.

We had hoped to travel more. Given this vexing virus, travel took a nose dive into a shallow pool. My wife had to postpone her trip to France. Restless me still hopes for another cross-country writing gig. I think I have one more in me. Thomas Wolfe wrote: "Men don't leave life, life leaves them."

What I really miss is work, contributing something useful. One dabbles where one can. Columns, books, politics (my ballot's a Clorox wipe), some preaching, church consultations, teaching. It's episodic, however. Admittedly, there are parts of my trade I don't miss. But this scion of Larry Andrews isn't one for hobbies or dull ease -- "As tho' to breathe were life!" [Tennyson's poem, "Ulysses"]. Retirement is draining for extroverts. Extroverts get energized by others. Extroverts lack an introvert's creative and contented self-discipline. We instead respond to, get animated by, external stimuli. We crave people juice. Without it we shrivel. We end up watching TV reruns.

Time's flying by. There plenty of us who could volunteer at schools as resources willing to help teach special subject matters via zoom. If you receive social security, if you're on the working people's dime, you're obliged to give back to the community. No time for deafness when people are pleading for justice. No time to belly up to the buffet when all hands are needed on deck.

How do you want to spend the rest of your lifetime? Not as if Mayflies realize they only have a day or so to live.

People often ponder and puzzle how they would spend their last days if they knew how few were actually left. The more interesting question might be: Why aren't they doing right now what they could do?

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
August 6, 2020
"Reasonable Minds"
Word Count: 750

Reasonable minds may disagree over whether or not what happened seventy-five years ago today (Washington time, August 5, 7:15 PM) was necessary. Surely, it was immoral. War, violence, always are immoral. General Sherman said as much. Culture wars too. Our family has thin connections to the atomic bombings of Japan. A photograph of our father, Sergeant Larry Andrews, is included in August's edition of "Life Magazine" featuring Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Plus, our father, stationed in China for U.S. Army News, knew journalist John Hershey who authored the classic book describing first-hand accounts of Hiroshima's devastation.

Hiroshima, Enola Gay, and Big Boy were the end result of four years of intense scientific industry, invention, commitment: Einstein and Fermi (among other physicists) to Manhattan Project to Oak Ridge to Los Alamos and Oppenheimer to Trinity test on July 16, 1945. They were the cumulative result of massive financial investment. They were the end result of strong leadership delineating a clear mission with clear lines of accountability, all driven by the urgency of enemies. Develop the bomb. Do so before Germany does. End the war, end the slaughter.

What would you have done if you were in President Truman's shoes? Truman was informed of this secret project only twelve days after succeeding Roosevelt. I join those who say he made the best of the worst calls possible given horrible conditions. Japan did surrender. The war did end. More Japanese civilians were burnt to death from our incendiary bombing raids. The battle of Okinawa also was on Truman's mind where 12,000 Americans were killed, 36,000 wounded, 110,000 Japanese soldiers killed, with at least 150,000 civilians killed.

We offer an interlude. Truman's atomic decision also inspired my family's beloved science fiction movies. During International Day at Mahoning Cooper Elementary School, our young son listened to a foreign exchange student from Japan. She finished her presentation about her country and culture. Our son raised his hand. He asked her, most innocently, if she lived in Tokyo when Godzilla attacked? He remains a legend among the retired teachers.

My point on this anniversary isn't to reignite the debate about Truman's decision. My point is to dramatize what incredible work our nation can mobilize when we have real leadership, capable leadership, intelligent leadership, when we summon the best and the brightest, when there's accountability, investment, discovery, discipline, science, ingenuity, all harnessed to meet clear goals. We're experiencing what happens when we lack the same. God help the U.S.A.

Consider a congregation we had to visit the other evening. Their pastor retired. They were trying to fill out a resume to attract a new pastor. What they had initially sent for review was a mess. Part of the problem was how the retired pastor found it easier to take care of church problems (the path of least resistance) instead of equipping his people to make decisions, be leaders. They liked him being their

chore boy. Email blurbs are lousy for solving problems. We needed to sit down and walk through the form, page by page. We needed to get the entire search committee on the same page (literally). Best: Approach the problem with a clear vision, clear methods, clear lines of responsibility, avoid misinformation, misunderstandings, and competing ambitions.

How best do you solve problems, whether in government, churches, groups, even relationships? You can apply this to backyard sports too, the way my brothers and I intuited this problem-solving process. When only nine guys show up to play softball, you learn to work out how you're going to play a game. Brothers have a way of teaching you how to be clever, how to negotiate, how to be entrepreneurial. If we wanted to play ball, we had to play ball.

The sevenfold process is simple. How you walk each step can be complex, requiring reassessments as conditions change. First, agree on the grounds rules. Second, determine the real cause of the problem. What is the felt need? Don't get sidetracked by chasing after symptoms. Third, name the problem. Is it a pandemic? Is it war? Is it calling a calling a pastor? Is it building a railroad, saving Main Street? Fourth, generate options for resolving the problem. Fifth, evaluate the options. Sixth, plan how to act on the option selected: who, what, when, where, how. Seventh, evaluate the outcome of the action. What needs to be applauded? To be improved? Which mistakes did we make? What have we discovered and learned for next time?

Didn't we do this before with polio?

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
August 13, 2020
"42 Years"
Word Count: 750

This may sound odd coming from a professional minister, but I'm really not concerned about God. The only reason I am interested in God at all is because I am interested in the struggle of the human condition. Who am I to try to imagine God, to try to package God into some box of my manufacture, or to dare presume God's mind? Jesus I got a better handle on. Sometimes.

Dealing with God would be much safer and comprehensible if I worshipped God the way they once worshipped Zeus or Baal or Athene. With sacrifice and incense. Cut up the entrails. Poke about for omens. Lucky Odysseus worshipped a manageable God, offering his libations of wine and roasted thigh bones, blood and smoke, love and fear proven on the spit. Those gods of yore superstitious I could be interested in, them mysterious but not clever enough to be elusive or awful, mere gods to be appeased, flattered, manipulated by us humans. Although, you'd think waking up each morning would be sacrifice sufficient.

After all these years since my ordination as a Presbyterian Minister of the Word and Sacrament on Sunday afternoon, August 13, 1978, I think I'm onto discovering a secret. What secret? That the Bible really isn't about God. The Bible is about us and how our beliefs about God shape us. We once again are clods of mud with breath blown into our nostrils animating us. What did I know of life, let alone being a pastor, when I was twenty-five years old, feckless and fatuous? Cocky too. Sure, I could talk about God. Funny: Me talking about something about which you cannot know. It wasn't as if God and I were pals. Easier for this new pastor was to talk about the stuff of seminary. Greek verbs. Systematic

theology. Luther's protestations. Drafting a three part sermon. The difference between intercessory prayers and prayers of thanksgiving. Did you know scholars say Satan's number 666 really is code for Nero Caesar?

Then came the savage life of a pastor (or is it the domesticated life of a pastor?): teaching the Bible (something unteachable), preaching scripture (something unpreachable,) and yes, a life dedicated and devoted to all that meaningful fussing about budgets and choir directors and meetings and mission work and crusades for good causes. I still know (in the Biblical sense of knowing) so little about the Bible. What little of the Bible I absorbed over these forty-two years soaked in from the pain, the loneliness, the rejection, along with the hidden joy that underlies our human hopes and sufferings. Who could really be trained for the suicides, baptisms in the Neonatal Unit, the long, whispering nights waiting for death? Lives turned on dime by chance, mischance, choice. Seminary tries, but seminary talks too much about important matters. Forty-two years later and only recently have I begun to feel the breeze from angels' wings.

Death and loss are what we deal with, the same as everyone else. Sadly though, we professionals are supposed to be able to discern some higher purpose to it all and share this higher knowledge as if it makes any difference. How I am haunted by the words I spoke when I should have been silent.

This is probably why the older I get the less I find the New Testament interesting (aside from a crucifixion, the Sermon on the Mount, and those disturbing parables). The New Testament tries to teach too much, instruct too much, explain too much. The New Testament can wear too prim. The older I get, more and more the stories of the Old Testament speak to me, all those messy, paradoxical, cruel, honest, horrible, terrible, wonderful stories of the Old Testament which befriend me now. Like a friend, I fight with them. I drink with them. I get annoyed by them. They push me into better. I love them. Tell me again about Ruth's loyalty, compassion, and audacity, about Cain's rejection and jealousy, about David's sins, about his son's hatred of his father, about Jael's tent peg, about Lot's cowardice, about Jacob wrestling through the night and ending up limping.

Often I long for a God I can blame. Or a God I can obey. It would make living life much easier. Are these longings forgivable? Not that I care whether or not God forgives me. Can I forgive myself? Will you? Since we abdicate so much responsibility for our human condition, I suppose we require much forgiveness.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
20 August, 2020
"Votes Count"
Word Count: 750

Are you a white male who owns property? Congratulations! You can vote, as we time-travel to before the Civil War. How we have voted has changed significantly and progressively throughout our raw history, America improving its liberal democracy. Most original State constitutions permitted only property owners to vote - white men. Other requirements were often added: religious affiliation, paying taxes. Votes also were conducted by voice vote until some States approved private paper ballots. No doubt someone complained about this dangerous new method.

Full white male suffrage practically occurred in the 1850's when these restrictions were cut from State constitutions. Pennsylvania did cling onto the requirement of being a tax-payer into the 20th century.

Then non-white men were added to the franchise mix. The 15th Amendment was declared ratified on March 30, 1870, establishing the right to vote to all men born or naturalized as citizens: "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any States on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." This lawful right was immediately abridged and denied through Jim Crow laws of segregation, poll taxes, reading tests, elimination of polling stations, intimidation.

Jim Crow laws led to the corrective Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965. Congress, hooray, purged our nation of corrupt attempts to suppress the freedom to vote! Right.

Hold on, we're forgetting a majority of our population. You may have noticed we've only talked about men. Please note that women couldn't vote nationally until 144 years after the Declaration of Independence when the 19th Amendment was declared ratified on August 26, 1920. Why denied suffrage? As argued back then (sometimes now), women lack an intellectual temperament. Elizabeth Cady Stanton disagreed. Plus, female issues were home and children, not dirty public issues. Women couldn't hold a bank account, own property, pay taxes, even inherit. Some readers might remember an interesting word in many a church marriage vow asked of bride, never groom: "Do you promise to love, cherish, and obey him in the Lord?" Try that one today, friends. Should we be surprised? In the early days of my marriage, my wife couldn't get a credit card in her own name. Girls today might be either amused or outraged that back in my Junior High days, girls were required to wear dresses or skirts. The School Board relented a little when they allowed girls to wear culottes.

Picture how often we vote. We vote for High School councils. Votes are cast for candidates for Halls of Fame. Many congregations vote on their pastor. You can vote for the best star dancer. You vote for club and civic leaders. Your vote determines who sits in Congress and White House. 'Who' is our responsibility.

We highlight one more milestone to our changing, evolving story of voting. On July 5th, 1971, the 26th Amendment gave me the right to vote in my first election. How proud I felt walking into the polling station at my church and cast my first ballot. Snicker, Dad's vote was beaten by his sons' votes (and probably his wife's but she never said).

The history of voting in the U.S.A. exposes an ugly reality: Those with the power to vote always have colluded to exclude others from this right. Have smoke filled rooms been replaced by privileged, smug, golf shirt lounges?

There's a perfect way to honor this centennial anniversary of the 19th Amendment. How? By young women and young men making sure they vote. Their right was hard fought for.

Make sure you're registered to vote. To register or obtain your mail-in ballot, you can either phone the Montour County Courthouse at 570-271-3002, or go on-line for information and forms:
<http://www.montourco.org/Pages/ElectionsAndVoterRegistration.aspx>

The last day to register before the November election is October 19. The last day to apply for mail-in ballots is October 27. The last day for County Boards of Elections to receive voted mail-in and civilian absentee ballots (must be received by 8:00 P.M.) is November 3, the date of the general election.

If you wish to vote by mail, please get your ballot as soon as possible, vote right away, and make sure you return it as early as you can.

Me? I'm excited, eager, to vote in person. Can't wait to play my part in claiming power for us becoming a just, clean, healthy, honest, prosperous for both poor and middle class, and a good democracy.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

August 27, 2020

"The Weight of Words"

Word Count: 750

It must come from the proliferation of smart phones and texting. The smart phone indicates how many people are in the text chain. 6 people. 20 people. This might explain why newscasters will report such things as 180,000 people dead from the virus, or 6 people involved in the accident. This is as wrong as using the word 'less' for 'fewer,' or the word 'further' for 'farther,' or the word 'infer' for 'imply,' or the non-word 'irregardless' for 'irrespective.' Correct is 180,000 persons, 6 persons. Once again I open my trusty and well-thumbed "The Elements of Style," by Strunk and White. "The word 'people,'" these grammarians write, "is best not used with words of number, in place of persons. If of 'six people' five went away, how many people would be left? Answer: one people."

I correct billboards too. A favorite billboard along Route 15 announces, "Marines fight to win." I should hope so.

Want another burr under my saddle? Confusing 'nauseous' for 'nauseated.' Nauseated is a verb meaning 'sick to my stomach.' Nauseous is an adjective describing something or someone 'sickening to contemplate.'

Whew. Got that off my chest. But come on, Bob, does it really matter? Aren't you again being a cranky fuss-budget? You can get pretty sloppy, needing a red pen. I answer myself: Yes! Words matter. Words are supposed bring clarity to communication. Without clarity, we bump into each other, misled in fog and darkness. This assumes we want clarity. If you listen carefully to words spoken into microphones, you'll hear false assumptions, leading questions, trick questions, fallacious statements, partisan pretend journalists planted in the briefing room to ask questions that spread dirt and rumor. When you throw mud, who really gets dirtier?

For example: "I've heard that so-and-so's syphilis has returned. That's what they say." And what I just did is how you smear without accountability. A cheap, cheating dodge. We do enjoy juicy bits of gossip, true or false. Tangled webs and deceit. Best when salacious. Why are we so gullible when it comes to conspiracy theories? Why? We relish tales that confirm our presumptions and assumptions, our ignorance and suspicions.

Press for evidence. Who are they? A Far Side cartoon depicts a woman swinging open a door. Inside the room is a man seated at a desk covered with phones and computer screens. She says: "You, Bernie Horowitz! So you're the 'they' in that's what they say?"

A kissing cousin to this technique is the loaded question: Have you stopped beating your wife?

A hugging cousin to these two ways of abusing language is when pseudo-documentaries present how space aliens helped build the pyramids as a landing pad for flying saucers, possibly assisted by Bigfoot. The pseudo-documentary never claims this to be true. Instead, the narrator teases: "Could it be true?" Statues have been spotted on Mars. Could it be true? Satanic pedophiles lurk throughout the deep state. Could it be true? Talk about corrupt, sick, stupid innuendo!

Circular reasoning and arguments are cute too. "The news is fake because so much of the news is fake." It's Catch-22: You can't get out of the war on the grounds of being insane because anyone who wants to get out of the war is obviously sane.

Then again, Truthiness: It's true because I feel it's true.

Also maliciously effective is quoting out of context. Word spinners who do this deserve a hickory switch whipping. A lie by any other name. For example, the attack advertisement shows a candidate pointing toward the U.S. flag, saying: "This is just a rag on a pole." What is deleted from the ad is the rest of the sentence: "...but what this flag represents are our country's sacred principles."

Friends shared this ditty: A wise old owl sat in an oak. The more he heard the less he spoke. The less he spoke the more he heard. Why aren't we all like that wise old bird?

Euphemisms deserve a doublespeak honorable mention. How about 'negative patient outcome' (death)? Patriot, but only if you vote my way. Freedom fighter, well, one man's freedom fighter is another man's terrorist. Don't you love it when they refer to getting fired as 'career alteration enhancement program,' or 'collateral damage' when they mean babies.

Let your yes be yes, your no be no, the Bible expects.

Groucho Marx is funnier: "There is only one way to find out if a man is honest – ask him. If he says, "yes," you know he is crooked."

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
September 3, 2020
"Good Work"
Word Count: 750

William Diehl was a steel executive in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. He was a good elder in his congregation until he started asking "so what?" about his faith. Then he became a great elder because he was able to connect his religious life with his business life. A book came of the struggle, titled, "Thank God It's Monday." He concluded how Sunday launches us into our weekdays. Our vocation of faith is meant to be expressed in our occupations, wherever we work. Diehl wrote how one congregation posted the sign, 'Servant's Entrance,' above church exits.

Diehl got it. So did my father. When theologian Elton Trueblood wrote, “Church goer is a vulgar, ignorant word; it must never be used; you are the church wherever you go,” he could have been talking about dad.

One of the testimonials shared about dad following his death related how the staff at our family’s Country Club regarded our father (yes, I grew up affluent and patrician). From the fellow who shined golf shoes in the locker room to the caddies to the groundskeepers to the waitresses in the dining room, they all said how he treated them with respect and courtesy. How he knew them by name. How he appreciated what they did and who they were. To them, he was a gentleman. Dad (admittedly patriarchal) was that old-fashioned guy and morality capitalist and servant boss with old-fashioned manners who valued persons for who they were regardless of wallet, make of car, portfolio, or position. Old-school Republican dad (his party since having committed suicide) would have connected the dots when historian John Meacham advocated for “principle over idolatry of power.” Given dad’s work ethic and integrity, I can guess he would have viewed our nation’s accelerated wealth disparity as unfair, as well as our termite riddled economics, the poorer suffering the most. This disparity has worsened since the virus.

America honors Labor Day, folks, not Wealth Day.

Contrast dad to some younger members of our family’s posh Country Club who my brother overheard in the clubhouse locker room. These newer club members – flush from fast stock market deals or daddy’s money -- had watched our dad finish his round of golf with his old friends (real men of business who built industries, earning success the hard way). My brother heard these gelded princelings (Kushner clones) mock our father. How could the Plainfield Country Club allow as a member a fellow who worked in a paint store?

Consider also what I witnessed. My brother and I had finished 18 holes. We were in the lounge having lunch (a ‘men’s only’ lounge) when a fellow rushed in to join his friends at their table. He loudly apologized to his buddies: “Really sorry for being late but I had to attend my grandson’s christening.” Says it all. I channeled my inner Groucho Marx, who wise-cracked: “I wouldn’t want to join a club that would accept me as a member.”

Dignity. Respect. Character. Fairness. The commitment to do good work. You are the church wherever you go.

An American selfie: Our mom served on a board for an orphanage. Periodically, she hosted parties at our house for the children. We had a built-in pool in our backyard. We also had in our side yard a blacktop court for basketball and volleyball. More than a few of our friends’ parents informed mom they didn’t like their children swimming in the same water as those black orphans. Mom told them what they could do.

An American selfie: Meet a seminary friend. Paul’s church in Jersey had a basketball court in their parking lot. Local fellows started playing there on a regular basis after school, others joining after work. Their language wasn’t the cleanest. The neighbors complained. Paul spoke to the young men. They apologized and cleaned up their language. The neighbors again complained because of the noise, sometimes going past twilight. Paul finally realized why the neighbors kept complaining. The young men were African-Americans. The subject of the young men became an item of discussion at church

meetings, more so in the parking lot after worship. Paul again went out and spoke to the young men and made a deal with them and narrowed the time when they could play. Paul was looking for a solution. Paul wanted them there. He thought it had potentials for outreach. Then one day the church leaders voted to remove the basketball backboards. Paul wrote his resignation that night.

What testimonials will be offered about you?

Danville News Column
Robert John Andrews
September 10, 2020
“Dear Children”
Word Count: 750

Last week I compiled my columns which appeared in The Danville News from 2016 till today. How the manuscript will end remains to be seen. We'll find out soon. It's a privilege to be part of this newspaper. I remain grateful to Editor Joe Sylvester, this organization, and you subscribers.

For obvious reasons, especially if you're regular readers, I titled this compilation, “The Donald Years.” The manuscript is dedicated to special someones: Our grandchildren. Sure, writers write because they have to write. I catch Gene Kelly's fever: “Gotta dance!” We also write with an eye to legacy. Every time I to put word to paper I imagine my grandchildren fumbling about my library. It's forgivably selfish, as John Steinbeck wrote in ‘East of Eden: ‘ “How will I be remembered? Will I be loved or hated? Did the good I did outweigh the evil I have done?”

We old folks indulge in the sin of nostalgia. We should also realize that when you keep looking back at what was, you turn into pillars of salt. Wiser old folks keep an eye on the future, the maybe. How will what we say and do today seed the harvest of tomorrow? After months of this virus and its devastation, and after more than five years of Donald Trump and his damage, given his parade of flunkies and those stink bugs of conspiracy theories infesting our homes, we find refreshing signs of hope and promise, life and beginnings. Each baby born is a sign.

I've noticed other signs of hope and promise recently. Three conservative friends who voted for Trump back in 2016, gambling on shaking things up, have had enough and want to be rid of him. You too? Tired of Trump's corruption? Of his barstool tough-guy act, violations of law and order, extremist policies, arsonist lies, narcissistic pathologies? I'm hoping more have had enough. We want to count on the eventual goodness, honesty, and common sense of the American people. The unspoken pain of Trump is that in our secret hearts we know he is us. Trumpism reveals a side of America we nurse but rather keep hidden.

My friends are not as confident as am I that Biden is the providential man for the hour given his relational and political talent, his love for all America, his humane and sensible policies. Still, they remain encouraged that he can build a team to usher in a safe, healthy, genuinely prosperous, and sober age for America. Biden, not Trump, values capitalistic economics, leadership, service. Trump, as cowboys drawl, is all hat, no cattle. The choices? I paraphrase Eddie Glaude Jr. from his book on James Baldwin and America's racism: Double-down on the lie, play it safe, or create anew. Nor can we place on Biden the burden of us courageously loving one another, which is the only hope.

Trump could be re-elected. I admit this possibility. I wasn't surprised at his Electoral College victory in the last presidential election. Even if he's re-elected and continues reducing America into Mussolini's Italy rallying alongside Jim Crow 1950's, my faith remains confident it will not last. Even if he's re-elected, his world is shrinking. Trumpism will not last. Corruption will not last. Dishonesty will not last. Hate can never last. It may distress America for a while, but it will not last. We shall "begin again."

It took me a while to realize I wrote these columns for future eyes. It is, I figured, part of what I'm supposed to do as Minister of the Word. Tough to escape the calling, let alone the destiny.

Words matter. Words last.

Grandmas and grandpas won't last. We hope we'll see these little ones grow up into the smart and gifted young women and men we nowadays 'face-time' in the babies prone to dance, giggle, and leap onto their stuffed animals. We hope we'll get to see them grow up and become the young adults they will be. Odds are, we won't. We'll be fuzzy memories to them. We'll be a photograph or two. We understand. It's the way of it. We won't last.

Our words, however, will last.

Today's children: These bizarre years of your history, birth, and present, are crucial years for your future, your country, your world. I've written these words because I want you to have a record of what grandma and grandpa believed. In our own way, we fought the good fight for your sake and for all those grandbabies yet to come.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
September 17, 2020
"Virtual Learning"
Word Count: 750

How do you parents do it? If this Covid-19 forced us into virtual learning years ago when our kids were younger, we'd go nuts. Call social services! I don't know about you and yours, but from the crib we noticed how each of our three kids had very different personalities and very different aptitudes. Our eldest was reading Jane Austen in second grade. Our second child would spend hours in his bedroom concocting elaborate fantasies and fighting imaginary dragons with an imaginary sword. Our third and most exhausting (nicknamed Tsunami) was climbing out of her crib when she was two months old and dashing around the house, singing songs, expecting applause. If we were home-schooling, how could we motivate each of them according to their needs, according to their gifts?

My school experiences could be instructive. For years I questioned my own intelligence. This self-doubt became acute during seminary when I chose to concentrate on systematic theology over preparing for pastoral ministry. Systematic theology (dreadfully Germanic) requires a disciplined and rational intellectual investigation into matters of eschatology, ontology, epistemology, dogmatics, apologetics, the philosophy of religion, and organizing faith into categorical systems.

Huh?

These classes made me dizzy. Since 9th grade I never bothered to look at my report card; it likely kept me sane. I viewed grades as irrelevant. What did I care how another person evaluated how well I was learning? It was enough how I felt. In seminary, I felt inadequate to mastering theological discourse. That was until, three years into my first pastorate, I became converted listening to a professor discuss how Jesus wasn't a systematic theologian but a metaphorical theologian. Jesus told stories. He delighted in paradoxes. He presented God and religion not logically but as relational – God, not as objective but subjective. When you tire of talking about God, try talking with God.

Listening to the professor, the Bible finally became alive to me. Why? Because I finally realized I live in the world of stories, poetry, narrative, passions and affections over logic.

Huh?

Some schools nowadays are becoming more attuned to different learning styles. Still, 90% of school curriculums rely upon the predictable two: Verbal linguistic (language, reading), and logical-mathematical (numbers, linear thinking). A thumbnail sketch of other ways we learn would include spatial intelligence (maps, pictures), musical intelligence (patterns, auditory memory), intrapersonal (self-understanding), bodily-kinesthetic (movement, hands-on, touching), interpersonal intelligence (understanding others), and naturalist intelligence (appreciation of the natural world).

A useful consequence of Covid-19's assault on traditional education could be exposing the diminished value of SAT's, AP's, and standardized testing.

Covid-19 update: Danville School District struggles to figure out how best to provide safe instruction. Big surprise. The District is doing its best to improvise the school day in light of Covid-19 – virtual learning, hybrid learning, in-class learning where and when possible. Parents struggle to decide how to balance protecting their children against the benefits of social play and learning. Big surprise.

One church in town recognizes this struggle and is taking positive steps to help parents, especially those who are hesitant to send their children to in-class sessions. The first key feature of this outreach involves connecting parents as a support group where they can share best practices, swap resources they've discovered (virtual tours of museums, historical sites), as well as take time to unload, regroup, vent, and appreciate they aren't exiles. Learning pods could evolve from this.

The second feature involves folks like me. How many of us could be vetted and mobilized into helping augment and supplement parental virtual teaching? Who can offer to read children's books or lead music time? Who can offer via the computer special expertise and skills to the young people: Arts, sciences, humanities, foreign languages, civics, cooking, sewing, mechanics, carpentry, banking? In my own case, I've gained some talent in the fields of literature, creative and expository writing, and history. Just don't ask me to teach calculus. The last time I took a math class was geometry my sophomore year of high school. But I bet there's folks out in the neighborhood who can so teach.

Tutoring could be another feature. Who would be willing to tutor young people in various subjects? Are there active zoom clubs out there? How can we make this Covid challenge an occasion for enrichment opportunities?

Parents are doing what they can. The school district is doing what it can. If they need help coordinating, I'm game. It really is up to us. Let's do it together, for each other.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
September 24, 2020
“Accountability”
Word Count: 750

Our son is an essential worker, which means he works in a liquor store in Fort Collins, Colorado. He’s a cartoonist too, which means he needs a regular income besides his commissions. His mother likes him working there because he gets the inside scoop on quality chardonnays. She also is nervous given he’s more at risk than most of exposure to Covid-19. But it’s a smart store. From the start they implemented safety precautions: masks, plexi-glass shielding, cauldrons of sanitizer. Best, the vast majority of customers cooperate. Every now and then there’s a yahoo. Our son bet that their most recent yahoo probably had several restraining orders on him. He arrived, all 6 foot 6 and 300 pounds, refusing to wear a mask. Bigfoot’s T-shirt announced: ‘Live free or die.’ You can live free and die if you wish, but you won’t shop in this store. No shirt, no shoes, no mask, no service. Sensible rules. He bristled at being told the rules. What’s with this perverse pleasure in trashing decorum, norms? He lurched a threatening gesture, trying to intimidate the workers by wanting to take it out to the parking lot. He’d fight them all, stoking his victimhood. It’s everybody else’s fault. The store manager, from Brooklyn, forced yahoo to retreat to his pick-up which sported political signs and flags.

Okay, Trump is onto something about protecting our suburbs. This is the kind of lawless bully I wouldn’t want in my neighborhood. Who’d want to be associated with him? You? Pray for him.

TV news broadcasted clips of similar guys who vented their opinion on masks. One fellow bellowed that it’s all a hoax. Another fellow boasted: “I trust God – if it’s my time, it’s my time.” Hey, ninnies: If you think it’s a hoax, go help the medical staff stuff body bags. Hey, ninnies: Are you your brother’s keeper? You wear a mask to protect others. Behold, God created masks.

How about motorcyclists rallying in Sturgis or college kids partying off-campus, flaunting bratty irresponsibility, dismissing the decency of mask, social distancing? We’ve enough out of control crises to deal with. Why make things worse? Evil, wicked Bob asks that if you ignore Dr. Fauci, why should you get healthcare?

There are varied virtues in wearing a mask. You don’t need to worry about your bad breath. You can avoid brushing your teeth. You can shave once a week. When you wear sunglasses, you can hide and don’t have to speak to people you don’t want to speak to. You can sell advertising space on your mask. You can mutter insults without anyone knowing. You demonstrate you care about others.

Whatever happened to codes to live by? Soroptomists’ principles, Rotary’s Four-Way Test, Boy Scout law and oath? How do I keep any honor if I say I value such laws yet condone such yahoo behavior? When did accountability become as disposable as integrity, fairness, honesty?

Folks out in California are thinking they might need to escape east for a week or two. They’re at their wits end. The fires. Except for rare respites, families cannot take babies out for strolls because of the smoke, ash, unhealthy air. Expectant women are stressed about inhaling foul air. It was the hottest summer on record. Windows must be kept closed. Headlights turned on at noon. An orange glow surrounds them.

People's dreams have been disrupted, piling onto the disruption and loss from this ill-managed virus. Suffering upon suffering. Millions of acres scorched. Towns incinerated. People killed. Climate change's revenge. If these fires were caused by lightning, that's one thing. If caused by fireworks from a foolish party or campfires left smoldering, that's criminal.

We are taught in church and Sunday school (and by a Shakespeare play) to be merciful. Mercy, nevertheless, cannot erase accountability. Mercy means we won't be trapped by what was said or done. If you cannot forgive, you are choosing to let the person who hurt you still control how you choose to feel. It is quite enough for me to work on where I am rather than assuming responsibility for where you are. That's your issue.

The "quality of mercy is not strained," sure, but forgiveness doesn't mean we excuse the person for the wrong they did. No. Wrong, like pandemics, mustn't be ignored, denied, excused. Nor should we forget what was done. If anything, forgiveness exposes it. Brings it into the light. A chance for making amends. There's no future without sincere repentance. Ask any recovering alcoholic.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
October 1, 2020
"October"
Word Count: 750

October is the kindest month, breeding a palette of colors from the trees. Cool mornings so refreshing. Cool nights for open window sleeping. Perhaps beneath warming comforter or quilt. Trying to catch Maple Tree seed pods helicoptering to ground and their intent on propagation. Planting bulbs in expectation for sunshine bloom following hibernation in cold soil. The Itea Sweetspire burning purple-red unto first frost. Grilled hot dogs replaced by stews and meat pies. Cornfields carved into dry mazes. Your lawn grows lazy and slow. It no longer requires the frantic labor of fecund, incessant spring and summer. Even October weeds seem listless. Look for abundance sprawling out in fat pumpkin patches. Look for nature's gift above in apple trees. How do you judge apples? Never by those fallen to the ground but by the ones hanging above, tart and crisp.

Best of all, October ushers in the peak time of fall sports (virus exempt). Professional sports, excepting the World Series, holds for me no attraction. College sports (forgive me, Penn Staters) I give passing attention. Youth sports, however, are what October is all about -- the ripe time of a team's season. The thrill of Marching Bands and weekly games, the heartbeat of a town drumming.

October is my favorite time of year, breeding fond memories of young days on the field. Fond memories of best of buddies – Kenny, Jeff, Chip, Jay, Mitch, and my paisan Oliverie – along with the best of coaches: Coach Formichella. We had a good senior year season too. Fourteen wins, one loss, two ties. Formichella, the kind of coach you wanted to play for. High expectations, fine values, tough teaching, good training, great assessment of where players best fit. I came from Junior High playing Center Half but Coach quickly realized my talents weren't as the control, anchor player. He shifted me to Left-halfback Winger where I could dash and assist. Coach also had a sense of humor. My senior year, due to me busy with the school board addressing tense conflicts caused by racial strife, police patrolling our hallways, I lost my starter position. I couldn't make every practice. I sat on the bench. At least, I was among the first subs sent in. One match, wiseacre me brought a cushion to sit on. Coach made me play

the entire game non-stop. Halfbacks had the fun of running the full field, back and forth, the entire game. Forwards and Defenders watched us pant.

How fortunate it has been since to help assist fine coaches, those who represented what coaching ought to be, men similar to Coach Formichella. I remember when we didn't play as well as he knew we could, Coach blamed himself. How embarrassing it has been to occasionally witness lousy coaches: screamers, bullies, fellows who throw tantrums while berating the young players, cheaters, coaches for whom winning is the only thing that matters and they will do anything to make sure they win. For these coaches, it's more about them than about their players. Men without shame.

How fortunate it has been to revel in October afternoons alongside coaches who appreciated that the real game was helping young athletes learn to win like sportsmen, or learn to lose, to sit on the bench, to recognize others might be better than you, inspiring you to work hard. The summer before I earned my starting position I ran miles with lead weights wrapped to my ankles. The best of sports is helping young athletes learn discipline, self-control, teamwork, shaking hands with your opponents, even discovering how annoying and vicious some fans, especially parents, can be.

Last, good coaches help you learn that seasons end. October yields to November and playoffs if you've earned the right to keep playing. October's rains turn chilly. The turf becomes chewed up, worn out. When you slide tackle, the ground scrapes like concrete. Raspberries. The pretty fields of September turn scuffed and used. You resign yourself to accepting the time comes to hang up your soccer boots, put away your shoulder pads and helmet, store your hockey stick, and move on.

That's the final kindness of October. It prepares you for November, then December. No wonder October ends with Halloween. Halloween began as a New Year's Festival for my Gaelic ancestors, marking twilight time, when the harvesting was spent and the realm of darkness ruled, a time when the barrier between spirit world and reality became porous, when the passions of hot summer turn mellow for their final bounty.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Thursday, October 8, 2020
"Dear Joe"
Word Count: 750

Dear Joe: Should you get elected along with a new Senate, we'll have a fair chance for fair fixes essential for effective government and for restoring quiet honor to America. I've never been more eager to vote. Please, right-wing-nuts, just try to monitor me at the polls. Sure, some friends will vote for Joe's opponent, somehow excusing his anti-constitutional democracy impulses. Who will their wives vote for in private?

What I want to see from our 2021 Executive and Legislative branches is for our elected leaders to exercise the common sense will to restructure how they legislate. I address the mechanics of how Congress operates rather than policies to be enacted. We address not 'what' but 'how.'

Fareed Zakaria, author and political analyst, forewarned us in his 2003 book, "The Future of Freedom," how since 1994 our nation via Congress has been on course toward becoming a damaging illiberal

democracy. We've arrived. Zakaria wanted to reclaim the term 'liberal' in its classical definition, meaning "concerned with individual, economic, political, and religious liberty."

Faced with many conflicts during my career, fix-it plans would begin by analyzing the structural hindrances to possible solutions and reconciliation: Who decides, how do they decide, power imbalances, barriers to communication and information, differences in culture, education, negotiating styles, scarcity of resources. When you deal with people, you naturally deal with conflicts. After disentangling the structural deficiencies and establishing a procedure for moving toward solutions, then you can begin to examine the attitudinal and behavioral barriers that prevent the various parties – our own Hatfields and McCoys – from listening and seeking common ground on issues. Common ground requires compromise when collaboration is too far a reach. Common ground requires the parties putting down their squirrel rifles for the sake of each getting a taste of a win for the sake of the greater good. What is the history of the conflict? How personal is the conflict? What's on the line for the participants? Are there areas of agreement? What are the real issues involved? What is their self-interest?

Consider the unnecessary rancor, grievances, and division over the last three Supreme Court nominees, as well as the one denied nomination. All four could have been managed productively by the simple restoration of a collegial practice that forced bipartisan collaboration in recommending, interviewing, and approving candidates. What practice? When Senatorial advice and consent required 60 votes for confirmation.

Other changes regarding how to legislate? Why does the Majority Leader of the Senate decide what gets debated and voted on? Let bills be filtered through committee, then automatically scheduled. Votes in committee should be reported but not who voted for what. That's up for them to say. It would profit government if votes were taken on major bills without amendments. Another idea? When conflict arose between my staff, we got them into the same room to work through their problems. Presidents who play only on their side of the political street fail their office. Recommended also are enlisting the best and brightest to help solve problems. Non-partisan Blue Ribbon Panels, on a speedy timetable, break partisan log-jams. Get power by giving up power.

Beforehand, it was the public's right to know decisions, not discussions. We've made public too much of Congress' work, thus subjecting Congress to immediate and intense barrage from lobbyists and vested interests (NRA, AARP, PhRMA). The hard fact is, there's too much democracy interfering with our republic's representative democracy where leaders should be able to exercise their judgment free of pollster, special interest, and fundraising. We're structured now for extremism and factions. Too much democracy, contrary to a republic, invites the tyranny of the majority, tyranny of popularity, tyranny of the biggest donors. Decision-makers need to be insulated to deliberate in private, free to offend their base – doing what's right over currying favor.

Leaders also need to get to know each other that they might learn to trust each other so they can agree to work together. A mandatory calendar fixing when Representatives and Senators must be present will force them to attend to business and stay over on weekends. They might even, following Scalia and Ginsburg's example, enjoy each other's company. There once was one dining room at the Capitol rather than separate dining rooms by party. Nowadays, party members who fraternize with other party members get scolded. The loyal opposition isn't an enemy.

One more request. In light of so many deaths, so much indecency, and so much acrimony, please plan for a humble, respectful inauguration.

The Danville New
Robert John Andrews
October 15, 2020
“Grace Notes”
Word Count: 750

Andy locks himself inside the warden’s office. He puts a Mozart album on the record player and broadcasts the Duetto Sul’aria between the Countessa and Susanna to prison yard. This comes from the movie, “Shawshank Redemption.” The guards break through the door and bludgeon bloody Andy, but not before the inmates pause for their brief moment of beauty.

Andy’s friend Red narrates: “I have no idea to this day what those two Italian ladies were singing about. Truth is, I don’t want to know. Some things are best left unsaid. I’d like to think they were singing about something so beautiful, it can’t be expressed in words, and makes your heart ache because of it. I tell you, those voices soared higher and farther than anybody in a gray place dares to dream. It was like some beautiful bird flapped into our drab little cage and made those walls dissolve away, and for the briefest of moments, every last man in Shawshank felt free.”

Can we survive without such moments? They are called transcendent moments, even when the song is blissfully sad. It’s the real rapture. They lift us up because they bring us beauty. Grace notes. Beauty redeems our souls – appearing in pure laughter, flowers growing in garbage, food bank volunteers, cards sent, families at nursing home windows, a tear on a young girl’s cheek, kisses through a phone’s screen. Being human, surrounded by humans and by what we humans do, is tough. Beauty restoreth our souls. Despite what’s going on around us – violence, rancor, sickness, virus, failure, frustrations, losses, fears, isolation, tedium, shouting insults, division, mean-spiritedness, the ache of daily news – beauty yearns to define our souls.

We need more grace notes. Alas, they cannot be contrived. It’s a matter of noticing, being mindful, open to the good, beautiful, and lovely. What restores your soul? For many, it is music. We grow in the womb surrounded by mother’s natural music, blood pulsing -- shoosh, shoosh, heart pounding, heart beating. We listen to the ¾ time and turn it into a waltz. Even the earliest hominids made music through animal horn and drum. Music, within culture, transcends culture, religion, politics, language, education, class, gender, age. Music hath unifying charms.

Why are those prone to melancholy moved by oboe and cello over all other instruments? Why does that timbre resonate? What sound is it for you? Opera, banjo, guitar, piano? We chatted about this once sitting around a candle on the dark porch in Honduras after a harsh day, listening to the trill of birds, telling each other about our favorite music, from Moon River to Mozart, Allman Brothers to Edith Piaf.

Simply put, music gets us where we can best get got. Songs conjure up for us memories of special moments. Lullabies sung long ago. A song played on a juke box on your first date. A dance.

Songs with their cadence make chores go quicker, from work gang songs to sea shanties to marches and Gaelic songs sung by women working together ‘waulking’ beating, pulling, milling the urine soaked cloth

into tweed, thought to have contributed to the origin of the blues. Mississippi Delta blends with Scotland.

Transcendent moments remind us we are more than humans who must mirror the likeness of everyday, imperfect, temporary, wounded mortality. Yes, we die, we're trapped in ourselves, we're terribly alone and disconnected. We never can, never will, experience total and true communion even with the person we most love. That skin of isolation persists. Separation. This is the price of birth and us becoming unique in our own bodies, separate from mom. Entering the world to be separate. That's life. That's being alive.

Still, we can become mindful we are more than mere physical life, we're invited to mirror the likeness of the spiritual, the beautiful. And that's good, even when we are smudged or fractured. Sure, some reflect better than others. Still, the closer you get to the source of light, the more light we will reflect.

What restores your soul? What helps you shine? Ray Bradbury wrote a story about a man who neglects his family busily building a happiness machine. When people entered it they experienced all the wonders and joys of the world, only to exit and be sad at what they could never experience. Finally the machine catches fire. The inventor returns to his family and everyday life, an ordinary life. The inventor realizes what is the real happiness machine: Sharing, loving, and being with others.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Thursday, October 22, 2020

"Taught to Love"

Word Count: 750

Can you love on the basis of an illusion? Perhaps that's how most love. Writer C.S. Lewis portrayed the difference between heaven and earth as the difference between experiencing real love and the craving to be loved: "Do you love me for who you want me to be or for who I am?"

Do we love someone on the basis of an illusion? That's setting yourself up for major disappointments when they dare ruin your illusion. Whose fault is that? Loving someone for who they are makes marriage fun. He neglects to replace the toothpaste cap. She clutters the closet with shoe boxes. He wears the same ratty college sweatshirt. She never misses a chance to be late. Both snore and drool.

Dear Brides and Grooms, sorry, but your partner isn't perfect. You might, however, find even their imperfections lovable (or forgivable).

Can you love on the basis of an illusion? This question needled me when I heard about Donald's plan to establish a 1776 Commission to counteract the 1619 Commission, purportedly to "restore patriotic education to our schools." Donny said: "Our heroes will never be forgotten. Our youth will be taught to love America." Really? This is as lame a cavil as that slogan from yesteryear: 'America, Love it or Leave it.' What me worry? History teaches truth comes out.

We know me-me Donald says things he never carries out. He swells with that deity-like impulse that if he pronounces something, it'll happen, like God in Genesis: "Then God said, Let there be light; and there was light." He talks a lot, little comes of it. More public relations bluster than productive, positive, the difference between actually achieving something worthwhile and marketing. Despite him a

twinge Stalin-esque, DOJ likely won't require his portrait in every house. We won't fret about Donald shaping American education in his image. A crowing rooster doesn't raise the sun.

Besides, is that how we teach young people to love America? Can you love an illusion? We fully favor honoring America's heroes. Yet, what makes a hero a hero? I love history. I love history enough to study history. I love to study history enough to know many facts about America history. I love facts enough to realize movies about American history shouldn't be considered reliable sources. History always is complicated, full of warts, pimples, and comb-overs. As Doc says in the movie, "Cowboys and Aliens:" "I've seen good men do bad things and bad men do good things."

What good is binary thinking? This either-or, good-evil, us-them, right-left, weak-tough, black-white dueling dualistic outlook on life fails to better us. The yard sign proclaims: 'Blue Lives Matter.' Fine. How does that contradict 'Black Lives Matter?' How does advocating for racial justice oppose supporting law and order? Another false dichotomy: Hide from Covid-19 or go out in public. Life is far more paradoxical, complex, and complicated. Mindful of historical perspective, civilizations improve by judging past practices based on modern scruples and knowledge. Civil War surgeons used mercury as medicine. George Washington was a great American hero. He also, along with bad teeth, had flaws. Thomas Jefferson was a brilliant patriot. Tom, more Deist than Christian, also cut and pasted the bits about Jesus he liked into his own Bible. Tom also skipped out on the Revolution and only returned from France when the fighting was over. Have you ever researched the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution that gave Johnson the excuse to wage war in Vietnam? John Wayne playing Davy Crockett portrayed a rugged fighting man. Davey helped Texas preserve slavery because Mexico had abolished slavery. Texans wanted independence so they could keep slaves. That's what that militarily unnecessary stand at the Alamo was about. Who survived the Alamo? Liberated slaves. Andrew Jackson waged genocide against Native Americans so he could sell their land to cronies so they could establish vast plantations and ruin small farmers. Where do you think Hitler found justification for his views on eugenics? From us. Even my beloved Lincoln was a bigoted man. What made Lincoln great was that he realized it and worked on it.

If you want to teach our youth to love America, teach them first to think for themselves. Second, adopt humility. Third, respect reality. Fourth, be worthy of love. It also helps quietly to shake our heads and laugh at our foolish selves. A favorite Far Side cartoon shows a broken mason jar on earth labeled humans, with several scampering away. From the clouds, God sighs: "Oh-no."

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Thursday, October 29, 2020

"Finest Hours"

Word Count: 750

Because I'm writing before Election Day, I do not know what next week's headlines will announce. It could be the president has been reelected (although, given what we're seeing, how long would he remain in office?). It could be that a new president will be inaugurated in January. It could be that the votes are still being counted and a final tally has yet to be announced. It could be that the election is being contested. Of one thing I am certain, we have a chance to be a smarter, kinder people in the days to come.

We theologians have a funny way of looking at life. Even suffering -- with faith, hope, and love -- can become a chrysalis of new beginnings. Shrinking from suffering disables us. The fable tells of a man watching a butterfly try to emerge from its hard shell but it seems butterfly will fail, so the man helps it by tearing away bits of the chrysalis. The butterfly is freed, but its wings, denied what they need to emerge, is now too weak to fly.

How often have we been chastened and improved by hardship? Birth-pangs. Throughout our Bible, we read how only through the struggle of the wilderness are we prepared to enter the future that awaits. What a privilege, what a gift, what a blessing, to be alive today at this time and place! We stand at a defining moment in American history. Political advisor James Carville envisions that this could be among America's finest hours.

Do you see what I see? I see a society repentant and ready to reengage, a society rediscovering the duties required from believing in "We the People," a society rejecting the rational self-interest of the consumptive philosophy of Ayn Rand which has infected the United States for decades. The self-made man -- her idol, her ideal -- is a sad and suspicious creature because at the end of his journey he only has himself to thank. That's an alienated way to live. Who here has no one to thank for their success? For their blessings? Anybody here lacking a belly button?

Point three of Rand's philosophy of objectivism states the following serpent advice: "Man -- every man -- is an end in himself, not the means to the ends of others. He must exist for his own sake, neither sacrificing himself to others nor sacrificing others to himself. The pursuit of his own rational self-interest and of his own happiness is the highest moral purpose of his life."

Is this attitude what has pulled us through the struggles and losses of 2020? Will this philosophy give us the gumption and guts necessary for us to endure still?

Do you see a new resolve born from our common suffering? We have hard months still to go, a hard winter to subdue this virus. If wagon trains could travel the Oregon trail to start a new life, we can travel this road. What then?

Do you see what I see? I am restless with hope, like a bear stirring after long hibernation. This is no steroid high. I trust the courage, pluck, and goodwill of 'We the People.' We have already seen hints of it. Folks wearing masks to save lives. Sane folks realizing what they can do without, what they can sacrifice for. Folks who learn the difference between inconvenience and real suffering. I see thousands of citizens standing in line for hours in the rain to vote, aching and yearning for a better society. I see white defensiveness about listening to the demand for racial justice breaking down. I see our fears and prides being exposed, our exhaustion with chaos and disunity, fed up enough not to put up with the nonsense anymore. I see deep sympathy for the grief and losses of so many, a deep sympathy for those suffering unemployment, illness, hunger, homelessness, addictions. I see the desire to move out of isolation into neighborliness, us realizing that unless my neighbor prospers, I cannot prosper, a recognition that there's more to a good economy than the stock market. Do you see it too, this growling hunger and commitment for civic improvement and volunteerism, for spiritual awakening and revitalization of religious organizations?

We're finally beginning to truly appreciate that there's more to bread than processed sliced white bread. There's bagels, bazin, tortillas, pumpnickel, rye, sourdough, naan, pulla, baguette, challah, anpan, ciabatta, pita, lahoh, among others. This true for our kitchen tables and for our government.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Thursday, November 5, 2020
“Election Day Prayer”
Word Count: 750

Some will be disappointed. Some will be ecstatic. Some will be infuriated. Some will be relieved it's over. Some will be taunting and gloating. Some will be exhausted. Some will be seething and accusatory. Some will be incredulous. Some will be resolute. Some will be nervous, afraid, and dubious. Some will be worried and stressed. Some will be frustrated to the point of giving up. A few won't care. Some will be further inspired and resolved to keep fighting for who and what they love, for how else can you endure?

Regardless how this election turns out, sin is crouching at the door for all and each of us, for when emotions are stirred, sin feeds on our emotional reactions to reality, to what we experience, keenly when we are personally invested. We moderns, given our enlightened sensibilities, tend to dismiss sin as a quaint and antiquated religious relic of an unsophisticated and superstitious era. This is exactly how sin wants us to view sin, despite its insidious virulence and causal familiarity proven by every newscast and news article. Sin casually prowls forth taking advantage of every personal and social fissure, fracture, and conflict. Sin salivates when we do what sins wants all and each of us to do: to see the world as a wolf pack competition between predator and prey, between winners and losers. Compare sin to a cancer ever present, ever lurking, ever awaiting the opportunity to be cellularly released. Sin anticipates the opportunity when our spiritual immune system is depressed. Then it pounces and devours.

So how will you respond to this election week? How will you react to the emotions churned by this tempest of politics? The years ahead will be determined by today. How you win and how you lose reveals your soul.

So dismiss not cavalierly how sin is aptly dramatized by the classical Seven Deadly Sins – greed, lust, anger, sloth, gluttony, envy, and the granddaddy of them all, pride. Think not of sin as the polar opposite of what we consider good. See sin as the distortion of the good. Sin, like a contorted mirror, misshapes and corrupts our passions and emotions. Give us humans any divine good and our natural prism of self-centredness perverts it. Healthy self-respect gets twisted into disdainful and haughty pride. Ambition gets twisted into greed. Romance gets twisted into self-serving lust. Admiration gets twisted into envy. Righteous indignation over wrong gets twisted into ogreish wrath. Sane boundaries gets twisted into apathy and indifference. Epicurean delight gets twisted into gluttony.

You can play this game of sin yourself. Take any virtue and shine it through the prism of self-centredness and what do you get? Patriotism plus sin equals _____? Power plus sin equals _____? Motherly love plus sin equals _____? Success plus sin equals _____? Popularity plus sin equals _____? Tolerance plus sin equals _____? Now do you see why we need to be earnest in prayer, lest even hate, prejudice, and cruelty be justified as good?

So we pray this election week.

First, we pray for our candidates-elect, those chosen to a new term of public service and the virtue of government (for if “men were angels, we’d have no need of government,” – The Federalist Papers). May they appreciate the dignity and nobility of their high calling, ever guided by wise and edifying use of authority.

Second, we pray for those who failed to gain sufficient votes for office. May they gain insight about themselves. Grant them grace in defeat and meaning in loss.

Third, we pray for the president and vice-president elect. Grant them compassion, sound judgement. May they ever appreciate, with all humility, the burden of their duties. Give them an eye to their legacy by reminding them that they are mortal and that all nations before God are a “drop in the bucket,” chalk on concrete, yet gloriously bestowed with the rare and binding privilege during these days to insure justice among the people they serve – protecting them, insuring peace and domestic tranquility, promoting their happiness, defending the poor, the orphans, the widows, and them who have no helper.

Fourth, we pray this week especially for us each and all, ever called to be the loving conscience of the nation, ever called to work hard, fighting the good fight, entrusted with the responsibility to further the good as our God reveals the good, ever called to hold all and each to account that we may be worthy of our time and place.

Amen and Amen.

Epilogue

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Thursday, November 19, 2020
“Skin In the Game”
Word Count: 750

When something happens that affects you, it helps to try to figure out why it happened. Sometimes it means trying to figure out why something good happened so you can increase the good. How did I get chosen to be this church’s pastor? Why did our kids grow up to be good people? What made the corn grow sweet this summer? Why did we win the championship?

Usually, however, we try to make sense of what happened when we view what happened as sad, bad, or disappointing, so we can correct what went wrong. The patient died. What happened? The once happy couple are now divorced. Why? Despite opening with great fanfare, the business on Mill Street folded. Why? My team lost the playoff. Why? My Presbytery just closed another church and sold the property. What went wrong? Why did this new church development during the late 1950’s, located in a thriving suburban neighborhood, fail? My autopsy of the church has led me to uncomfortable probabilities. They defaulted on ministry years ago and deserved to be closed.

A recent column by Michelle Goldberg reminded me how following Trump’s 2016 election a cottage industry of hand-wringing and soul-searching quickly and rightly developed. And it was good. Why did we lose? Books such as “Alienated America” and “Hillbilly Elegy” taught me about how a vast number of my fellow citizens who favored Trump felt disrespected -- those from Shamokin, Jersey Shore, Emporium -- as well as how I have been neglectful of their needs, their fears, their anger, their defensiveness, their despair, their sense of powerlessness and abandonment. The mantra of us failing to get out of our bubble was chanted and echoed among us losers. Cato Institute’s P.J. O’Rourke’s book, “How the Hell Did This Happen?” was annoyingly convicting. And it was good. I had to unplug my ears and question my assumptions and biases to try to learn to listen and hear what ‘the other’ was saying. Sometimes I did. Sometimes I didn’t. We Biden and Clinton voters still make the mistake of failing to understand where the Trump voter is coming from. This doesn’t mean I have to agree with or even tolerate behavior, policies, and beliefs I consider intolerable, larcenous, and wrong, but it does mean I need to understand why. Treat others the way you want to be treated. That’s sounds familiar. Or replace the word, ‘treat,’ with, ‘respect.’ Could hope begin as simply as us choosing to practice the Golden Rule? Don’t look to the stars for fault, Dear Brutus, or others, it begins with us accepting personal responsibility.

In “To Kill a Mockingbird,” Scout comes home from her first day at school and complains to Atticus the trouble she got into with her new teacher when Scout tried to tell her about another student’s pride. Said Atticus: “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... Until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it.”

An old adage suggests, “the unexamined life is not worth living.” Decency and patriotism required me engaging in uncomfortable self-examination. Consider it a spiritual colonoscopy and political colorectal examination. Trust me, it’s much easier to ignore an unexamined life, but then those polyps eventually get you in the end. These years of Trump’s presidency have taught us much, with much still to discuss. Who is America? What do we Americans really value? Why did the rural counties of Pennsylvania overwhelmingly vote for Trump in 2016 and 2020? Why did 60% of Montour County voters? For this election of Joe Biden, why did the percentage of Democratic voters in Montour Country increase?

Given the results of these last weeks, will a cottage industry of soul-searching and hand-wringing now develop the other way around? How will Trumpists handle Trump's loss? Gooses and ganders come to mind. How about it? Where have you been neglectful? What's your bubble? You want respect? Will you give respect? Personal responsibility goes both ways. Will enough Trump voters examine themselves? What do they need to understand where the Biden voter is coming from? Why did so many dance in the streets? What does Shamokin need to learn about Philadelphia? What does a blue collar white guy need to learn about a black mother from Reading? What does a diehard old guy Danville Republican need to learn about a migrant worker from Honduras working Pennsylvania fields or from a successful Latina from Queens?

There's a real chance here. If.

Robert John Andrews

Thursday, December 31, 2020

"Happy New Year"

Word Count: 750

Who else is ready to close the book, ring the bell, blow out the candle on 2020? Tomorrow begins January, named for the Roman's most venerated god, Janus, the god of doorways. Janus was two-faced, one looking backwards, the other looking forward. I'm looking forward to crossing the threshold into the New Year, although I'm aware many want to keep looking backwards. You do have to admire their obstinate clinging to their own reality.

Asked Custer: "What Indians?" "I feel this ship is unsinkable," said Titanic's captain (glug, glug). "I am Yertle the Turtle! Oh marvelous me! For I am the ruler of all that I see," said Yertle, until Mack burped and shook the throne of the king!

You do have to admire such confidence based on feelings rather than reason. It's a remarkable persistence in folly and stubborn denial. Thank you for lessons for our grandchildren to study.

Rumors report stalwart Ironman boosters feel that Danville's football team didn't lose its playoff game to Wyomissing by the score of 14 to 44. No. Danville won. Danville's victory was taken away by rigged calls from corrupt referees. Likewise, bless the resolute disciple in town whose sign on the rear of his trailer still proclaims: 'Trump 2020 – make liberals cry again.' Back in November of 2016 some liberals cried. They cried because they were broken-hearted and feared where the nation might go. I'll take the liberal reaction any day over cringing vengefulness. Who's the snowflake!

Our son still gets yelled at by miserable customers when reminded they must wear masks. The latest yahoo shouted obscenities before they escorted him out. Living backwards, foolishly. Something better is coming, actually. Less indifference, more compassion. Our son hid Rubber Duckies about the store shelves for a finder-keepers game. Customers welcomed this good cheer. People want to smile. Our son told about a young woman who was stressed. He quietly gave her a discount. She looked at her receipt, asked him about it. He told her she appeared as if she needed it. She started to cry. We'll take a cup of kindness yet.

I'm glad for you, Mr. President. You finally got your wish. You never really wanted the job, what you wanted was the power. Sadly, the aim of power always is more power. Yet power alone becomes true

power when employed to benefit humanity. My New Year's wish is that you and your right-wing jihadists stop embarrassing America and yourselves by wrecking it all before the new fellow moves in. I could never be a landlord. How many landlords have had to deal with crummy tenants? Tenants who feel victimized, despite having failed to pay rent for months. For evicting them they take it out on landlord by overflowing the bathwater, turning up the heat, letting the dog urinate on the carpet, stealing lightbulbs. Does America need to get a restraining order following this breakup? White House staff, please fumigate, then count the silverware.

Again, your hutzpah is remarkable. Congratulations on banking a nest egg by tin-cupping your supporters and PEZ dispensing pardons to unrepentant crooks and killers of children. We're so proud of our President's farewell statesmanship and valedictory commitment to character and community. Your devout fanatics decry how you never were given a fair chance, how the fake media and deep state were bent on destroying you from the beginning. The real fault was how you disdained the accountability and responsibility that accompanies authority. Beware, fellow passenger. Do you really feel your enabling and permissive Republican contortionists will continue to tolerate you once you leave office? America's hungry, America's dying. Let's play golf. Discover happiness: step into the freedom of insignificance. The Trump business plan: spinning straw from gold. Scandalous is believing you're indispensable. Who is? My profession regards it our duty to help our successors succeed.

Looking back, you could have governed. Government isn't always a good thing but government always is a necessary thing. You might have achieved mediocrity if only you had listened, cared, and tried. You could have governed and achieved some good. You have secured your legacy in American history. What a waste.

Me? I'll do whatever it takes to charm good luck for 2021 -- eat twelve grapes, jump off the chair, be sure to smooch Elaine at midnight, eat my black eyed peas, jump seven waves making seven wishes, eat my pork and sauerkraut -- whatever it takes to conjure up some good luck. The problem is, I don't believe in luck.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Thursday, January 21, 2021
"A Nice Church"
Word Counts: 750

The church pulpit wasn't my intention. When young, I had better ambitions. I felt called, instead, to serve in what my religious tradition regards as the noblest and highest calling a person can receive from God: to serve the public good in government. How? Become a Navy pilot, enter politics, become a senator. A good plan, until I heard Martin Luther King, Jr. preach, until I heard my pastors take a stand. Can you believe in the gospel without opposing oppression, injustice? We echo John Lewis' "good trouble" mantra.

A different calling began calling me, for I came to realize how government can prevent you from lynching your neighbor but cannot make you love your neighbor. Jesus is my savior, not the state, howsoever vital is the state. So this week I thank those who voted for Biden. I guess that you who didn't are now glad you lost.

Can't we all just get along? No, we can't. Not on our own. That's a Presbyterian answer. Church, through ambassadors such as King, argues it remains "wrong to use immoral means to attain moral ends" lest we end up, for instance, with assaults on our Capitol. Bad trouble. Do we really want America made in the image of Q conspiracy tantrum toddlers? In the image of those celebrating the Jewish holocaust? In the image of lynch mobs violent against those who disagree with them? Obviously, blue lives don't matter to those MAGA. In the image of 'we alone are right?' In the image of christian nationalism? In the image of white supremacists carrying that flag of dishonor and infamy or waving their silly flag of their fearful leader? This is heroism? In the image of terroristic militia, brown-shirts by any other name, disloyal behind the lie of patriotism? The Capitol you claim as your house also is the house of my African-American son-in-law, and mine.

Veins of pain and anger, fear and bigotry, alienation and willful ignorance, lies and arrogance crisscross America. What happens to a house built on sand? I've addressed this problem often. Given recent events, whosoever relies on immoral means must regain America's respect if they wish to be heard, supported, redeemed. Required: truth, contrition.

Myriad ways the church swims in the political pool. I've stood on court house steps and prayed. We encourage citizens to vote, more so, to get out there and hold office. "In God We Trust" says my dollar bill (all others pay cash...). The flag hangs in our sanctuaries. Since Reagan, our government sends an ambassador to the Vatican (we Protestants wonder how come we don't get an ambassador too).

We've been meddling for centuries. Since when should church be nice? Nice means pleasing, a vague agreeableness. This word 'nice' originally meant 'trivial, foolish.' The church slogs hip deep in politics, for faith requires no namby pamby Jesus. This week I'm grateful to be chastened by how King reminded white moderate Christian liberals in his 'Letter from Birmingham Jail' that they have been "more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained glass windows... I have watched white churchmen stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities." I'm proud when church "was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society." Subtract moral religion from the equation and where's the hope? That's the church I love, until we become tyranny's unholy cheerleaders or silent in the face of unjust laws, violence, inhumanity.

John Knox rebuked Queen Mary for repressing Protestantism. Was not Jonathan Witherspoon political when he preached from his Princeton pulpit about the necessity of freedom and American independence? Who opposed slavery as incompatible with humanity, despite the church's own sins? Give thanks, for every major social progressive movement can claim religious inspiration. Who challenged Nazism as demonic? Pastor Bonhoeffer. Was not John Mackay, Moderator of the Presbyterian Church, boldly loving the gospel when he stood among the first to defy Joseph McCarthy and the House of Un-American Activities, naming his tactics un-American?

Was not Martin Luther King Jr. political when he led boycotts and marches? King, as a disciple of Jesus, knew who the enemy was. Never persons. Always ignorance, want, hateful ideologies, prejudice, the power to dominate and violate the humanity of others. "Hate begets hate, toughness begets toughness," he preached, "and it is all a descending spiral ultimately ending up in the destruction for all and everybody."

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews

Thursday, February 25, 2021

"The Gift of Not Like Me"

Word Count: 750

You needn't hold your breath for the release of the 2020 census results on April 30th. It's unlikely here in Montour County we'll see big changes, especially in population statistics. Research indicates a fractional increase in foreign born residents, now 4.35% of our county population. This increase enriches our community. We're double Columbia County's percentage. Anyone want to bet we'll still be over 90% white?

Where I grew up, my once predominately Protestant Jersey hometown included African-Americans, Irish, Orthodox Jews, Hungarians, and, gastronomically, a bevy of Italian grandmas who ignored learning English and provided my friends' friends (meaning me) with the tastiest meals I've ever eaten. God bless Italian holidays. Thank you, Muranos.

Not only can a monochromatically inclined community deny your taste-buds soul food from around the world, such bland ethnic conformity can reinforce blinders to your soul. Are we surprised when the sin of refusing to value the gift of those 'not like me' breeds incestuous extremist groups, slavish loyalties, and pride in the ignorance of white advantage? The Southern Poverty Law Center ranks Pennsylvania fifth in the nation for hate groups. Christians: we're simply not doing our job.

My Dad spoke about taking a bus in Georgia before he was deployed to the Pacific theatre. Raised in a town in New York State, he didn't know about Jim Crow south. One day he got a taste of it; he didn't like it. He paid his fare and walked to the back of the bus. He sat down. An elderly African-American woman whispered: "Young man, please move forward, sitting here could cause trouble for us." Role reversal moves us in the right direction. How would your life have turned out if you had been born black? Asian? Latino? When it wouldn't matter, then we're close to effecting the Second Coming.

Black History Month teaches me, pushes me, reminds me. One news channel asked guest panelist to highlight African-Americans from history they believed deserve recognition. Familiar names were mentioned: Thurgood Marshall (Supreme Court Associate Justice), Frederick Douglas, Shirley Chisholm (my first vote in a Presidential primary, still have the campaign button), John Lewis. Then were named George Starling, Ruby Bridges.

Ruby Bridges? She was the six year old girl taunted with vile threats by vicious white mommies when she desegregated a Louisiana all-white elementary school. Norman Rockwell painted that haunting portrait of her, "The Problem We All Live With." The problem wasn't a little girl.

George Starling? Leave or get lynched in Florida for trying to unionize sharecroppers? He left, becoming a Pullman Porter. Duties required him to help black passengers move to the segregated train car once they crossed the Mason-Dixon line. After the Civil Rights Act passed, he informed black passengers they could say when the conductor ordered them to move: "I bought a ticket."

Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin named A. Phillip Randolph, union organizer and civil rights activist. Randolph organized the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and was instrumental in convincing Roosevelt to prevent the banning of black citizens from war industry jobs. He insisted on Truman desegregating the military. He headed the 1963 March on Washington.

If I were a guest panelist, who might I name? I'd name Willie, John, and Ernest. I never did learn their last names. They knew mine, although to them little boy me was Mister Robert. Such were the times. John and Willie were rugged, overalls wearing men, employees in our family's paint and ink factory. Ernest, gray haired with a face carved and hardened by decades of hard work, was my grandma's handyman. He frequently shared fish he caught with Missus Young. I'm grateful how our patrician family treated them and their families with respect, but what were their lives really like?

Also I'd name Pastor Ambrose Hopkins. I swear he was old enough to have been on first name basis with Moses. His faith was equally weathered. He was the pastor at Mount Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church in the Pennsylvania town where green, un-tested, freshly Princeton minted me first served. Weekdays, he labored in the Coatesville Steel Mill. Nobody said it aloud, but Mount Zion AME was the first church in our Christiana and Atglen region, formed by Freedmen and runaway slaves. Pastor Hopkin's own grandfather participated in the 1851 Christiana Riot, where Quakers, Freedmen, and escaped slaves fought off Maryland slave catchers. Frederick Douglas received one of the pistols used in that preliminary Civil War skirmish. When Pastor Hopkins benedicted you, you knew you were benedicted.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

March 18, 2021

"Dr. Seuss"

Word count 750

When I heard about the cancel culture's attempt to censor my beloved Dr. Seuss I leapt to his defense. Dr. Seuss has been a family favorite for his eloquence. Our collection of his works is impressive, though incomplete. When I would read monthly to 1st graders at school, Seuss was a giggly treat. Especially fun was reading new tales to Sam and Jim, Sally and Callie. Not "Green Eggs and Ham." Not "The Cat in the Hat." Instead: "Yertle the Turtle," "The Sneetches," "Horton Hears a Who," "Gertrude McFuzz," and (skewering today's obdurate opinions) "The Zak." Seuss was punctilious at portraying cultural sins with wit, grace, and rapturous valorous silliness.

What? The power brokers of culture are censoring Dr. Seuss? Folly fully on the loose! How dare those prima-donna barbarians of elitist prudery impose their cancel culture, their preening political correctness, on my bookshelves. How dare they censor "McElligot's Pool," "Mulberry Street," and "If I Ran the Zoo." The other stories banned are strange to me, so I cannot comment on those three.

Boy, this got me steamed. Bob, calm down, put hand to ear. Bob, listen. What sound do I hear? They're not pulling these stories from shelves and tossing them onto the book burning bonfire. We leave that to those prima-donna barbarian elitist prudes on the other extreme, the ones who try to ban "Harry Potter," "Lolita," James Joyce's "Ulysses," or who sigh at "The Catcher in the Rye." Fact is, the Dr. Seuss people simply are thinning out those early works of Seuss where content has been judged unsuitable, given modern sentiments and scruples.

Will sections deemed inappropriate be reworked? Baby and bathwater comes to mind, because when I rushed to defend my beloved Seuss, I went to my library and re-read "If I Ran the Zoo." The page illustrating some of the residents of the African island of Yerka is tacky and rude. His artistry seems drawn from the stereotypical portrayals that you might find in those disparaging Tarzan movies ("ungawa!"), even "Gone with the Wind." So too the depictions of the helpers in the mountains of

Zomba-ma-Tant where Seuss jokes about their eyes being slant. Times insensitive. Times thoughtless, like the depictions of the Monkeymen of Planet X in another book in my library: the collected comic strips of Buck Rogers. In a 1943 serial, Buck's friend, Dusty, explains: "The Monkeymen of [Planet X] are descendants of the 20th century Japs – 500 years ago. After the United Nations destroyed Tokyo, they fled into space and reverted to type – and became Monkeymen." We wonder, did all Native Americans raise their palms in the air and grunt, "How?" Perhaps if we're willing to be honest, we have much to atone for now.

Tucker, Don Junior, plus those liberals lacking humor, let's all chill out. That's thing one. Let's avoid rushing to our defensive corners so we can come out swinging. Seriously, there's a time and place for us to read books that reflect the cultural biases of another era. Those works require the maturity to study them in context. Would you really want to read "Huck Finn" as a bedtime story to your third grader? Would you really want to let your Middle School child watch "The Birth of a Nation" and absorb it as history? Maybe some here would. Would you sing-along with your daughter songs sung by black-faced Al Jolson in "The Jazz Singer," a film revealing racist 1927? Even "Dumbo," given hipster crows, deserves a disclaimer and understood in cultural context (by those willing to understand). Isn't there something richer and sweeter to read to your buttery pancake loving toddler than "Little Black Sambo?"

Can we go overboard? Yes, that's what humans do best. Just watch Fox News' uncritical, fawning for a crusade, readily offended reporting (playing to their audience looking to be offended) about this decision regarding a smattering of Dr. Seuss' works. We humans love to ride a pendulum. That's thing two. Still, my puzzler is sore trying to figure what's amiss in "McElligot's Pool." Was it the reference to Eskimo Fish? Or the blunt farmer? There always is wheat and there always is chaff. Knowing which is which is smarter.

By the way, I daresay, I received my vaccination the other day. Looking forward to dose number two. They did it well, I conclude, from tent scrum into time slot line, then gentle vaccination to observation room. If only we had a vaccination for stupidity, hysteria, bigotry, too. Maybe we do.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Thursday, June 10, 2021

"Growing Up In America"

Word Count: 750

O' the things we do that we have to do even though we don't want to have to do them. Although, I will confess my root canal was easier than my anxieties anticipated. What are some of your least favorite things? Dieting? Cleaning toilets? Installing ink cartridges in the printer? Paying taxes?

Doing what you don't want to do but have to do because it is the right thing to do is a sign that you're growing up. You, friend, are behaving like an adult, even when you'd rather not.

The same is true with civil courtesies, common respect. Writing thank-you notes. Thanking cashiers. Shaking the hand of the winner, admitting you lost. Drivers alternating when the highway merges into one lane so all traffic can continue to flow. Treating others how you want to be treated. Living the Golden Rule. The rule is simple, doing it is tough, particularly when not mutual. Of course, Jesus didn't say: "When convenient." Seminary trained us to hold the other person's hand as tightly as they hold yours.

Colleagues have confessed apprehension about moving from their COVID inertia and isolation back into public roles. Some, especially introverts, even doubt if they are up to the challenge given how these months have changed us. There's the excitement of society beginning to emerge, courtesy of vaccinations; there's also a sense of dread. Colleagues say: "I shouldn't have to feel I need a kick in the butt to get back to my responsibilities, but I do."

At least their dread and doubt is honest and healthier than some behaviors we've seen lately. Why are people behaving so badly? Has COVID unleashed a breed of selfish and spoiled brats? Fans spitting on athletes. Dog-walkers neglecting to pick up their dog poop. Drivers staying in the left lane, endangering traffic (especially driving into Danville). Mowing lawns early evening when neighbors wish to enjoy their patio. Upstairs apartment dwellers demanding their right to play loud music and dance at 3 AM, then incensed when told to respect their neighbors. Sick souls with guns viewing life as prey or predator, casual malice toward police, the innocent. Bigoted, brutal officers exposed. Young men, distorted by hatreds, beating old people, while spectators watch. Sore losers choosing to cheat lest they lose again, easier than earning it. Violent and angry factions behaving like abusive boyfriends. Liars, the lies hungrily swallowed. Accusing others for your mistakes, sins, failures. Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, and their colluders debasing our American flag. "Owning the libs" – is that all you got? Shameful has been members of society who contend they've been humiliated, so they lash out and make themselves feel superior by humiliating others.

Friend, you're a seagull in the movie, "Finding Nemo," them squabbling over two fish, all screaming, "Mine! Mine! Mine!" You ain't grown up, friend.

Civilization takes effort. We Presbyterians have no illusion about humanity's natural selfishness, hence our effort to encourage and discipline people to act unnaturally and become ferociously kind, courteous, merciful, just, honest, selfless. If you cannot like someone or what they say or what they do, you can, at least, love them.

The same is true with democracy. It takes effort. For democracy's orchard to thrive and bear fruit, it requires we the people committing ourselves to certain essential and practical principles, common goals: 1) That we the people preserve equal rights, insuring equality before the law (faithful believers add that all people are equal and beloved in the mind and heart of God); 2) That we the people guarantee impartial courts; 3) That we the people, protecting this social contract, agree to play by the same rules; 4) That we the people agree to be literate, informed, and rely on the same facts to deduce decisions; 5) That we the people refuse to tolerate corruption and shall punish those who are corrupt; 6) That we the people maintain checks and balances on power, lest power be abused, and, without check and balances, it will be. These are the six principles of patriots, our nation's working reality and promise.

Flag Day is Monday. Last week I counted ten flags displayed on my block. That's fine, so long as we realize flying the flag, hugging the flag, or pledging to the flag is hardly enough, hardly adequate respect. Only by practicing these six foundational principles of democracy do we the people honor our flag. Anything less, spits at what the flag represents.

It's time to grow up. It's not about you anyway.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews
Thursday, July 1, 2021
“One Nation Under God”
Word Count: 750

In 1954 our pledge of allegiance added the phrase borrowed from Lincoln who borrowed it from the Bible: ‘under God.’ It’s easy to say it. Do we demonstrate what it means? Sunday, we take our turn to sign the Declaration of Independence. What will you do to fulfill this sacred trust? One nation under God. The mistaken and naive use this phrase as a boast when it’s admonition. If we stand under God, we’re held accountable to achieve what Divine Universal Truth stands for.

Fareed Zakaria, author and journalist, offered insights about the American soul, starting with how democracy is insufficient. At its worst, democracy means mob rule. Populism can become demonic: whether the tyranny of the few or the tyranny of the majority. How come McConnell doesn’t mind changing Senate rules for his schemes, yet aghast (or giggling) when Democrats try? We enter rough surf whenever group rights displace individual rights, whenever mutinous partisan interests bully, cheat, or bribe to get what they demand. I recently echoed what I’ve quipped for decades, how the only thing worse than a self-righteous intolerant conservative is a self-righteous intolerant liberal.

A Republic requires leaders of conscience, honor, and accomplishment rather than seismographs. Our Senators once viewed themselves first as members of the Senate, second as representatives of their state, third representing their political party. Americans before party. Winston Churchill was counseled to keep his ear to the ground. His reply? “The British nation will find it very hard to look up to leaders who are detected in that position.” Alexander Hamilton envisioned a Republic where ministers, lawyers, and professors would remain neutral so they could guide the nation as respected and trusted arbiters and reconcilers between factions, as disinterested interpreters of weightier matters.

Providentially, we remain a Republic instead of absolute democracy. The sail for our ship of state is our democratic ethos pulling us forward. But without keel, ballast, and rudder of constitutional principles, this Mayflower is going to sink. The Pilgrims didn’t board the Mayflower and establish the Massachusetts Bay Colony to practice freedom of religion. That’s popular fiction. They came to establish a Holy Commonwealth, a city of God, a theocracy ruled by their doctrines. By 1740, the colonists realized a Holy Commonwealth wasn’t going to happen. America was becoming America with its unruly outpouring of religious expressions, with its rugged spirit of independence.

Mid 1700’s, Jonathan Edwards, America’s finest theologian, quickly saw how the church too was entering a new age, where town meeting and church meeting weren’t the same, where faith came by conversion rather than by citizenship, where it is our mutual obligation to these constitutional principles that binds us together. Unity isn’t conformity. Will we jettison petty litmus tests imposed from left and right? Loud cries about ‘wokeness,’ whether as aspiration or criticism, are tedious. Come, let us reason together.

We are better for this civil obligation. It’s harder, but far better, as modern times show. We are crewing toward a more perfect union. Who would foolishly want to live in yesteryear America? This ship of state is improving, despite dangers of woodworm, storms, ripped sails, leaks. Election Day, 2020 – how close we came to America’s shipwreck! Despite reactionary spasms, we can smile at our progress in human rights, in opportunities for women, in a willingness to be forthright about our history. Child labor abolished. Food quality regulations. Environmental protection. Monopolies curtailed. Secure elections

(well, at least last November's). Interracial marriage acceptance (acknowledging we really are one race). Auto air-bags. Lead-free gasoline. Glad we altered the pledge salute too. One day a young church couple, very active in the Republican Party (when the Republican Party was still the Republican Party), confided how they finally couldn't oppose gay marriage. They admitted: "How does gay marriage affect us?"

When hasn't knowledge prevailed, ultimately? When haven't the classical liberal humanistic worldview and causes become mainstream, ultimately?

America is people rather than place. For America to continue to succeed, we the people each are responsible, chosen to make it succeed, the difference between being ruled by and being governed. There is no room for violent extremists nor patience for falsehoods, conspiracy theories, dumb 'culture wars,' whether from Mar-a-Lago, Facebook, TV pundits, or newspapers. Which also means we must weigh which are the larger threats, problems, needs, versus ancillary. Violent crime. Misguided militias. Mass murders. Gun safety. Effective law enforcement. Wreckage from pointless wars. Protection of civil rights. Prosperity opportunity. Climate change. Health care costs. Addictions. Homelessness.

All hands on deck!

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Thursday, August 12, 2021

"A Dog's Life"

Word Count: 750

Our two year old grand-daughter can be very pushy. Whenever we Facetime on my wife's phone, she demands that we show her close-ups of our Tortoise Shell cat, Nyssa, and our Irish Jack Russell, Bailey, so she can come up to the screen and hug them. Similar to her mother, she has a natural, nearly holy, sensitivity for animals. How do we tell her that her Bailey is no longer with us? Do we say he got a sickness doggies only get and let her response lead the way? Two years old, after all, is two years old. She, similar to our Bailey, cannot comprehend death. In a few years, death might be able to be discussed and described, should she ask. He got old. His heart stopped beating. He doesn't breathe anymore. He can't play and chase the ball.

The death of a pet often is the child's first experience of death. How they learn to handle a pet's death will help them handle grandpa's death. He got old. His heart stopped beating. He doesn't breathe anymore. He can't play and push you on the swing or play tickle over the phone.

With children it is wiser and kinder to avoid assuming they respond the way adults respond. If you tell her that her little doggie is sleeping, will she go easy to her naptime? How long will she wait for doggie to wake up? If you tell her he's with God or angels, will she resent God for not letting her enjoy her doggie? Will she be jealous of and angry at the angels? I would be. Little children have a gift for coming up with their own answers, especially when they are surrounded by loved ones. Important is to let her know that it is alright to be sad. Why? Because we are too. As our son reflected, using a Portuguese word: "saudade," a melancholic sadness. A sweet sadness. I worry when people don't grieve. Tears flowed that late afternoon at the veterinarian's. Something vibrant, loveable is missing in our house. But it was time for us to make this decision. What was the alternative? Him lethargic and sleeping for

hours, vomiting white foam, staring blankly, wobbly from the profound weight loss from not eating for a week, recoiling from food. All he wanted was to rest against his best beloved.

What is the difference between the canine mammal and the human mammal? We have similar organs. We have similar bodily functions: We breathe, we eat, we procreate, we poop. The difference is that humans are consciously aware of these functions, of ourselves, of time, of death. A linguist taught how only humans can talk about talk. A dog doesn't even know it is a dog. Dogs and cats live in the here and now. Cats and dogs deserve the respect of being treated like dogs and cats, rather than as furry, four-legged humans. One of our cats, Nyssa's brother Adric, suffered a stroke. He recovered somewhat. One day he disappeared. He went off, we believe, to die on his cat terms.

In a Fresh Air interview by Terry Gross, anthrozoologist John Bradshaw, author of the books "Cat Sense," and "Dog Sense," explained how cats and dogs lack a concept of quantity of life, important to humans (and a blessed curse to us humans). Pets only experience quality of life. He added how his only regrets with regard to euthanizing his animals have been when he let the lack of quality of life for his pets continue too long, for his sake.

My antennae sense Bailey was acting by instinct by not eating. He was telling us he was ready, even if he didn't comprehend his decline cognitively. What was the alternative? Do we impose strange, distressing measures and intrusive procedures, producing in him more anxiety, just to soothe ourselves? No, because we love them, we shouldn't be so selfish. No, he was our responsibility. Yes, we get the best medical advice about where the hope lies. Yes, our pets wouldn't understand that they are receiving chemotherapy or surgery to preserve their lives. Toward what end? That is the key question we humans need to ask on behalf of our pets. Insert catheter for sedation. Inject the sedative while cradled by his best friend. Place him on the blanket on the examining table and complete the kindness. Wrap him up. When the veterinarian carried him out, I told her it reminded me of her carrying a baby.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
August 26, 2021
"Believing in America"
Word Count: 750

Which is the real America? I've never been quite sure. I want to believe it is what I saw the other Sunday coming down into Danville on Route 54. I don't mean the car crash. I mean the helpers who ran to help the victims. Volunteer fire fighters. The young woman in the pink top along with others who helped navigate traffic into one lane. That's the America I want to believe it.

I want to believe in the America serenaded by Kris Kristofferson's song, called "Here's Comes that Rainbow Again," based upon an incident in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*: "The scene was a small roadside café. The waitress was sweepin' the floor. Two truck drivers drinkin' their coffee. And two okie kids by the door. How much are them candies, they asked her. How much have you got, she replied. We've only a penny between us. Them's two for a penny, she lied. And the daylight grew heavy with thunder. And the smell of the rain on the wind. Ain't it just like a human. Here comes that rainbow again. One truck driver called to the waitress. After the kids went outside. Them candies ain't two for a penny. So what's it to you, she replied. In silence they finished their coffee. Got up and nodded goodbye. She called, hey, you left too much money. So what's it to you, they replied."

Steinbeck loved the Hebrew word, *timshel*, “Thou Mayest,” a matter of choice.

Waitress and truckers represent the America I want to believe in. It’s the America Irving Berlin believed in when he wrote “God Bless America.” His original name was Israel Beilin. Suffering poverty and persecution in Russia, five year old Israel and family emigrated to America, entering via Ellis Island. From hawking newspapers in the Bowery, he became one of America’s favorite songwriters. Despite the prejudice he experienced growing up as a Jew in America, he felt blessed to be an American. He had a chance here he’d never have received in Czarist Russia or, later, Stalin’s Russia. Likely, he’d be dead. Guess which song was sung on the Capitol steps by harmonious House Representatives and Senators following the attacks of September 11, 2001?

I want to believe in the America where the passengers on Flight 93 fought back, who agreed to sacrifice themselves for unknown others. Sometimes I try to imagine what those seat-belted in their seats felt. Usually, it’s too heart-wrenching to go there.

I want to believe in the America that may not be able to eradicate all drug cartels from profiting on their poison, although we might prevent one friend from trying cocaine or heroin.

I want to believe in the America that may not be able to cure all forms of cancer, although we can support Camp Victory.

I want to believe in the America that may not be able to prevent 22,000 children dying daily from poverty, although we can help friends in Nicaragua invest in water purification projects.

I don’t want to believe in the America that has abandoned fostering the liberation of women in Afghanistan, subjecting them to the choices of the Taliban, although we can support them by treating girls in our school district with respect and by reminding girls how they don’t have to be to themselves un-true and live the lie others wants them to live.

I want to believe in an America that takes to conscience Mark Twain’s “War Prayer” and comprehends choosing war’s consequences, where nobody’s innocent.

There have been many moments in my life when America has made it difficult for me to believe in America.

A Bible scholar described the Bible as a friend. Friendship was his way of reconciling the weird and frustrating, the perplexing and ugly aspects of the Old Testament in particular. “As with any good friendship,” he explained, “there are commitments that persist amid difficulties.” What is a friend? You trust them, they make you better, you can be honest with them and them with you. They have faults. So do you. They can annoy you. So can you. But you stick together even if they let you down, even when you let them down. Saints and sinners. Eros love will have naked bodies, C.S. Lewis quipped, but *Philia* love, friendship, will have naked personalities, and guess what? They’re still your friend, despite, where, avoiding nostalgia’s sugar-coating illusions, the best adventures can be, might be, still ahead. *Timshel*.

It’s a fair way to describe your country.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews
September 23, 2021
“Along Comes Mary”
Word Count: 750

Yesterday, 329 years ago, my ancestor was hanged in Salem, Massachusetts. Salem nowadays is a curious tourist trap shilling crystals, wax museums, potions. You can photograph Elizabeth Montgomery’s statue (aka Samantha), star of the sit-com, “Bewitched.” You can also visit the park where the victims’ names are marked on benches. Mary Estey was the 18th to be executed for witchcraft.

No Pyewacket cat familiar for Mary. No eye of newt or toe of frog for her. No fire burn and cauldron bubble. No wiccan covens of weird sisters taking themselves way too seriously. Nope. Instead there were juvenile witnesses fabricating accusations. There were men in authority bent on vendetta. Salem was a cauldron of fanaticism and ignorance, fears and lies. We know too well how unchecked lies and liars invariably prove lethal. There also was grim severity. Do you want to know the first symptom of a community in decline? A sententious absence of a sense of humor. Not mocking humor, not degrading humor, which aren’t funny at all. But humor based in good will and self-deprecation. Do you have to be nice to jerks? Alright, you do. Do you have to tolerate them? No. Who stepped up for Mary?

Do you remember the Happy Iranians? They were mischievous Iranians arrested in Tehran for the crime of being happy. Three men and three women filmed themselves dancing to Pharrell Williams’ song and posted it on social media. It was promptly censured. Do you remember the song, “Wake Up Little Susie?” This Everly Brother’s song was banned for scandalous lyrics. So too “Puff the Magic Dragon.”

We’ll always be saddled with puritanical guardians of society keen on being offended, persons whom journalist George Ade remarked as having “accumulated a sense of virtue that weighed over 200 lbs.” You’ll find illiberal them on the right. You’ll find illiberal them on the left. They’ll threaten school boards for endorsing face masks. They’ll shout down speakers at Universities who voice uncomfortable opinions. The atmosphere turns more toxic because salivating extremes taunt and bear-bait those whom they judge their enemy. It’s beyond reasonable disagreement. The point isn’t about listening but about scoring punches and punishing the other. Outrage is easy. Welcome to our madness.

What helps us resolve the curse of illiberal, censorious conflict? There is no secret spell, no magic wand, no witchcraft. There only are deliberate and rational steps, beginning with the hope that those in conflict are neither mentally ill nor Kool-aid believers, that they want to resolve the conflict for the greater good rather than stoke it for selfish ambitions. Next, focus on issues, not principles. Avoid generalizations. Check personal attacks. Clear away the cobwebs of distortion. Agree on facts. Find areas of practical agreement and build from there. If this had been done in 1692, Mary Estey might have enjoyed her grandchildren rather than confront zealots falsely hanging her.

Some seminary classmates found their zealous and cherished religious convictions challenged by professors and other students. They became better pastors for being pushed and questioned, despite one obnoxious student charging an Old Testament professor with heresy. Free expression should be neither safe nor weaponized. My daddy’s advice: If you don’t wish to be offended, don’t take offense.”

In the musical, "1776," several members of the Continental Congress worry that portions of the Declaration of Independence might offend British leaders. John Adams blurts: "This is a revolution, dammit! We're going to have to offend SOMEbody!" Earlier in the movie they are voting on whether or not they should debate the topic of independence. Let's applaud Stephen Hopkin's reply: "Well, in all my years I ain't never heard, seen nor smelled an issue that was so dangerous it couldn't be talked about. Hell yeah! I'm for debating anything. Rhode Island says yea!"

I'm anticipating reading a new book by Anne Applebaum, titled, "The New Puritans. Basically, she argues how our society simply has replaced the pillories and stocks, the public whippings and Scarlet Letters, with hasty public social media shaming, false slander, and condescending contempt.

Ring the bell. Close the book. Blow out the candle. Mary Estey's final words, written in her final petition, were both warning and prayer: "I petition to your honours not for my own life for I know I must die and my appointed time is set but the Lord he knows it is that if it be possible no more innocent blood may be shed which undoubtedly cannot be avoid in the way and course you go in."

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
11 November, 2021
"American Snapshots"
Word Count: 750

Click: Facebook's been nagging me, mere flea on the hide of a Wooley Mammoth. They hound me that I have 99 notifications, 2 photo tags, 16 friend requests, 3 close friend requests, 9 messages, 1 group update. I have a Facebook page but have ignored it for two years. Cute pictures of cats don't interest me. Supporting Q nonsense, insurrections, or Zuckerberg really doesn't interest me.

Click: Democrats, get what you can now. Get what you can later. You can't withdraw anything till you banked it. An expert in infrastructure explained we're twenty years late in fixing things. Because he's a road guy, he dislikes mixing hard infrastructure with soft infrastructure. Because he's an engineer, he can't see the symbiotic relationship. The bumper sticker showed the ex-President's face, asking: "Miss me now?" No!

Click: Biden did win, right? Meuser, Gordner, Masser: did Biden win the election? Is there any evidence of fraud, aside from Trump and his minions committing sedition? Do you agree with former Attorney General Barr that it was a clean election? Or do you side with the Q dupes? Some of us are trying to hold fast to faith in the United States, despite yellow-toothed shysters eager to tear it down.

Click: Wild white yahoos may have stormed the Capitol and bludgeoned police with Trump and American flags, but now we know plans were planned from the boys at the top. How much did Trump's campaign pay the Willard Hotel for war room space? Thanks for the campaign contributions, you patsies. Throw their rumps in jail, especially that Trump pardoned convicted embezzler.

Click: We supposedly have two major parties in the United States. One deals with stuff to improve local American families. The other party, hostage to disinformation, has abdicated its responsibilities. One party wants to govern. The other keeps blind, deaf, dumb, and complicit as McConnell shoves broomsticks into spokes. Would he hesitate for a second carving out the filibuster? Use the filibuster only for consensus on judicial nominees. Imagine what will happen to this country the constitution

envisions if Jim Jordan, Matt Goetz, Marjorie Greene, Mo Brooks, control the House of Representatives? Fascism never ends well, said the lamppost to Mussolini. If your boyfriend's abusive, you really should find another boyfriend.

Click: We were close to winning the battle against COVID, along with its domino consequences: inflation, supply chain shortages, unemployment, gas hikes. USA Today reports, at the time of this writing, 58.1% of the population fully vaccinated, 750,430 dead. Since the beginning of October, over 50,000 deaths, nearly three Montour Counties. We had a chance. We blew it. Well, I didn't. I've booked my Pfizer booster for a week from now. I'll stick with Biden, Harris, and Fauci, thank you very much. Tucker Carlson can take a flying leap. What a hypocrite given Fox News COVID policies.

Click: The flight from Orlando to Newark was spectacular. Wispy clouds. Bright blue sky. Clear visibility. Flying over the North Carolina coastline toward Virginia Beach -- islands, inlets, estuaries -- I began to wonder how long will it be till Climate Change shapes a new coastline? Bye-bye beach house. It's real. We can blunt the effect if we wish. Sadly, too few care about power than the world their grandchildren will inherit. I've got my swimmies on!

Click: Has the red herring of Critical Race Theory come local? Bless the school board candidate who said that it's not even on our radar. Why? Because it's a red herring. Misleading information, a ruse. We get mired in culture wars, tithing mint and cumin, whilst neglecting weightier matters. Please stop getting your news from social media. You don't want to debate policies? Okay, I'm up for a healthy discussion about what's really behind these cultural red herrings? History is history. We all have the right to tell our story. We have reason to be proud. We have reason to be ashamed. It's like family. Sure parents should have a say about the advancement of their kids' knowledge. Attend school board meetings. Volunteer. Expand your family's reading list.

Click: Which brings us to our own responsibilities. We can act like seagulls screaming, "Mine! Mine!" Or we can exercise the duties of citizenship and our covenantal responsibilities toward each other. I have said that we've romanticized my parent's generation, idealizing their guts, selflessness, and sacrifice, labeling them "The Greatest Generation." I've wanted to believe that the greatest generation of Americans has yet to be born. It might be a long wait.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
December 9, 2021
"Loss"
Word Count: 750

"It is the little things you miss," he said, as he struggled to open a packet of crackers to crumble into his acorn squash soup. We lunched with him in the assisted care facility's private dining room. Parkinson's can be ruthless. Wife spooning husband his salmon salad. He who once ran a successful company, played golf, ran marathons, now depends on his walker and shuffle. An expert in city planning, he enjoyed being asked about infrastructure legislation. He replied: "We're twenty years behind."

We claim what small victories we may, sitting here in limbo. We claim what control we may. Let him tell you when he's ready to be pulled from the chair. Losses require considerable patience by both care-giver and care-receiver. Palm pressing the trembling hand. Pausing before replying to the agitated comment sprung from frustration. The mistake of correcting a memory rather than redirecting the

thought. Ask permission. Listen. Enter their world. Respect holy silence. “Loss is not as bad as wanting more,” the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu pontificated. I’m betting he said this before he got old.

Illness changes us and our relationships. Illness requires a new understanding of self, for our bodies are our identity. Change isn’t always progress, but change happens regardless. Stand still and see what happens. When did you notice the disappearance of bowls of matches in restaurants? Whatever happened to free newspapers outside your hotel door? Can you remember when rotary phones were charged for dialing long distance? When did we need a smartphone to read a menu? Keyless cars can be particularly annoying, especially when you think you turned the engine off but didn’t. That’s embarrassing when you return an hour later to the parking lot and the car is still running. How many of you resort to using pliers to lever the cork from the bottle of Prosecco? An elderly woman recovering from a stroke groused how a ten minute visit was as exhausting as unloading a truck. No wonder a seminary professor teaching pastoral care suggested we hold the other person’s hand as tightly as they hold yours. Follow their lead.

There are losses we choose. Mom forfeited her degree to marry and raise five children. A wife gave up her career to move to Danville with her husband. Such losses are sacrifices for something adjudged more important. Resentment may occasionally leak out but can be sponged up by affection.

Then there are losses that we don’t choose but which time and circumstance nonetheless force us to manage. Picture the brother whose hearing was savaged by cancer, who now relies on devices in his ears and a receiver on a lanyard controlled by his smartphone. What does the alchemy of these golden years really produce? I often wish we’d stop talking about getting justice when what we mean is judgment, revenge, retribution, recompense. We need another word. I’ve never seen justice ever doled out in this world. Justice would mean that those innocents never became casualties at a Christmas parade or during school.

A teacher honored at the recent gathering of the Danville Alumni Association quizzed the crowd with a question he often is asked: “What is the most important thing that you want your students to learn?” He concluded his speech by telling us that what he wants his students to know is that they are loved. Knowing they are loved helps our children deal with the pain and loss and injustice they invariably experience. Skinned knees. Electric outlet sizzled fingertips. Discovering friends mocking them behind their backs. Boyfriend-girlfriend rejection. Losing the championship game. Failing to get into the school they wanted. Burying beloved grandmas.

Knowing that you are loved, knowing that your life is woven into a continuing tapestry of something special, much of which has yet to be stitched, speaks just as much to those of us who, long since young, have experienced our seasons of loss and pain. This partly explains why our holidays – Thanksgiving and Christmas, especially – imbue a deeper appreciation. We affect each other. For love seeds hope. When Pandora opened her box and all those calamities, sorrows, and evils escaped to vex the world, the last thing to enter the world was hope. With hope, the man refuses to let time and circumstance define him. With hope, we refuse to let circumstance and time define this world. With hope, he presses on for the next morning. The fortunate among us are those who have lived well enough to have something to lose.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
January 6, 2022

“On The Road Again’

Word Count: 750

It’s the difference between license and license. You may have a license but it doesn’t give you license.

Mid December we drove to Fort Collins and back. It was an adventure. We celebrated time with our kids and grandkids. We proved we aren’t dead yet. We drove 1,628 miles westward, 1,731.3 eastward. Driving was fun, although we didn’t have fun with every driver we encountered. I’m from Jersey. I drive defensively and offensively. The day after I earned my driver’s permit, Dad road-tested me. “Turn here. Go straight. Turn onto this ramp.” He made me merge onto the Garden State Parkway near Rahway at rush hour. “Get used to it,” he grinned.

For our trip to Fort Collins and back we drove 3,359.3 miles and I made only one dumb mistake, cutting in front of a pick-up truck to pull into our hotel in Springfield, Ohio. I’m a good driver. We encountered too many bad drivers.

What kind of bad drivers? Drivers lurching out to pass, trapping the car ahead of them behind the slow moving vehicle. Drivers speeding up in work zones to get ahead of you before the lanes converge. Drivers racing in and out of lanes ignoring the speed limit, passing on the right, forcing the car they cut off to brake. Drivers demanding you yield when they merge. Drivers refusing signals. Drivers riding your bumper to push you. Drivers who won’t budge from the left lane. Drivers who speed up when you begin passing them. Drivers texting or speaking on their phone, crossing lanes. Drivers refusing to read the road and anticipate what the traffic demands. Drivers who fail to pull into the left lane for disabled or emergency vehicles. Reckless, boorish drivers who think themselves unbound by the rules of the road.

The devil on my left shoulder snickers -- can anything be more delightful than to see two miles ahead the offending driver pulled over and ticketed by a State Trooper? The angel on my right shoulder urges me to follow the example of the Christian missionaries who escaped their Haitian captors to preach: “We pray for them to find a better way”

We want road menaces to find a better way. It’s also fair to expect them to be held accountable for their road rage and reckless driving. Get off the road before you injure innocents! It’s the difference between license and license. You can have a license but it doesn’t give you license. Freedoms require responsibilities.

Now that its 2022, what’ll we do with bad drivers? After all, today is January 6, 2022, the anniversary of seditious infamy, when bad drivers threatened a nation and violated the rights of those who want what’s right. Why are they repressing our freedom to arrive at our destination safely?

Hello, January 6th, the anniversary of blatant Trumpist political road rage and the malign actions of bad drivers and those who gave them their permits. Who favors bad drivers? Of course you complain about them. What will 2022 demand of us, especially since Trumpism proves that white supremacy isn’t? Right wing extremists demanding election integrity is like a pimp advocating for monogamy. With a nod to the movie “It’s a Wonderful Life,” the choice before us this 2022 once again is whether we want to live in Bedford Falls or Pottersville. The issue isn’t whether or not a political party has integrity. Do the party members have any integrity?

I've chatted with friends who voted for Trump who have admitted that Trump lost the election legitimately. January 6 was a shameful scheme to usurp the Constitution and install a pathetic, scared, unworthy man who exploits the worst in those who follow him. Why are these friends silent? Where are the decent Republicans? To remain silent is to remain timorously complicit. They're better than Trumpism. Can we count on those who still regard themselves vestigial Republicans to be patriots and no longer remain mute over Trumpism's contempt for the rules of the road? We can disagree about policies. This is beyond policy disagreements. Time's up. Will those with honor reproach calumny, malice, and unscrupulous behavior? Their voice, not mine, can protect America from bad drivers and the wreckage they leave behind in their rear view mirror.

Does anybody find it curious that January 6 also is Epiphany, a Christian observance commemorating when the Wise Men honored Jesus, and, consequently, when what is in our hearts is made manifest? January 6 reveals what and who we truly worship.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Thursday, January 20, 2022

"Never Forget"

Word Count: 750

The television tribute to Sidney Poitier recalled how Poitier himself described what happened when he tried to enroll in an African-American acting school. The teacher pushed him out the door and said he'd never make it. Poitier couldn't read. He was tone deaf. His Bahamian accent was too thick. All three reasons were sound reasons. All three were true. Poitier's gift was acknowledging but refusing to accept these limitations. Did the teacher regret failing to take time to help him? My professor, after failing me in expository writing, did take me aside to show me how to work at writing. Poitier's real teacher arrived in the form of an elderly Jewish man at the restaurant where Poitier worked, them reading the newspaper together after the restaurant closed.

Failure: sometimes our own fault, often our own fault. Sometimes it's the fault of forces beyond our control. Failure, in my experience (and I'm well experienced in this area), usually is a rough white water confluence of choices. And you're there without a life jacket.

Come now, have you never gotten a D- in life? Are you haunted by where you have failed others or yourself? I hope so, provided the haunting is done with clarity and hope, without bringing out hankies or tiny violins.

We are our wounds, our mistakes, our hurts, our failures, our faults, our hypocrisies. We are our history. Correct that. We are what we do with our hypocrisies, our faults, our failures, our hurts, our mistakes, our wounds. This explains why I keep saying how the phrase "forgive and forget," is both trite and wrong. Preferable is: "never forget, then forgive." We can play the denial game, at least until the Tupperware of our denials spills from the pantry. We can try to forget, ignore, even rationalize our missteps and misdeeds. For how long? Have you tried to paint over pencil markings?

God bless the gift of disquietude, discontentment, disillusionment, this holy restlessness and discomfiture, these stirrings when we want something better. When we realize what we thought were answers weren't. When we dare question the conventional, questioning ourselves, even disliking bits of ourselves, if we are observant. Yes, we find freedom in loving ourselves but that doesn't mean we

always have to like ourselves. To erase our bad memories erases who we have become today. That's the clue. The fortunate among us admit them, learn from them, making ourselves more human than inhuman, remembering to name them instead of letting them name you.

Avoid reading this as an invitation to beat yourself up. If that's all we do, all we do is end up too bloodied and bruised to go forward. What "Never Forget" requires is the wisdom and trust to be honest, to decide how to make amends, to work on becoming truer. Nations too, as when Gandhi popularized a sermon from Westminster Abbey that preached the 'Seven Deadly Social Evils,' warning us with these D- signs of a failing society: "Wealth Without Work, Commerce Without Morality, Science Without Humanity, Religion Without Sacrifice, Politics Without Principle." How we doing?

Alligator cannot change alligator nature. Mountain lion cannot change lion nature. Mosquito cannot change insect nature. Humans can.

Watching again Poitier's film, "Lilies of the Field," one of the subtexts missed in previous viewings became clear. It isn't as if the movie changed. It was the viewer who has been changed, shaped by current times. Same with the Bible. Scripture doesn't change. What you bring to it does. Here's Homer Smith on his own, wandering, homeless, a black Baptist from Alabama. Then there are the five Roman Catholic nuns who risked escaping Eastern Bloc fascist tyranny to come and minister in the Arizona desert, adopting their new home. All the characters are outsiders looking to build something worthwhile. Notice also how it is the Latinos who end up building the chapel. The only two white persons include the prejudiced boss, Ashton, who repents his prejudice, and the jaded priest, Father Murphy, who recovers his faith from them. The outsiders redeem those who assumed they were the insiders.

Another interview with Poitier pointed out how for the 1967 movie "In the Heat of the Night," he insisted that the producers officially contract that whenever and wherever the movie is played, it must include the full scene where the white Mississippi aristocrat cannot stand Poitier's character refusal to be deferential. So he slaps him. Poitier slaps him back. Did this movie get shown in Jackson, Tupelo, Meridian, Clarksdale?

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
February 17, 2022
"Uncomfortable"
Word Count: 750

A classic definition of preaching is to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." God help preachers considered nice. They, then, aren't doing their job. Not as if the Bible is nice.

Remember the movie "Braveheart," about William Wallace? What a gripping story, but terribly inaccurate. Sorry, no prima noctes, no blue faces, no romance with the princess. Wallace wasn't a commoner – he was an aristocrat. No kilts either.

I'm terribly guilty in wanting to romanticize, idealize the past; although, I imagine if we could jump aboard the 'WABAC Machine' and return to view ourselves in the past, our perception of the past might be too cruel to be endured. Better the rose colored glasses, yes? Yes, I'm proud of my Scottish heritage. I'll admit to being an unabashed cheerleader for Presbyterianism and Scotland, extolling the virtues of

Scotland, the Scottish enlightenment, and the principles my church espouses: Our spirit of self-reliance, personal responsibility; That the United States Constitution is inspired by the Presbyterian form of government; Our bootstrap mentality (as Carnegie said to the English one day: “You look to your officials to govern you, instead of you governing them”); Our sense of duty to family, to clan; Our distaste for patrician ease; Our emphasis on education. Impoverished Scotland’s 17th century literacy rate was the highest in the world: 85%. Boys and girls.

Although, do these virtues belong exclusively to Scotland and Presbyterians? Aye, there be sin. Cannot these virtues be found in people from other lands, whether Spain, China, Columbia, Mexico, Ghana, or even those who come from England? Since when is racial or religious pride a virtue? Shall we also consider our other Scottish gifts to America: the KKK, cross burnings, an exacting religious fundamentalism, a myopic intolerance toward America’s destiny and promise of a richer pluralism? Ach, man, more sin.

Want other example? Maybe you don’t. Our senior seniors might remember that sentimental love story of how King Edward VIII abdicated England’s throne because he loved and intended to marry a divorced American woman, Mrs. Simpson, contrary to Anglican Church law. A tragic and beautiful love story. Except, King Edward supported Hitler and she likely was a Nazi spy. Edward wanted England to become Germany’s ally. What do you do when the King is borderline treasonous?

Washingtonville’s DeLong Memorial Hall displays items featuring Charles Lindbergh’s solo flight across the Atlantic, May 20-21, 1927. The museum rightly celebrates this remarkable achievement. History must also be thorough. Scholars assess how Lindbergh was a Nazi sympathizer. Lindbergh and his America First Movement was fueled by isolationism and anti-Semitism. Lindbergh advocated for a neutrality pact with Hitler. We today would call him a white supremacist, typical of his era. Lindbergh feared “dilution by foreign races.”

Adulthood is complicated, requiring responsibility -- personally, socially -- which explains why we fear learning history. My boyhood shook off lazy innocence when our Junior High librarian rolled up his sleeve and respected my family enough to show me his tattoo from Auschwitz. The comfortable afflicted. To gloss over teaching the Holocaust cheapens the Allied armies’ victories.

A friend pastored near Coatesville, Pennsylvania. They were preparing to celebrate their church’s history. They were excited. It also was a time when his church and a nearby church were upset with issues stressing the denomination. They fretted that the larger church was forgetting the Bible, unlike them. They feared that the denomination had veered away from true righteousness, unlike them. My friend uncovered from old newspapers an interesting tidbit about Coatesville’s history. He came across a curious incident that happened after World War I involving many of the grandfathers from members of the two churches. Two young black men were arrested for alleged indecent conduct toward a white woman. The familiar accusation. The grandfathers didn’t feel like waiting for the trial to punish them, so they decided to do it themselves. These leading citizens of town and church took the two young men out, lynched them, set them on fire. My friend, unmannerly, mentioned that bit during the banquet. History’s a curious thing especially when you’re dishonest about the past, living in an idealized delusion. It’s easy exposing their past. Can you handle disclosing your past?

I hope leaders busily sanitizing school curriculums would have the guts to read the poem, “Let American Be America Again,” by Langston Hughes. I hope it’s required reading by High School students, and not just this month: “O, let America be America again—The land that never has been yet—.”

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Thursday, March 17, 2022
“Nursing Hope”
Word Count: 713

Thermometers measure temperature, whether Fahrenheit or Celsius. Yardsticks measure inches, feet, yards, and miles. Barometers measure air pressure. A clock measures time. A level measures balance. A plumb line measures true vertical. A speedometer measures, obviously, speed. So how do you measure a people or a society? You measure us by how we treat babies.

Several years ago, reflecting on St. Patrick’s Day, I wrote how wearing green is popular, excepting those from Northern Ireland who, annoyingly and stubbornly, prefer orange, such as myself. Time to repent -- rather than feed the hungry beast of hatred, I wear today a Hawaiian shirt. Again I quote Canadian folk singer Stan Rogers whose song, “The House of Orange,” pushes us toward kinder aspirations. He had been approached by a representative of the Irish Republican Army to donate to the fight. He refused, singing:

*Now they cry out for money and wail at the door
But Home Rule or Republic, 'tis all of it shame;
And a curse for us here who want nothing of war.
We're kindred in nothing but name.
All rights and all wrongs have long since blown away,
For causes are ashes where children lie slain.*

For causes are ashes where children lie slain. How do you measure a people, a society, a government? When will we ever get it right?

Recently I’ve been researching a project where I intend to write about what our Susquehanna region looked like from the death of Oneida chief Shikellamy in 1748 to the death of Danville’s William Montgomery in 1816. Research can be disturbing when you read of all the treaties, mostly broken. When you read about the mutual massacres and marauding: French on English, English on French, American on English, English on American, Native American on Native American, Native American on white settler, white settler on Native American. How long, O Lord, how long? Check out the Paxton boys of 1763 and their Conestoga massacre of Susquehannocks converted by Moravians. Read about the frontier forts (often stockade mills) built in our neighborhood: Fort Augusta, Fort Freeland (which was forced to surrender June 29, 1779), Boone’s Fort, Fort Menninger, Fort Muncy, Fort Bosley. In May, 1778, the Big Runaway began, with the Susquehanna West Branch and Wyoming Valley aflame and bloody. The settlers rushed for refuge from the British Forces and their Iroquois and Loyalist allies into these forts. After the American Revolution, Joseph Priestly had had enough and wanted to get away from the ‘Susquehanna Settlement’ and go to France. He rather misjudged what the French Revolution would lead to: heads in baskets.

Can you imagine how English transcendental poets wanted to sail here with new brides to set up their utopia and commune with romanticized nature? What they ignored was the danger, risk, and arduous labor required.

Someone explained the perverse popularity of Marvel movies and superheroes. We want immediate and quick rescue from threats. The reality is that the only heroes are the ones who would be looking back at us in the mirror. Perversely, I also ask the Proud Boys, 3%, and other militia that if they really want to fight for liberty, go to Ukraine. By the way, only freedom equals prosperity.

A secret to church work is that pastoring isn't factory piece work. It's ironic, but the worst thing a church that wants to increase its membership is to want to increase its membership. Our faith instead commends us to be worthy by doing ministry. Give folks a reason to want to participate and use their own gifts in ministry, mission, fellowship. How do you begin? By taking care of babies. Can you imagine how different our community, our county, our commonwealth, our country, our world could be if we all agreed to make children our priority?

Fire and flood, Ash and mud, Lives in despair, Some beyond repair, Does anyone hear? Indifference severe, Please walk with us, Forgive the callous, We are more than news, The abandoned accuse, And now the next, Human ruin and wreck, Bloodying Ukraine, Babies forced on a train, Putin's ungodly sin, That with war he wins, Bombing with an evil will, Tiny bodies crushed still.

We pray fervently for Putin's conversion. Short of that, praying for a heart attack would not be amiss.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Thursday, March 31, 2022

"Robin Song."

Word Count: 750

Mr. Robin yanked with his beak sticks and dried fronds from the stones edging our patio. He flew toward Mrs. Robin, who was ready with mud to fashion their nest. Jays and crows aside, soon their eggs will incubate, hatchlings hatch, nestlings nest, fluffy down becoming feathers, yellow mouths anticipating, catered to by both parents.

The calendar may announce spring has sprung. Robins announce it better. We also look forward to our Azaleas flowering red and pink. The Rose of Sharon beside our driveway was a cutting from a Rose of Sharon the church expansion dug up. Beauty is meant to propagate.

We like our house. Birdsong cheeruping. Squirrels dashing. Hawks soaring. Our realtor, Jack Curry, worried when I put a bid on it before wife got the chance to see it. September, 1989, I had arrived to be examined by my Presbytery to see if they would concur with the congregation's vote to call me as their pastor. Jack showed me the house before the church elder and I drove to the meeting in Montgomery. I pondered while waiting to be grilled by this gaggle of elders and pastors. The examination got delayed until after lunch. We skipped lunch so I could return and meet Jack back at the house. Before leaving the meeting I told the person in charge to stall if I returned late. I told Jack: "Let's do it." He really wanted me to call my wife first. No need. She'd love it. No cell phones then anyway. Pleasant neighborhood. Lovely yard. Fireplace. Within our price range. Best, the kids could walk to Mahoning Cooper School. Come afternoon, Jack celebrated that our bid had been accepted. It would take a month before we all could fully relocate here.

We dream that our kids will be able to afford their own homes, given where they want to live and need to live, given prices, given taxes, given corporations buying available homes to market pick-pocketing

rental units. We wish we could help them the way our parents helped us. What did 60 Minutes report the other Sunday? There's a shortage of over 4 million homes in our country.

We benefit from recalling Roosevelt's State of the Union address on January, 6, 1941 where he announced his Four Freedoms: Freedom of speech and expression; Freedom to worship; Freedom from want resulting from healthy peacetime; Freedom from fear of violence and aggression.

In my profession, it is a fortunate gift to be able say: "This is our house, this is our chance for home." Although, for a month after settling in, our three year old youngest kept telling us at bedtime, after stories and lullabies, that she wanted to go home. Mommy finally asked her: "Where's home?" She couldn't answer. But she could snuggle into her nest of a crib and hug her precious blankie and cuddle with her special friends, her stuffed familiars: Dumbo, Lambie, Panda, Big Bunny. Safe. Stable. Secure.

Why do kids find a precious friend? For our son, it was his stuffed monkey in striped shirt, coveralls, red cap. For our elder daughter it was a brown and orange Gooney Bird. Tattered remnants of monkey along with Gooney foot are stored in the dresser drawer, our own worn out by love versions of the Velveteen Rabbit.

I've begun to realize what I really believe in. We refuse to let those whose mouths are bigger than their hearts, those who sow ugliness, those who suffer crimped imaginations and predatory ambitions, take away the goodness, our joy, our song. We persevere. Frankly, the idea of God interests me less and less, not that I've turned atheistic. Hardly. It's just that that which we call God is too beyond me to for me to assume I can talk about God or that I can dare talk for God. Listening, paying attention, is another matter. Jesus simply makes more sense. Why? Because he reveals the existential divine essence of religion, faith, church, synagogue, mosque, shrine, whatever. How what matters is us imitating his humanity, us becoming humane.

When you are human, you see the pink bunny along the fence-line of the Sandy Hook Elementary School. You see the yellow stuffed animal abandoned on the grey rubble of what used to be an apartment complex, once the home to many now homeless. When you are humane, you see the child in her mother's desperate arms at a train station in Poland holding on for dear life to her stuffed Teddy Bear.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Thursday, April 28, 2022

"National Prayer"

Word Count: 750

We are a Christian country, saith the well-meaning pastor in a letter to the editor. We might, however, wonder what kind of Christian he means. Like monkeys, we're creatures of varied species. To be accurate, the United States isn't a Christian country. To be doubly accurate, ours is a country raised up from Reformed Protestant principles, which themselves arose from Hebrew precepts.

There's a marked difference between being a Christian nation and being historically inspired by the Reformed Protestant ethos. I'm surprised this pastor would want us to be grouped with Afghanistan, Iran, among other theocracies. "Of all the 'ocracies,'" James Fenimore Cooper teased, "hypocrisy is the most flourishing." It's accurate to posit that the sentiments, logic, theology, and principles of Reformed Protestantism supplied the rootstock of what fruited forth as these United States. Never forget that an

essential tenet of Reformed Protestantism recoils at an established state religion. Why? We worry whenever religion and state merge, a gangrenous symptom of despotism.

Why? Because the established church in several colonies, the Church of England, imprisoned Baptist and Presbyterians, among others, for preaching the gospel. Francis Makemie, Presbyterian, was arrested, jailed, and charged with preaching without license. The Virginia Charter required Roman Catholics to take an "Oath of Supremacy" accepting that the ecclesiastical laws of England governed Virginia. Laws were passed against Baptists and Quakers. Baptists were imprisoned for refusing to pay taxes to support the local Congregational Church. Baptists were accused of child abuse for refusing to have their children baptized. The First Amendment wasn't written to hinder religion from engaging in matters of state. It was written to hinder the state from messing around with us. Religions serve nations best as tough prophetic witnesses. Does the Russian Orthodox Church worship Christ or Putin? Do we?

Because we humans tend to let personal (oft pecuniary or ideological) interests eclipse principle, and because we humans admire virtue so long as virtue serves our vain desires, we admit that absolute freedom must be limited to protect civil society's fundamental obligations and covenantal cohesion. Sacrificing chickens or virgins isn't kosher. Mandatory conversion makes for lousy adherents. Polygamy (aka, legalized non-sequential marriage) creates violations of personal rights frowned upon by society's social compact. Child brides too. If we wish to benefit from living here, we agree to practice mature deference for mutual success. I obey traffic lights despite them infringing on my liberty to drive how I want to drive. When I don't my selfishness injures myself and, worse, you.

Human nature being human nature, we find that if we trust in the virtue of our leaders -- governmental, religious, business, media, academia -- we frequently will be proved sorely mistaken. Power devours. Virtue is wanted but cannot be depended upon. Pure motives get conveniently adjusted to justify dishonest tactics for ignoble ends, where spleen rules mind and heart, sadly most flagrantly evident today by mad anti-constitutional vandals dominating those formerly called Republicans. This isn't okay. Justice measures us. Truth matters. Injustice and dishonesty sow distrust. Distrust breeds selfishness. Selfishness incubates fear. Fear spawns hate. Hate destroys everyone. Reformed Protestantism believes a rogue lurks inside every saint, there's a cannibal inside each of us, gluttonous enough to devour our neighbor. We trust less in persons being virtuous and prefer to trust that they will act responsibly, provided there are sufficient goads, rewards, and restraints to insure that they will be held responsible. Cooper explained: "Responsibility is the substitute for virtue in a politician as discipline is the substitute for courage in a soldier." He added: "Divide the trust to divide the abuses." Wise, worthy, law-abiding leaders embrace this.

This commends prudence about endorsing the National Day of Prayer, playfully coincident next week with Cinco de Mayo. Piety on the Court House steps in the morning, margaritas by noon. Saints preserve us, look how disingenuous religious and political actors are cashing in on this ritual. Jesus is indeed fungible.

Patriotic Christians resent equating cross with flag. This National Day of Prayer can smack too opportunistic for conservative leanings. This Day of Prayer might have more meat if it included less haughtiness and more justice, plus love for the oppressed, ignorant, wanting, lowly, hungry, innocent, those denied their divine right to the pursuit of happiness besides other inalienable rights. Real conservatives affirm liberal democracy. Years ago I persuaded the Octorara School Board, where I

served for several years, to stop beginning each meeting by reciting the Lord's Prayer. Why? Because I'm religious and conservative, not reactionary.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

26 May, 2022

"Lest We Forget."

Word Count: 750

Memorial Day is nice, but it's time to give it up. For one reason, we confuse it with Veteran's Day by honoring those men and women who chose to enter military service to their country. Yes, we hear the familiar platitudes about how we appreciate their service in defense of our country. Good for them. I, however, especially appreciate historical accuracy when the day's emphasis is on thanking those who have paid the ultimate sacrifice, along with their gold star families, for fostering our nation's high principles. We decorate their graves in tribute. I just wish the cause for their deaths and service was as honorable as their service and death. But let's be frank. Some of our wars were indeed necessary and noble, well, as noble as war can be. Some weren't. Too many were more about opportunism than defending those principles. Excuse my insensitivity, but body bags must be justified somehow. Let's be honest.

Do you remember the names of the first two United States soldiers to die in Iraq? They both died on March 21, 2003. I bet their momma's do. Buddies too. The first was 2nd Lt. Therrel S. Childers, Harrison County, Mississippi. The son of a Navy Seabee, he wanted to be a Marine since he was five years old. He made it to thirty years old. He was shot in firefight to secure an oil field in southern Iraq. An oil field? The second was Lance Cpl. Jose Gutierrez, of Los Angeles, California. Los Angeles was his adopted home. He was an orphan who grew up on the streets of Guatemala City, Guatemala. Jose became an illegal alien at the age of fourteen, sneaking across the border. He ended in foster care, finally settling in with a family who loved him, themselves immigrants from Costa Rica. Shortly after high school he joined up with the Marines. He made it to twenty-two. Along with his love of soccer and chess, Gutierrez also enjoyed writing poetry. A poem he wrote in 2000, "Letter to God," was read at his funeral. "Thank you for permitting me to live another year, thank you for what I have, for the type of person I am, for my dreams that don't die," he wrote in Spanish. "May the firearms be silent and the teachings of love flourish." He was awarded U.S. citizenship, posthumously. Lest we forget. The second reason for giving up Memorial Day is when we have children murdered in schools. Body bags in kiddie size. I really don't care anymore about the platitudes expressed in Memorial Park about what a great nation our soldiers have dedicated their years and lives to protect. We aren't that great. Will the day come when will we deserve Memorial Day?

If we really wish to be honest, the new reason for us to gather in the park on Memorial Day and listen to the anthem, hear the speeches, and feel noble about the recitation of the Gettysburg Address should be when Memorial Day is dedicated to fighting for those innocents slaughtered in schools, in synagogues, in mosques, in sanctuaries, in grocery stores. We need to dedicate this solemn day to more than a soldier's greater love, we need to dedicate it to eradicating from our national soul the sin of our hatreds, prides, fears, and prejudices. Or will we gather in Memorial Park, listen to the band, salute the flag, then just move on indifferently, unconcerned, unaltered? We've lost our American right to Memorial Day. We've proven we aren't the country those soldiers whose graves we decorate died for. I don't know about you, but ever since Sandy Hook, almost ten years ago (twenty mothers with empty arms, how many others since?), I have declared from the pulpit that I cannot offer up prayers and thoughts for the

families of the victims. There comes a time when you can no longer remain hypocritical. And America, the land I love, is the biggest hypocrite I know, besides myself. Golly gee, I'm so sorry your child was gunned down, our thoughts and prayers are with you.

I'm sick and tired of what too many of my brothers and sisters in Christ decry as the war on Christianity. I appeal to them. You want to identify the war on Christianity? This is it. When mothers end up with empty arms. Gun violence is war on Christianity. Racism is war on Christianity. Ignorance and want, poverty and cruelty, the murder of innocents, is war on Christianity.

The Danville news
Robert John Andrews
Thursday, 9 June, 2022
"Misunderstood"
Word Count: 750

I have been woefully misunderstood. Contrary to popular opinion, I fully support MAGA, although not the MAGA my crass son quips as: My Attorney Got Arrested. No, I'm all in with camp Make America Great Again. Although, some wags might ask: when exactly was America great? There may be some snowflakes out there who question if America really was great for everyone, for all.

So, yes, I'll all for MAGA, starting when our entire population raises our Happiness Index. We rank 19 out of 156 countries, right above the Czech Republic. Although, I'm a sensitive guy -- I'd settle for a decent score on the sanity index. Maybe we all need a puppy? MAGA: when duty trumps desire.

MAGA: when 7.7 million Americas no longer suffer, along with loved ones, substance use disorders. When we really are pro-life and our sinful infant mortality rate decreases – we can do better than ranking 53 out of 227 countries. When 10 million Americans no longer are homeless or live on the brink of losing their homes, when 11 million of our children no longer suffer food insecurity. When the top 1% don't own more wealth than the bottom 90% combined.

MAGA: when we renounce our gun idolatry and pass gun measures wanted by 80% of Americans: Universal background checks, up the purchase age, training and registration required as for hunting licenses, you may own an AR-15 but it must be used and stored in a gun club facility. Perhaps it's time for me to purchase an AK-47, although it might frighten my neighbors as it's not as if competence is required to own such weaponry. Shall we pretend treating symptoms or cure the disease?

MAGA: when we show respect for the cop on the beat, when the cop on the beat earns respect. When monopolies and middle-men find it un-American to inflate prices on infant formula, beef, or gasoline. When 95% of Americans are vaccinated. When we find no rusted football goal posts at high schools, no oppressed neighborhoods or towns left behind.

MAGA: when white nationalism is laughed at as an oxymoron. When those who call themselves Christians actually heed the gospel. When evangelicals are less obsessed with enforcing selected bits of the Old Testament and begin following the countercultural message of the Sermon on the Mount.

MAGA: when we adults debate practical issues, restore the voice filibuster, increase the number of House of Representatives so they can fairly represent their constituency, require sittings of congress when they must remain and conduct business, remove corporate and PAC money from campaign

contributions, eliminate lobbyists, grant statehood to Washington D.C. and Puerto Rico. When our elections continue to be as free and fair as we had in 2020.

MAGA: when we recover our daughter's innocence when she was a little girl and we visited Niagara Falls. We entered the caves, donned the slickers to avoid getting drenched. Little daughter looked around at the crowd, all in slickers. She gushed in joy, asking us in her loud voice: "Who are all these yellow people?" We were aghast, as the others in the cave were Japanese tourists. Little daughter, however, was referring to the yellow slickers we all wore. What's that song from the musical 'South Pacific?' "You've got to be taught To hate and fear, You've got to be taught From year to Year, It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear, You've got to be carefully taught." Love can be taught too.

MAGA: when we play geese and ganders, when fair is fair, and we imagine what we would do if roles were reversed. How would today's faux Republicans respond if Democratic leadership had done what right-wing extremists Republicans are doing?

On June 9, 1954, it was a question that caused the senate hearing room to erupt in applause, except for one senator. The senator, infamous for his accusations, taunts, and bluster, fumed in silence. For once this loser was forced to shut up. The question was asked by Joseph Welch, special counsel for the U.S. Army. Welch was disgusted with Senator Joseph McCarthy's bullying smears, innuendo, and lies. Welch finally asked the question that most had been too cringing to ask: "Until this moment, Senator, I think I never really gauged your cruelty or your recklessness." Welch stared Joseph McCarthy down, asking: "Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last?"

I fervently believe, as Lincoln believed, that "God will not abandon us to the foolishness of our own devices."

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Thursday, July 7, 2022
"Christ and Culture"
Word Count: 750

With the smell of sulfur still in the air from Independence Day fireworks, it might be fun to mention how Jesus refused to be interested in creating new government, despite the pressures and temptations for him to politicize his movement. His disciples initially became disciples because they were zealots eager and armed for the overthrow of Herod's corrupt court, the oppressive religious rulers in bed with civil authorities, and Roman cruelty.

What Jesus did instead was commit his life and death to fashioning a people into becoming faithful people, manifesting the new humanity. He, a true revolutionary, talked about souls, hearts, and minds rather than about causes or issues. No wonder Jesus frightened the politicians into crucifying him. Dangerously, Christ equips people to live according to God's liberating essence – personal regeneration, building each other up, disobeying rules and exposing laws that exploit and limit humanity, mercy, compassion, justice, accountability, joy, grace, freeing us to live love's potential. Nothing unsettles worldly power more than the golden rule.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Thursday, July 21, 2022
"Incredible Things"
Word Count: 750

Sister and little brother are walking along the sidewalk, her left foot forward (pink pull-ons and red socks), his right foot forward (golden colored slippers). Her right hand holds his left hand, making sure he is safe. Both wear blue shirts, short-sleeve. She with curly brown hair. He with curly yellow hair. They resemble miniature versions of Harpo Marx. Wildflowers and mulch line the sidewalk. You can see Mickey Mouse's yellow shoes sticking out from her left hand. His right arm is blissfully pudgy, the satisfying joy of chubby elbows and wrists. His pants bulge from the diaper. The sky is cobalt blue. The crisp shadow in front of them mirrors their linked hands.

Mommy trails and snaps the photograph. It may seem they are walking away from mommy, which they are, though they also are walking forward. They are pressing on ahead, together. As they should. They will make the journey together. They may be walking now but not for long. Soon they will be running toward the adventure and there shape their future.

Three years ago sister traveled via mommy's womb. Then she traveled by infant snuggle carrier. Next came the stroller. For us, when our littles were so very young, it was an old-fashioned English perambulator. Sister and little brother's incautious steps and tumbles quickly followed, until, feeling secure and safe, walking was eventually mastered. Jumping too. Dancing too. Freed for something wonderful. There's no stopping them. As it should be. It's not as if they are walking away so much as they are walking toward. The interesting question is: Into what?

We received a glimpse of what sister and brother are walking toward courtesy of the Webb space telescope and its incredible things. What earth-shaking perspectives and wonders, life's magnificent magnitude! From womb of God to cosmic birth, our universe is 13.6 billion years old. Webb's magic mirror sees stellar nurseries. It sees light from 13.5 billion years ago. It sees into the atmospheric composition of exoplanets and already has told us how one exoplanet, 11 thousand light years away, has clouds and steam. New stars, never before seen, are seen. New horizons.

Imagine the discoveries yet to come, questions yet to ask. "Romper, bomper, stomper, boo. Tell me, tell me, tell me do. Magic mirror, tell me today. Did all my friends have fun at play?"

What will we discover about ourselves? For the Webb telescope's photographs make us look at ourselves. We see no room in this universe for a world where our children are prevented, tripped, limited, betrayed from moving forward into a remarkable world of remarkable wonders, a world of incredible things.

I trust they walk toward a universe of vast wonders. For two months now the public has been shown by patriotic witnesses incredible, bias-shaking facts. We've gained clearer perspective. And America is rejecting flabby, fascist Donald along with Trumpism and all the violence and hatred it feeds on. Don't you dare scapegoat this spoiled brat. He's your creation. How do you inherit the wind? You troubleth your own house. Proverbs 11:29. Obsolete Trumpism already is whirling down into the cesspool of history. We walk away from those opportunists with their corrupt conspiracy fetishes who fish through a hole in the bottom of their boat. Humanity requires something kinder, wiser, generous, selfless. We

reject a world infested by black-shirted Oath Keepers or brown-shirted Proud Boys, these pathetic termites. Don't cry, little boys. We the people know what to be proud of. I'm Calvinistic enough to doubt utopias can ever be achieved, but I'm devout enough to reject that we are fated to live the dystopian future they want to impose on us.

Riddle me ree, what do I see? I see sister and brother looking at gas pumps the way we look at pay phones. I see them mystified that we relied on kidney dialysis rather than regenerate the diseased organ. I see them baffled at how people once thought there were different races and how they exploited this ignorance to separate humanity. I see them laughing at our despairing and cynical predictions of doom.

Consider today this my peculiar version of Ray Bradbury's short story, "The Toynbee Convector." I too have time traveled and seen the future, the same as Bradbury's inventor, and I too have returned to tell you that these two children, and yours too, are walking toward a world that is abundant, full of promise and goodwill. We simply have to believe it to make it so.

I've always been chary of churches that pronounce that they are the true church and their views are what true Christians believe and practice. We're not here to promote the church's self-interest. I don't need my church to mimic the Taliban.

Call me a relic, for my youthfully opinionated career detoured into what missionary, John Mackay, meant when he argued that "the purpose of the church isn't to transform society but to transform the transformers of society." How is this accomplished? Scripture points toward the church's ministry of prophetic teaching and preaching. Rather than enforcing conformity, education draws forth possibilities. An apt definition for Christian Education's goal is: "Life in the risen Lord." We gather on Sunday so we can get to work as risen people from Monday to Saturday. Why else?

At the heart of my Reformed Tradition, which seeded the Declaration of Independence and our Constitution, beats the conviction that the "Lord is the Lord of the conscience," meaning that no person, no special interest, no church, no civil authority can command me to comply with what they demand I believe if I believe what they demand contradicts the Word of God revealed by Christ. There's the crucial condition. The sole litmus test to being a believer is that you grow in faith through repentance, you listen, learn, seek and strive to practice faithfully your confession that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior. Such is our freedom to live for God, never independent from our responsibilities to be humane toward each other. Your beliefs are yours, such is the freedom of your individuality, but never is faith individualistic.

Our responsibility is to think theologically. For we also uphold: "Truth is in order to goodness." We must wrestle to answer, admittedly provisionally, this question: how does my life in the risen Lord require me to respond to our time's existential problems? This is how my church struggled to bring the gospel to bear on divisive issues, such as rebellion against King George III, slavery, equal rights for women, civil rights. This is how the church must continue to struggle to speak to our day's vexing social issues, not as self-righteous crusaders or zealots but as thoughtful and devout followers. If we boast that our efforts transform our culture, then we're saying we're saviors.

When I taught my confirmation classes, preparing 8th graders to consider making a profession of faith in Christ, I baited them, asking: Who is the head of the church? They, thralls to popular culture, usually answered that as pastor I was the head of the church. Wrong. The only head of the church is Christ.

When the church institution or I demand obedience to what we pronounce as correct belief, we make the mistake of us thinking we have become the head of the church.

Among my sorrows is how we mislay this prophetic teaching ministry of the church. We issue self-validating slogans more than press intimately hard questions. We ill-serve our people when we declare preferences as divine decrees rather than challenging each person to choose to responsibly engage scripture, listening and learning from others and historical knowledge, so that each reflects upon the breadth, length, depth, and height of mature faithfulness. Our job is to foster occasions when the Spirit of Christ may provoke us into discerning how our views and actions may glorify God through our culture.

We do our job because we believe it is possible to cultivate, never impose, the kingdom of God on earth.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Thursday, August 4, 2022
“A New Confederacy”
Word Count: 750

If you’ve read any history books, you know how the last confederacy turned out. Contrary to some opinions, that 1861-1865 calamity wasn’t the War of Northern Aggression. Fort Sumter was bombarded first by those who renounced Lincoln’s lawful election. Neither was it the War Between the States because states cannot legally secede from the Union. Can the kidney tell the head it will leave the body politic? Persons within those states chose anarchist rebellion against their country, of which they were and did remain an indivisible part. Pennsylvania wasn’t fighting South Carolina. Combat took place between those who supported the Constitution and those who insurrected against it lacking just or moral cause. States’ rights was the excuse to preserve slavery.

We’re falling into another confederacy. Certain cynical leaders in certain states, abetted by three corruptly seated activist Associate Justices of the Supreme Court who place states’ rights over Federal sovereignty when it suits their darlings, are dangerously and inconsistently maneuvering us away from a Union toward a pocked-marked confederacy. New York permits the right of choice over abortion. Texas forbids it. It’s a new confederacy

We’re the United States of America, not a voluntary club. Democratic-Republican Thomas Jefferson advocated for states’ rights, opposing Alexander Hamilton’s support for Federalism, at least until Jefferson became President and realized Hamilton’s views were useful. It’s fitting for states to exercise authority over their own jurisdictions. Mahoning Township sets its own regulations about zoning, dog poop, fireworks, burn barrels. But Mahoning Township cannot ignore rules governing Montour Country. Township supervisors can challenge the county in court (checks and balances, decentralizing power), but should the court decide for the country, county must be obeyed. State sovereignty supersedes counties. Counties supersede municipalities.

Another example: Wyoming in 1869 exercised the right to grant suffrage to women decades before the 19th Amendment was ratified. When ratified in 1920 suffrage became binding on all states. No state had the right to deny a woman’s right to vote. Again: my denomination requires that all congregations with called pastors contribute to the denomination’s Board of Pension and Major Medical. Our denomination affirms the congregation’s right to call their own pastor, but also insures that pastors retain benefits should they relocate.

Federalism, as the head authority, is designed to seek moderation (often by choosing the lesser evil) and curb extremist abuses. Even as states' rights check Federal demagoguery, Federal authority supersedes state authority. It must, because there are policies and freedoms which pertain to the public as a whole, such as interstate commerce, foreign policy, climate laws, banning slavery, or protecting the right to vote. States cannot mint their own currency. They cannot establish a state religion – Christian nationalism, Mr. Mastriano, isn't Christian. No Ayatollahs here. The Christian Right isn't. National freedoms mustn't be abrogated despite agendas by leaders in particular states.

Question: how does the right to abortion and contraception, free from interference by the womb police, ethically compare to end-of-life decisions? Are these matters best controlled by political ambitions? I contend these are personal spiritual and medical matters, matters of private conscience deserving protection versus state constraint. Once upon a merrier time the Republicans accused the Democrats of fostering a 'Nanny State.' I'll take a persuasive 'Nanny State' any day over a punitive Police State inciting state sponsored vigilantism. Coercive rule by minority signals the minority's moral failure. Don't misconstrue pro-choice as pro-abortion. It's particular and situational rather than one size fits all (or, all must fit one size). Reject Texas chainsaws when healing scalpels are required.

Question: what will a legislator in Texas, North Dakota, or Florida do when his daughter's life is threatened by a failed pregnancy requiring a medical procedure on the fetus? Or if his daughter doesn't wish to carry her rapist's child to term?

Question: if Texas bans same sex marriage and the Supreme Court allows their state decision to stand, what happens if two men who were married in New York move to Texas (why anyone would want to these days, I don't know)? Are they still married?

Was it conversion or jaded opportunism that persuaded conservative evangelicals in the late 70's to market the issue of abortion into an expedient cudgel? Most evangelical churches, up until Reagan, supported freedom of choice, defending how such decisions belonged to the woman rather than legislators. It's also proven that Planned Parenthood and its caring positive approach to health care prevented more abortions than all the anti-abortion marches or clinic harassment. Perhaps times demand a modern Underground Railroad.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Thursday, 15 September, 2022
"Man Without A Country"
Word Count: 750

The historical fiction short story, "The Man Without a Country," was standard fare in Junior High text books. Is it still on the reading list? You might remember it. The story tells the tale of Army Lieutenant Philip Nolan, a fictional associate of Vice-president Aaron Burr. Burr actually was tried for treason for attempting to break away from the United States and form his own empire. Burr was miffed because he lost the presidency to Jefferson by vote of the House of Representatives. Burr thought he deserved to win. Burr thought he deserved to be anointed emperor. The rot of jealousy. Historically, Burr died ignominiously. Burr, the short story relates, seduced Lieutenant Nolan into his conspiracy. Nolan was tried, found guilty. Nolan renounces allegiance to his country. Nolan's response to the verdict? "Damn the United States! I wish I may never hear of the United States again!"

The Judge agrees: "Prisoner, hear the sentence of the Court! The Court decides, subject to the approval of the President, that you never hear the name of the United States again."

Nolan was sentenced to never again hear about or see the United States. He was kept on board naval vessels, never to set foot on his homeland, never to hear news about the United States. Upon his shipboard death as an old man, the reader learns how Nolan had repented.

Some renounce their nation by words, some by actions, some by both. Some boast patriotic slogans to deceive. We're still waiting for incoherent Donald to explain why he felt entitled to violate the law and hoard classified documents. He certainly seems incensed that he forced the FBI to resort to legal proceedings to retrieve them. No vendetta this, no weaponized justice system this. That's his thing. It's the law. If you throw a stone into a pack of dogs, the dog that howls the loudest is the dog that was hit.

Acting from the conviction that life is mortal combat between two competing principles – good versus evil – is a lethal, cultural, moral, and theological trap. Dualism is a sick world-view. Lamentable and destructive. When you believe you alone are good and righteous, then those disagreeing with you must be evil, demonic. This explains how persons throughout history have defended cruel, illicit, and corrupt behavior. Winning justifies immoral means. Lies, deceptions, become useful, symptomatic expedients. Surprising? Donald built his entire life upon fabrications. Listen to contractors he stiffed in Atlantic City. He's stiffing us still. Machiavellian audacity. Self-adoration. Puzzling is why decent people persist in trusting untrustworthy him, loving him as savior. What's their self-interest? Hanging onto the client's self-interest is how you discern someone's motivation. We've long idolized symbols unworthy of idolizing. Malignant narcissism is hardly endearing, though it does reveal a frightened and desperate spiritual, emotional and mental neediness.

Life, precious, doesn't deserve to copy "The Walking Dead" – this 'us or them' mentality. Which suggests another cultural problem: Mimicry. Cartoonish mimicry followed the movie, "Animal House." Friends just couldn't let it be a fun, dumb movie. They tried to replicate the experience with toga parties and base humor. Given the prevalence of anti-heroes celebrated nowadays, why do we delight in mimicking them? God save us when culture imitates wrestlemania. Meanwhile, fat-cat promoters sipping scotch in the upper boxes grin at the money they're collecting from the circus below.

It's puzzling to ponder how some people justify controlling, manipulating, others to be the kind of persons they want them to be instead of the persons God meant them to be. Just isn't right. Saviors don't demand: "Serve me." Neither do leaders. Neither do healthy persons. Self-adulation is no path to the joy of genuine affection. Isn't human happiness found in helping others succeed? Not dominating, dehumanizing, demeaning persons. Rather: by helping persons realize their gifts and use their potential productively.

It's a privilege bearing witness these wrestlemania years. Only when you wrestle in the pigsty do you realize how you want to get clean. We'll likely never convince 30% of the populace that their dualistic obsessions are mutually destructive, but 70% of us can demand and vote for the positive preservation of democracy, uneasy liberty, and respect for the spirit of the law.

If facts warrant his indictment and prosecution (whether for obstruction of justice, stealing documents, insurrection, tax evasion, or witness tampering – take your pick), if the prosecution establishes guilt, and

if Donald is to be sentenced, a plea deal should be offered. Over an orange jump suit, I recommend exile

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
27 October, 2022
"In Whose Image?"
Word Count: 750

On Saturday, 8 October, I spoke at a rally on Mill Street. What follows is an edited excerpt.

Dear Voters: It really is a choice. This election will decide in whose image we wish our country to be made.

Do we want it to be made in the image of cruel white supremacists, anti-Semites, Christian nationalists? I don't think so. I ask this as an authentic evangelical.

Do we want it to be made in the image of Mastriano, Oz, Meuser, of election denial, and obsolete Trumpism? Imagine the punitive legislation that'll result if they are in charge. Do the research. Fetterman, Shapiro, Waldman are the candidates who support law and order. We support these common sense, kitchen table candidates.

Do we want it to be made in the image of Roger Stone, Alex Jones, Steve Bannon? Do we want it to be made in the image of petulant, insecure, over-compensating males who go by the name Proud Boys, Oath Keepers? Do we want it to be made in the image of those pathetic Q-Anon puppets and their hateful hemorrhoidal conspiracy follies? Do we want it to be made in the image of those perverting Christianity into a tool for abusive power, prejudice, dominance, who intentionally ignore the righteous tenets of the golden rule, of the prophet Micah's words to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God, of Jesus' sermon on the mount? The Trumpist party of family values? Since when? Do we want it to be made in the image of Congressional frat boys who criminalize a woman's freedom to seek spiritual and medical care regarding her pregnancy?

Do we want it to be made in the pessimistic image of obstructionists who ban books, muzzle teachers, whose main purpose in life is to 'own the libs,' who can only whine and blame while refusing to negotiate needed solutions to our serious challenges. Talk about abdication of duty! Thank God Joe Biden is President and Kamala Harris Vice-president. Worse, unprincipled Republicans seek to dismantle the very constitutional engine by which America's solutions are driven. Is all they can muster disdain? What do they stand for? Or are vain, petty, cultural wars all they know how to wage? We already see where they are going. One side says this is how you must behave and what you must believe. This other side protects the freedom of how you may act and think. Do we want to be made in the image of those who seek to control or those who seek to serve?

Which is why I will vote for Shapiro, Fetterman, Waldman, Mock. Against a rascal minority, they take positive steps toward a successful, prosperous future and a mature foreign policy fighting for Western democracy. The ends are 'pre-existent in the means.' We do not misconstrue liberty as license. We're freed so we may live worthy lives. Our universe, the truest Republican, Abraham Lincoln, firmly believed, is the theatre for the working out of the moral law, dedicated to a great redemptive work.

November 8th offers a clear choice between a positive, hopeful future, and a commonwealth and country made in the image of those who imperil us by discrediting high principles, sabotaging our republic. We grieve them and their self-serving aims. They're not my enemies. They are my brothers and sisters.

Dear Republicans: I address real Republicans, some of whom must still be out there willing to listen. You know how those in control of your party have renounced true conservatism. I hope you can find it in you to set aside your partisanship and enter the voting booth and save America by casting your ballot for the optimistic Democratic candidates who give us a chance of living peaceably, justly, kindly. What profit to gain the world and forfeit your soul?

But, dear true Republicans, if you find it in you not to be able to vote for the sensible and competent Democratic candidates, at least do your conscience a favor and step aside and refuse to vote for those candidates who have fallen far from traditional Republican values. Blunt the violence they practice. Write in the name of Tom Ridge or John McCain. Remind your party of what integrity once meant. Will Rogers advised, you really don't have to drink downstream from the herd.

Dear Democrats: If you don't stand and fight and show up we get the country and the future nobody deserves.

What will our children's children say of us at this, our hour?

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Thursday, February 2, 2023

"Reptiles and Mammals"

Word Count: 750

Can alligators learn? If you questioned this decades ago the answer would be an emphatic, "No." Reptiles only obey their instincts, genes rule brains. Modern research, however, has begun to suggest tortoises, snakes, and, yes, alligators have a capacity to learn, howsoever limited compared to mammals. After all, we believe groundhogs know when they see their shadows. Can Puxatany snakes? Our Labrador fetched the Frisbee after several throws. She also discovered the mischievous delight in keep-a-way. Our son's pet box turtle never did get the knack.

Two words describing this difference between reptilian and mammalian brains are "extra-genetic" and "extra-somatic." Mammals evolved brains that can collect information from sources outside the body and use it beyond their genetic code. Question: Might this imply that when we mammals are cruel it's because we want to be cruel?

What's our taxonomy? Domain: Eukarya (cell based). Kingdom: Animals (we move on our own). Phylum: Chordates (we have vertebra). Class: Mammals (furry with milk glands). Order: Primates. Family: Hominids (by mastering walking upright, bipedal, our hands were freed to invent tools). Genus: Homo. Species: Homo Sapiens. Sapiens in Latin means, "wise" (although sometimes you could have fooled me). We have big brains, which explains why human babies are born with such oversized pelvis-painful heads. This also explains why our children's dependency lasts longer than all animals (sometimes till their thirties). The higher the specie, the longer the dependency.

Many of us, perhaps, are smarter than dolphins. Even the dumbest among us is smarter than a box turtle. Whether or not we use our intelligence is another matter altogether (Q-Anon comes to mind). Supposedly the zenith of evolution, we humans supposedly have the highest ability to gather information, remember it, and apply it, compared to all other creatures. Dolphins may squeak and click but writing is humankind's supreme technological achievement. Words. Our ability to write and read is the premier example of extra-somatic learning, encouraging our ability to recognize failings and avoid repeating them. This salutes why local newspapers are indispensable. We may dislike what we read. We may disagree with what we read. We are, however, better equipped by what we read. I still chuckle at the new seminarian who leveled charges of heresy against an Old Testament professor for teaching ideas the student didn't like to hear. Behold the sin of myopic modern christians voting: "Forward to the 1950's!"

When we read, we raft down the Mississippi alongside a fugitive slave. We name stars we spot at night. We learn they still shine during daylight, but the sun is too bright. We stare beyond our solar system and realize there's likely hundreds of galaxies in the observable universe for each earthling alive today. When we read, we discover how a young boy in Kabul experiences his world. We enter the life of a mother in South Africa oppressed by apartheid or walk in the sneakers of an adolescent boy who feels like a bullied outcast. We get transported out of our particular culture into the culture of a Mexican pueblo. God help those who think that sliced white bread is the only true type of bread there is.

One vivid morning long ago I stood at the end of my driveway imagining that another young boy far away was looking at his neighborhood and realizing, as did I, how the world was more than his neighborhood. This was my earliest 'aha' revelation. My safe, tidy world crumbled before this earthshaking moment, only to be rebuilt, reborn, launched toward dangerous possibilities far larger and assuredly far more wonderful. This awakening happened again when my pastor (fostering "minds freed from error, spirits freed from baseness") challenged me to imagine how the mythological truths of metaphorical Adam and Eve speak today. My Bible became unshackled, my faith energized.

Extra-genetic and extra-somatic learning is why we expend exacting efforts on educating our young, drawing forth potential, asking questions rather than packaging them like sausages. Teddy Roosevelt pushed to enact Child Labor Laws because children forced by poverty to work in the mines missed out on going to school. This sinister, uncivil, denial of a chance for education trapped them into their misery. Ignorance indentured them to cold coal bosses. There's a special circle in millstone hell for sanctimonious authoritarians who limit, stifle, regulate, and control people's liberty to learn, dictating what children cannot read. Reptilian brutes stomping on dreams. Their hell threatens the rest of us with, as poet John Milton hauntingly described, a "dungeon of myself."

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Thursday, March 2, 2023
"Happy Seuss Day"
Word Count: 750

Which is your favorite Dr. Seuss story? Seuss Day – today! At elementary schools they'll predictably read the standards: "Green Eggs and Ham;" "The Cat in the Hat." Fun. Fun.

Hush please. Please don't tell Ron DeSantis (or other emotionally illiterate right-wingers) that Seuss' stories convey 'woke' messages. I dare not mention what he might think of, "There's a Wocket in my

Pocket.” He might ban them all for not complying with his elitist world-view. Seuss is more than silly, he’s subversive. Those stories are my favorites.

“Yertle the Turtle,” his best, mocks tyrants. “The Sneetches,” ridicules arrogant prejudice. “Horton Hears a Who,” my second favorite, portrays repressive McCarthyism bullying those who wouldn’t conform to his Americanism. “Gertrude McFuzz” warns about ingesting drugs to meet commercial expectations of beauty. “The Butter Battle Book,” parodies dumb politics and dumb religious disputes. “The Lorax,” promotes protecting the environment.

If DeSantis’ ‘fainting couch’ Republicans (who honestly cannot be considered Republicans), really want to ban a book that graphically flaunts adultery, genocide, abuse, killing children, violence defending tyranny, violence rebelling against tyranny, rape, murder, sexual confusion, drunkenness, theft and cheating, there’s a book that never should be found on any bookshelf. It’s called, “The Bible.”

At a recent church-wide meeting, a colleague oddly invoked Mister Rogers to argue how he frowns upon cultural influences infiltrating the purity of church positions, especially by allowing modern gender language. Speaking of gender, with Biden visiting Ukraine and Carter embracing mortality, we see prime examples of manhood in action. I confess, unhip that I am, I’m ignorant about gender issues, but I’m willing to listen. Two things I do know, however, is that church positions can be whatever someone says they are, and, second, that decades ago I realized that since God can use the church to reform culture, God can use culture to reform the church.

If we cherry pick any of Mr. Roger’s messages (March 20 is his day!), let’s choose the one where he sings: *“I Like You as You Are, I like you as you are, Exactly and precisely, I think you turned out nicely, And I like you as you are. I like you as you are, Without a doubt or question, Or even a suggestion, Cause I like you as you are. I like your disposition, Your facial composition, And with your kind permission, I’ll shout it to a star. I like you as you are, I wouldn’t want to change you, Or even rearrange you, Not by far. I like you, I-L-I-K-E-Y-O-U, I like you, yes I do, I like you, Y-O-U, I like you, like you as you are.”*

Then again, there’s where Fred sings: *“You are my friend, You are special, You are my friend, You’re special to me, You are the only one like you, Like you, my friend, I like you. In the daytime, In the nighttime, Any time that you feel’s the right time For a friendship with me, you see, F-R-I-E-N-D special, You are my friend, You’re special to me, There’s only one in this wonderful world, You are special.”*

Perhaps Fred sang this song after reading Seuss’ story, “Horton Hears a Who.” Kind Horton bravely stands against those who harass him, those threatening the clover refuge of those vulnerable Who’s, protesting: “A persons a person. No matter how small.”

Danville’s school district has begun a task force to address mental and emotional health challenges faced by our students. I can suggest plenty of remedies alongside counseling and medication: boycott social media, animal husbandry at school and hallway dogs, creative writing clubs, expanding theatre and dance opportunities, arranging chances for doing something for others, engaging in sweaty and satisfying manual labor where you accomplish something, mandatory national service. Still, Dr. Seuss and Mister Rogers would be a compassionate way to frame the effort. We just don’t live for ourselves.

At the same church meeting, while we were busy pontificating, our Director of Christian Education read, as part of her report, a children’s book, titled, “The Rabbit Listened.” It begins with something sad happening to a little boy. Things came crashing down. Chicken, bear, elephant, hyena, ostrich,

kangaroo, snake, come by thinking they can help. They advise, they scold, they shout, they offer opinions, they tell him how he should fix things, how he should act about what happened. Then along comes rabbit. The gift of rabbits is that they have big ears. Rabbit is invited to come close and cuddle with the boy. The rabbit listened.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Thursday, March 30, 2023

“The Last Word”

Word Count: 750

It was one of those books you wish you had read sooner. Published in 2014, author Daniel James Brown chronicled in “The Boys in the Boat” the crew team from the University of Washington who won the gold medal in the 1936 Olympics hosted by Germany. These depression era boys labored as farmers, loggers, jack-hammering rock to build the Coulee Dam. They defeated the Ivy League teams, then went on to defeat the best crew teams Europe could muster. They did so even when the German Olympic committee cheated in the medal race to give the Germans and Italians the lane advantage along with a deliberately confused start. Hitler, watching Germany lose from his privileged balcony, didn’t see the humor in it. This Olympics was supposed to showcase German, Aryan, superiority. Jesse Owens made Hitler grumpy too. Sweeter, the USA coxswain was Jewish.

What happened to Hitler nine years later? What happened to Mussolini? What about Stalin? When we look back and see the truth, what were their legacies? Answer: failure, miserable failure after failure, sadly after causing wasteful misery, especially upon the innocents. Nero. Mao. We can predict Putin’s fate (and his jesters). This is the way of evil. It will infest and afflict the world with pain and travail, requiring us to stand against it, but it never lasts. “Tempested but not overcome” [Julian of Norwich].

The same is true with all evils. Colonialism. Imperialism. Racism. Fascism. Terrorism. Even those Seven Deadly Sins don’t stand a chance. Dante’s “Purgatorio” describes how the Seven Deadly Sins are perverted and distorted versions of love. We see Bad Love in me-first Pride, Envy seeks things outside to satisfy, and Wrath reveals in its rage weakness and fear. Sloth (apathetic indifference) and Avarice (this desire for material things) are Inadequate Love. Gluttony filling emptiness and Lust seeking needy pleasure are Immoderate Love. Ascending through purgatory’s purification toward the revealing and cleansing light of paradise, they become redeemed, true humanity is restored, Bad Love becomes transformed into Good Love, Inadequate Love becomes Enough Love, and Immoderate Love becomes Magnified Love.

We Protestants offer a fundamentally different understanding of Purgatory. We hint at this in our funeral services because we don’t pray for the dead. The dead don’t need our prayers. Those of us who mourn need them. So for us, purgatory isn’t some religious doctrine of what happens after we die. Purgatory isn’t a place or a state of being like some bus station after death where we wait around for our ticket. Purgatory is right now, a present process of conviction, repentance, and renunciation bringing us toward human fulfillment.

For us Christians, this is what Easter means. We delight in bunnies, chocolate, lilies, posh frocks, and sunrise services. Wife and I prefer lamb over ham. Easter also means far more than a sentimental view that heaven is a reward for individual piety. Jesus didn’t get crucified simply to make us feel good about ourselves. Quite the contrary. Consider what brought him to Easter’s dawn. Herod. Pilate. A corrupt

aristocracy. Pharisees. Hypocrisy. Violence. Betrayal. Lawlessness. Greed. Exploitation. Domination. Ignorance. Propaganda. Hateful retribution. Fear. These sins manufacture crosses. The cross demonstrates human existence stripped naked of divine essence. These were the forces at work trying to suppress in Jesus what they could never suppress, then and now. Inhumanity is impractical. Even the ugly cross becomes a symbol of divine faith, hope, and love. Evil, sinfulness, death never will have the last word. Easter triumphs. Jesus didn't resurrect himself. He was raised.

We who are religious realize there are skeptics who dismiss belief in resurrection. We also realize how some believers argue for a physical resurrection. Other Christians suggest a bodily resurrection, informed by the interpretation that the Greek word for body doesn't mean flesh, it means a person's essence, their personality, their soul. Believe what you will, but even if you're skeptical, you still can appreciate the spiritual symbolism of Easter, how, despite their efforts, those who do evil (in the name of their good) fail. They're as impotent as a stone blocking a tomb.

Author Brown glimpsed what made those eight oarsmen and their coxswain special. Each discovered the secret: "It has to matter to you whether the other fellow in the boat wins the race, not whether you do."

After all these years, the message of faith is beginning to make sense. We do not live for ourselves.

Please tell me, which is better? Life without Easter or life with Easter?

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Thursday, May 25, 2023
"Call it Out"
Word Count: 750

When soccer referees call a foul, the referee can award a yellow card for intentionally harmful infractions or a red card for nasty play. If a red card is issued, the player is sent off. Imagine walking around town with yellow and red cards in your pocket flashing them at misbehavior. What satisfaction! Sent off!

Referees stick their necks out. Upset fans yell at you. Most prefer being timorous when faced with bad behavior. Friends, do call it out. Does it mean you must be annoying when telling kids that skateboarding on church steps is rude or reprimanding foul language or criticizing vulgar displays? There are reasonable and respectful ways of calling out wrong actions, even in a society, writes Lynne Truss, where criticism often is taken as aggression. Truss warns that you shouldn't be surprised if you're accused by the nuisance maker for being intolerant, when the nuisance maker is the intolerant one. Those who lack an inner censor invariably invite external controls, then they attack when boundaries are attempted. Sound familiar? Boorish jerks deserve to be told to shut up.

Can we be obnoxious and vindictive when calling out others? Sure. It's a favorite past-time. How? Don't consider why you feel outraged enough to stomp and shout. Speak in accusatory "You" statements rather than "I" statements. Do humiliate them. Target the person rather than expose the act. Don't practice what you demand of others.

The danger arrives when silence permits rudeness to fester. Incivility and evil too. Goebbels counted on the Germans to be cowed into silence, then into obedience, soon enough into idolatrous cheering. Predictably, Hitler, Mussolini, Putin's minority control eventually did more than intimidate dissenters who dared speak out, they eliminated them. No voices remained to say: "No."

If you're going to get angry at God, society, or someone, make sure you're angry over something worthwhile.

Mark Twain's story, "The Mysterious Stranger," takes place in old Europe. Witch-hunting is trendy. Power-greedy men accuse a lady of witchcraft, fomenting fear. The mob chases her, lynches her. A boy joins the crowd in throwing stones at the corpse. He's ashamed of himself, mostly for being too afraid not to join the rabid villagers. Mob rule happens casually.

The Mysterious Stranger laughs at how the boy feels. "I know your race. It is made up of sheep. It is governed by minorities, seldom or never by majorities. It suppresses its feelings and its beliefs and follows the handful that makes the most noise. Sometimes the noisy handful is right, sometimes wrong; but no matter, the crowd follows it. The vast majority of the race, whether savage or civilized, are secretly kind-hearted and shrink from inflicting pain, but in the presence of the aggressive and pitiless minority they don't dare to assert themselves. I know that ninety-nine out of a hundred of your race were strongly against the killing of witches when that foolishness was first agitated by a handful of pious lunatics in the long ago. And I know that even to-day, after ages of transmitted prejudice and silly teaching, only one person in twenty puts any real heart into the harrying of a witch. Yet apparently everybody hates witches and wants them killed."

Sound familiar? Only mysterious wags would laugh at how MAGA republicans chant minority litanies about women's rights, civil rights, voting rights, climate, guns, economy, foreign policy, yet expect the masses to echo the bleating flock. It ain't even conservatize, hardly right. Do sheep realize they're on the menu? Whenever any extremist minority seeks to enforce their anti-republic, anti-freedom will by aggressive cruelty, dishonesty, dehumanization, are we lemming or lion? People baa and grunt about how politics is broken. False. The folks who use the machinery are broken. Broken extremists don't deserve sheep. Call it out, roar, make sensible noise, lest real witch-hunts begin.

On Memorial Day, May 30, 1922, the Lincoln Memorial was dedicated. 36 marble columns support the Memorial, one for each state at the time of Lincoln's assassination. 36 states, including those who shouldered rifle to destroy the Union and shred the Constitution. They didn't. They couldn't.

This Memorial witnesses to us how Lincoln believed in the idealism and goodness of his countrymen. He understood their anguish, their pettiness, their failings because he understood his own. He maintained a confidence, proved by dread sacrifice, that the people will achieve this nation's Constitutional reality of equality, freedom, democracy, achieving a government by the people, not of the states, not for a clanging minority.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Thursday, June 8, 2023
"Flag Day 2023"
Word Count: 750

Neglected Flag Day, June 14, deserves attention. Flag Day reminds us that the United States of America is a united nation. Fifty stars represent our fifty states. These fifty stars shine from a blue field of heaven, representing, “a new constellation in the firmament.” We started with thirteen stars in a circle. It would be exciting to see four more stitched into the union. Puerto Rico, Virgin Islands, Guam, District of Columbia. A perfecting union: “Responsibility has its own burdens.”

Union, an inspiring word. People come together for a common purpose. Unified. United. Unity. Unison. Etymologically, all these words originate from the Latin word for ‘one.’ E pluribus unum.

We honor the flag, thus we are reminded we are united. This doesn’t mean we all agree. Hardly. You should hear how one of my brothers and I disagree. It’s healthy to avoid thinking of unity as conformity. Our nation embraces an exciting tension. We celebrate our individuality while surrendering our individuality to a nobler calling. America: patchwork quilt and melting pot. We’re both, paradoxically, dialectically.

How can this happen? Take, for instance, when Christians talk about Christian unity. It gets clumsy if we assume oneness happens when all Christians agree to one set of approved doctrines or structure, liturgy or theology – like that’s ever going to happen. Even if it did, that’s religious conformity. Given Baptists and Presbyterians, Romans and Lutherans, Quakers and Assembly of God, Unitarians and Methodists, what we got now are differences of opinion.

Unity. Thankfully, individual churches never experience divisions, no never. Except, perhaps, when it comes to the color of Sanctuary rug or new hymnbook. If Jesus had a grave, he’d be rolling over.

Have we ever really ever been ‘organized religion?’ Kathleen Norris winked when folks told her they have little use for participating in organized religion. She joked: “Then come to my church, we’re terribly disorganized.” What’s offered a thirsty and alienated people is community, connection, meaning, worth.

Maybe this explains why silly us are once again fussing over the Ten Commandments and public schools -- a two-dimensional reaction to life feeling out of control, disappointing, scary, empty. You want respect for the Ten Commandments? Come to church. Open your Bible. Far better than posting them is showing them by living them. Same with the Pledge of Allegiance. Hey, I want what she has, he has, life at its most practical and sensible and fulfilling in a world that isn’t. Being mischievous, it might be frolicking fun for us to crusade for Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount instead posted in classrooms, since the Sermon on the Mount brings into full spiritual flower the unfinished law of the Ten Commandments.

It should be mentioned that we Presbyterians, having suffered and caused religious repression, historically object to any door being opened to religionists to impose their brand of faith. There are versions of Christianity (white nationalism most notably) I’d never want spoken in any classroom as an authoritative prayer, just as some Christians might find blasphemous what I’d pray. I’ll leave it to the Sermon on the Mount to be the measure.

Christian unity, for instance, happens when, despite our denominations and differences of opinion, we stand fast together by following the corrective way of Jesus against fell forces that divide and destroy, ruin and degrade, us unified for a common purpose that is truer and holier than ourselves.

Unity like the Danville Community Band. Persons from all walks of life come together to play music – different instruments, different notes, coming together for making beauty in a noisy, discordant world.

Unity like the Ukrainians, them united in resolute opposition to the evil of Russian aggression, murder, and atrocity, united for democracy and prosperity for her people.

Unity like my brothers. Okay for them to pick on me but never anyone else in the neighborhood.

What happens when there is a crisis, where there is a real threat? When the hour demands we be united? When there's a school shooting. Well, some of us anyway. When divorced and bickering parents are told their child has leukemia. When a town is threatened with flooding. One of our prouder moments happened when the river was rising and it was going to rise regardless, and my son and I, along with soccer team, football team, electrician, surgeon, maintenance man, shopkeeper, commissioner, started sandbagging together. We do have our finer moments.

One nation. A fact. Under God. A warning. Indivisible. A necessity. With liberty and justice for all. A responsibility.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
July 6, 2023
"Pleasers"
Word Count: 750

A church couple tried to sabotage their pastor because he didn't fit their standards. They were a couple easily offended. What's the cure for not being offended? Don't take offense. Eventually, this couple tried to split the congregation, which could have happened. She was both Deacon and church organist. He was both Trustee and church custodian. They, masters of passive aggression and rumor-mongering, believed they'd cow everyone else. This is how they chose to spend their days.

Session (the congregation's governing board) tried to ignore the problem. They finally addressed it. The elders spoke with them, trying to placate them. The pastor spoke with them. That didn't placate them. They didn't want to be placated. Session teetered, until one of the elders finally blurted: "We're not going to be held hostage – we've been as fair as possible."

Good line. I've borrowed it since. Liberation arrived when I realized I was not in the business to please people, but to be fair, to be reasonable. It's not as if it's our responsibility to make others happy. You can't anyway. Happiness, like love, is a choice. You can cultivate the conditions, but it's up to them to choose to be happy. Or not.

Another friend laughed about his first pastorate when a parishioner summoned him after worship to come and speak with her. "Pastor," she began, "you're a fine preacher but I simply can't stand that beard of yours." My friend went home, prayed about it, and decided since it bothered her so much, he would shave off his beard. Come next Sunday she approached him. "Oh, thank you, I'm so glad you shaved. Now, about that moustache..."

Good luck rushing around trying to please everyone. Whose favor do you seek? Whose approval do you need? This rookie pastor, fortunately, learnt early on the importance about not worrying about pleasing

my congregation. I learnt I never would, never could. Plus, it's parasitic. How could I succeed when desperate for their approval? Should we be courteous and civil? Yes. Loving? Yes. Sincere? Yes. Kind? Yes. Trustworthy? Yes. Conscientious? Yes. Fair? Yes. Just? Yes. Currying favor? No.

I caught the movie "The Big Country" last Sunday, starring Gregory Peck. Peck plays a sea captain affianced to the daughter of a Texas cattle baron. Peck's character doesn't play by cowboy rules, refusing to appease them. Eventually, his refusal to fit their regulations gets to where his fiancée, her father, and cowhands regard him a coward.

His fiancée is ashamed of him: "Don't you care what people think of you?" He replies: "I'm not responsible for what people think, only for what I am."

One scene at the debut party captures Peck's attitude. A prideful Texas rancher greets Peck's character. "Mr. McKay, how do you like this country?" "I like it very much." "Did you ever see anything so big?" "Yes." "You have? What?" "A couple of oceans."

This smacks of when down-home folks start bragging about small town values. What? Are small town values superior to big city values? Talk about elitist snobbery.

Congregations love it when we dare remind them that their pastor isn't their employee. I had this go-around with a church which kept instructing their pastor what he should do. They even floated the idea of giving him a commission for each new member. Boy, did Session get miffed when I declared: "He's not your employee. This ain't widgets." Pastors don't work for the congregation. They work to please Jesus, with the congregation. Sadly, some pastors need to be mascots. Some pastors become pastors because, painfully insecure, they need to be loved and appreciated. Have you ever been involved in a church?

What happens when you bend a metal coat hanger this way and that way, that way and this way? It heats up and breaks.

The former director of the Columbia/Montour Women's Center taught us their motto: Choices not solutions. She helped us refocus the Gate House ministry. How can we make good choices so we will solve our problems, maybe even transform problems into blessings? Choices. Here's mature and unselfish personal and social responsibility.

O' MAGA saboteurs, how sad. What a waste. Stop whimpering. Stop grouping like zombies. Are you so busy being miserable, offended, angry, emotionally insecure, that you've forgotten how to choose happiness, hope, confidence? What legacy are you cultivating? Why should we choose to let you heap your displeasure on us? What are you bringing to your living? Desperate and needy Donald: pull on big boy pants.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
August 3, 2023
"Horns of a Dilemma"
Word Count: 750

Some collect stamps. Some Hummel figurines. Having reached my sixth stage of life, as Melancholy Jacques' soliloquy portrays in Shakespeare's, "As You Like It," I dote on my collection of idioms and phrases. They help slippered and pantalooned me play my part as the venerable and aged sage. Over 152 expressions come from the Bible, such as: "By the skin of our teeth;" "The apple of my eye;" "A fly in the ointment."

This next saying fits today, prophetically: "A house divided." This Gospel line finds ample proof in a stupid king named Rehoboam. Real evangelicals might take note. Kings rule not by divine right, but by the rights of the people. When a king stops respecting those rights, he's no longer king but tyrant. Vindictive Rehoboam, by abusive and exploitative forced labor of his people, ignites a rebellion that destroys Israel. Israel regretted him. Violence is expensive, and we pay the bill. Beware rulers lacking compassion, humor, servanthood. His cruel incompetence divides his kingdom. A kingdom divided cannot stand. Nor a house. Not as if a house divided refers to broken sheetrock or concrete. House means people, family. House of David, House of Andrews, House of Christianity, House of USA. The principle called Hanlon's Razor chides, "Never attribute to malice that which can be adequately explained by stupidity." In Rehoboam's case, it was both. Worse, self-loving, self-serving Rehoboam didn't care. Hello, karma. Consequences inevitably reveal the cause. Reaping the whirlwind.

Three Bulls grazed in a meadow watched by a Lion. Lion longed to eat them, but felt that he was no match for the three because they kept together. By false whispers and malicious hints he began to foment jealousies and distrust among them. Lion's plan works. Bulls grew suspicious of each other. They finally avoided each other. They grazed apart. Lion grinned, killing them one by one. The quarrels of friends, warns Aesop, become opportunities of foes.

Here's another expression fit for today: "A heavy heart." It comes from Proverbs: "Like vinegar on a wound is one who sings songs to a heavy heart." If you're sad, do you want to be bombarded with Disco music to fake happiness? Do the hustle! This is about bad timing rather than bad intent. It isn't the songs that sting, but the intrusive singer. Name first why you are sad.

"Horns of a dilemma" also speaks to today, although it's historically Greek rather than Biblical. This phrase about an angry bull depicts how difficult it can be when you must select between two things when both lead to bad results. When faced with horns of a dilemma, it's awkward. You choose one horn, the other impales you.

Have you heard these presuppositions provocative partisan pundits push? How President Biden is either a James Bond super-villain mastermind plotting over decades to persecute his political rivals while enriching his family syndicate; Or else he's a doddering old geezer who can neither walk across a stage without tripping nor read from the teleprompter. Which is it?

Watch out! Here thunders another snorting bull with sharp horns. For either thousands of reputable and distinguished law enforcement and judicial officials from various backgrounds, various departments, and various States are willing, for nefarious aims through a nefarious cabal, to collude and betray their sacred oath of office, corrupt our legal and justice system, violate the US Constitution; Or else Donald Trump is guilty as sin. Which is it?

Why does the fox always suspect that everyone else acts like the fox? Sad. When faced with horns of a dilemma, try Occam's Razor: the simplest and most obvious answer likely is the correct one. Venerable

sage that I am, I've invented my own rule. It's called The Obama Application. Who would bellow loudest if Obama did what Trump has done?

Another convincing way of trying to decide which option is worth betting on would be simply to apply Mom's "Company-You-Keep" axiom and review the track record of their character as disclosed by the character of the company they keep. Well, if you swim in a cesspool, you're bound to drink the water. Let's see: Steve Bannon or Merrick Garland? Marjorie Taylor Greene or Doris Kearns Goodwin? Paul Gosar or Jamie Raskin? Elise Stefanik or Kamala Harris? Roger Stone or Larry Hogan? Hawley or Kinsinger? Tuberville or Duckworth? The Reverends Jeffress or Barber? Ted Nugent or Bruce Springsteen? Compare the evidence of conduct. Whose integrity would you bet your grandchild's life on?

What was that about reaping the whirlwind?

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
August 31, 2023
"Cribs"
Word Count: 750

Newark State Hospital, located some 50 miles east of Rochester, New York, was a tolerable institution for those youngsters we once referred to as mentally retarded. Fortunately, our language improves as our knowledge and sensitivity matures. It was an institution typical of the period, housing kids whose parents, lacking the capacity or resources to care for them, sent them there. No judgment. Even back in the early seventies, society was embryonic in our medical expertise when it came to causes of disabilities and treatment, exacerbated by the dearth of social resources for children and families in need. Have we improved? I remember visiting one ward regularly as a college volunteer. Volunteerism gets in the blood. When we went through the process to become church members, an integral component included volunteering for mission work: playing with poor children in the slums of Elizabeth Port, shooting pool with women convicts, traveling to Montreal to fix homes, playing checkers with a boy suffering from muscular dystrophy (our parents expected us to let him win -- we didn't). By the way, our pastors refused to thank us for doing this work. It was what was expected. A wry professor at seminary asked: "Are we a reproducing church or are we just playing house?"

Visiting Newark State hospital weekly during my early years at Hobart College, I found myself invited to interact with dozens of male adolescents who had been warehoused in one large room, cots lining the walls. There was a ping pong table at the other end and a few tables for games. Things took place there you really don't want to know about, but should. The needs of one bullied adolescent, nearly deaf, forced me to teach myself rudimentary sign language so he could talk with someone. Newark State Hospital prepared me for student teaching in English at a local Roman Catholic school, especially when my supervising nun announced I was now the school's reading teacher: "You will teach several illiterate young men." Phonics, here we come! We ignored textbooks, touring instead school hallways and sounding out the signs, eventually deciphering forms for getting a driver's license. Educators call this, 'praxis.' It always was amazing how kids who would whine about failing math could calculate their batting average or free throw percentage.

Later, I was selected to work in a pilot program for eight blind, deaf, and retarded middle-aged children. Prior to this program, these children existed without undue attention, for that matter, without any

undue anything. Who had time or resources for excesses? They were fed regularly, diapered frequently, bathed occasionally, and returned to their cribs. To prevent them from crawling around and injuring themselves, they were, by the law of economics, kept in their cribs – day and night. Life for them was, as far as they perceived it, adequate. It was their life, they knew nothing different. All requirements were met.

After a few weeks of our program of operant conditioning (the magic of M&M's and ice cream) and individual attention (the magic of words and touch) we noticed a change in our kids. Well, it wasn't they who changed. We discovered that all of our charges were not as severely incapacitated as supposed. They had become how they had been treated. Most possessed partial vision. Several suffered only impaired hearing. One even suggested average mental competence.

Because we worked with them specifically, nurtured them individually, loved them personally, they began to awaken, emerging from their imposed restrictions. It didn't take any stupendous miracle for them to grow. All it took was for us to care for them each, encourage them each, day and night. The law proscribes. Grace prescribes.

At Newark State Hospital we felt shame when we realized we needed to do better by all of them. We did for eight. They were liberated from mere sufficiency, from accepting what the institution expected them to be. Our eight kids eventually learnt to run and play.

That which haunts you can inspire you. We realized how inadequate was their adequate existence in their cribs. What had been formerly sufficient, satisfying life's basic requirements, had been exposed as woefully cruel, stifling their potential. It frustrates me how many cribs are still out there, how many cribs we're still manufacturing and sticking kids into. Then there are those who choose to remain in their cribs. There once was a fellow who complained and blamed, griped and sniped about being blind, except he wasn't blind. He just refused to open his eyes.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
September 14, 2023
"Fiction's Truth"
Word Count: 750

Someday I'll retire from retirement. Given changing attitudes about ministry, churches lack professional ministers to serve. I've picked up another chore. Church headquarters has been busy drafting new policies for our congregations to adopt. New ones are added to an already stuffed basket. My task is to review and re-organize them, beginning by sorting between policies and procedures. Paper-cuts are the Presbyterian stigmata.

I should explain that John Calvin, Presbyterianism's forefather, never was ordained. He studied law. Enough said. After the Bible, we hold our Book of Order (our Church Constitution) with a reverence that necessitates alterations befitting a church that values periodic reformation. We adjust, we try to progress, seeking guidance from Word and Spirit how to be reformed.

We may be a denomination born in protest, but we do acknowledge the practicality of institutional rules. Discarding a baseline of principles and procedures to which we contract ourselves, humanity tumbles into a mess. The Enlightenment advanced the illusion of self-willed human perfectibility. Given

right knowledge, right opinion, right government, all will be wonderful. Really? The Enlightenment failed to take seriously something Calvin took seriously: sin. Indeed, we believe that it's easier for us to sin in groups than as individuals. Beware when power itself becomes God. The KKK comes to mind. So too Mussolini's fascists, Christian Nationalists, Robespierre's unchecked mob-democracy. Guillotined heads in baskets. Hence, the authors of the US Constitution explained: "If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary."

Our US Constitution is a pragmatic product of Reformed Protest-antism, distrusting the perfectibility of both individuals and government. We depend on our citizenry's ongoing commitment toward virtue, education, altruism, truth. If we manifest none of these, decadency follows. Our self-interest demands we get beyond our self-interest.

September 17th celebrates Constitution Day, when we honor the day the Convention of 1787 voted to adopt this document and send it to the States for ratification. The Constitution: more lodestone than cornerstone. Our reliable compass.

Given the recklessly rude nature of our 2023 society, some of the policies my church is bidden to enact include addressing harassment (bullying and kindred abuse), racism (bigotry with power), church safety, family leave. I'm hoping we might model similar policies adopted by local school districts. It makes sense that we reinforce community efforts.

Yet, as much as we less than angelic humans benefit from a baseline of rules (picture a football game lacking umpire discipline, where players and coaches balk at playing by the rules), is Christ's church merely some social institution? Are we not first a community of faith summoning us to go deeper than surface navigation between "Thou Shalt Not," and "Thou Shalt?" We the church must behave by more than compliance. Are we lifted by Word and Spirit in what we foster?

When faced with racism, for instance, let's develop a two tiered approach. The foundation will be the do's and don'ts. When we act out racist sins, the code points it out and indicts. Faith, however, demands we plunge within and ask questions, pressing those of us who struggle with social sins to examine ourselves. It must be personal, situational. Interrogatives over declarations. Does your behavior glorify the grace of God? Do your jokes, your actions, your motivations, your reaction to others square with Christianity's practical central principles embodied by the Sermon on the Mount and the cross?

A church cliché teases how preaching should comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. History too. Can we be honest without fear, indignation, hostility, or self-justification? Although, I'm guessing my Southern ancestors might feel relieved to hear how their plantation actually offered an apprenticeship program for foreign nationals.

After 8th grade I visited Israel's Holocaust museum. I remember piles of shoes and soap rendered from Jews. More recently, I visited the bridge outside Okemah, Oklahoma, where prominent citizens picnicked above the lynched bodies of a mother and her boy.

This partly is why I travel. I need to see through other eyes. The Christian faith requires it. It's why I read fiction like, "Cry, the Beloved Country," a story about suffering amidst apartheid: "I shall no longer ask myself if this or that is expedient, but only if it is right." Non-fiction relates information, facts.

Fiction illuminates truth. We shouldn't be surprised by parallels between the policies of the Afrikaner movement and Trumpism.

No, I guess you really never can retire until the real work is done.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
October 12, 2023
"Dog in the Manger"
Word count: 750

It happened, predictably, Sunday following the November, 2016, election. A young woman who worked on the Clinton campaign started crying following worship. Oddly, we had scheduled a church hike that afternoon to the Devil's Featherbed along Bald Top. Prophetic?

I tried to help her put her tears in perspective. First, I reminded her how she did participate in a successful campaign. Hillary won nearly three million more votes than Trump. Second, I attempted to put the election in perspective from my experience with parishioners who survived heart attacks. Many came to realize that their heart attack was one of the best things that could have happened to them, pushing them into wiser diets and exercise, improved health habits.

While preparing to teach a class to folks interested in becoming Commissioned Pastors, I reviewed strategies for pastoral care-giving. The aim is care. Cure is up to the parishioners facing problems, concerns. Pastoral care begins when pastors remain available to perceive the person's perspective. Our antennae tingle when people feel and act upon anxieties, guilt, anger, along with distress, dread, alienation. Such behaviors signal unhelpful beliefs (also known as idols). Pastoral care seeks to offer guidance so persons can choose to ground themselves in helpful beliefs. Change in conduct happens from a change of mind, of perspective. What the mind decides, what the mind chooses, actions of heart, belly, gonads, tongue, limbs, follow. This applies to us individually and as a society. Hurt breeds hurt, I've heard. Dog poop needs to be cleaned up. I'm an expert.

Where's your mind at? Does our mind guide us? Very often it's those other organs that govern us, but only when the mind, the seat of reason and understanding, agrees, gives assent, permits them to get their way.

Following the 2016 election it was worthwhile to ask: What did this election do to reveal us, to wake up America? Where did we fail a segment of our population? What brought on such hurt and pain, anger and disappointment? What gave rise to such negativity? I tried to reach out and explore the motivations for Trump's popularity. I listened to various voices, received Republican polls, read such books as "Hillbilly Elegy" and "Alienated America." I prayed that all sides would improve from this result.

Then came the 2020 election. I disagreed but respected the right to vote for Trump, albeit that MAGA is neither conservative nor Republican. Sure, I was glad Trump lost the election, even gladder that Biden won, relieved at Biden restoring competence and statesmanship to our domestic and, especially, foreign policies. Unlike most, I vote on the basis of foreign policy. Domestic issues, Congress dependent, always are a kerfuffle.

That was then, this is now. I'm tired of reaching out to understand, negotiate, excuse, or accommodate those voters who only demand, take, or threaten. It's their turn to reach out, to learn, listen, and compromise, to bravely practice self-examination. Do we really want an America of dread, despair, alienation? Is America okay with syphilis infecting the body politic? Sure, leftist extremists can be nuts, but let's get real about the level of scale. Venereal disease or indigestion? Given the flagrant and flawed convictions (pun intended) driving 2023's naked Trumpism, who can explain how any decision to support this movement can be respected?

How is Trump a failure at life? Let me count the demonstrable ways: Judged a rapist; Snobby self-loathing; Hedonist; Human rights opposing; Extortionist; Inveterate liar; Misogynist; Fact denier ; Malignant narcissist; Rapacious taker; Opportunistic racist; Con-man fraudster; Anti-American; Rampant vulgarian; Anti-Constitution; Cruel retribution; Anti-gospel; Democracy hostile. And a bad sport to boot. He worries me. He's not a well man. Unkindness is the telling tell.

Those rallies offer little that is hopeful, positive, promising, or factual. To borrow from the novel, "1984," they really are 'Indignation Meetings.' We are all so prone to indignation. But then, indignation's easier than solutions. Fortunately, Orwell's story is purely fictional. Orwell's book profiles the ideal mind of a Big Brother Party member as, "An ignorant fanatic, whose prevailing moods are fear, hatred, adulation, and orgiastic triumph." Rabid zealots of all stripes mustn't be considered acceptable.

Do MAGA Republicans enjoy being the proverbial dog in the manger? What do they get out of it? The intemperate and indignant dog barks and barks from the stable manger, preventing horse and ox from eating their meal, not that dog could eat hay. So nobody eats. Everybody goes hungry.

Forget needing good lawyers, Trump could use a good pastor.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
October 26, 2023
"What, Me Worry?"
Word Count: 750

What, me worry? Yes, me worry. We worry. We'd be mad not to worry. The question is: what kind of worries do we have? Next question: what type of worry?

Don't worry, be happy. Come on, get serious. There's plenty to worry about. What worries you?

Following one pulpit supply gig, a fellow assumed that I wanted to receive his emails and all the links he thought I should read. It's all political indigestion. Material often misinformed. Often mocking others. I finally replied by suggesting that instead of spending time getting obsessed over things that cause tantrums, we might benefit from rereading the Sermon on the Mount. I know I sure could. He hasn't sent me anything since.

Worry. It doesn't mean we shouldn't be concerned, prudent, or upset. Bad worry means a worry that obsesses you, strangles you, the way a cat worries a mouse. When we get anxious, we start doing nutty things. When anxious, we want relief, often resorting to unhelpful fixes. When we worry, we shut down – full denial immobility -- or panic and act rashly in haste. Afterwards, I sometimes realize how ludicrously I reacted.

Geisinger's finest neurologist delivered a church talk on the topic of stress, differentiating between good and bad stress. Stress: "producing normal physical response to events where you feel threatened, upset, or imbalanced." Not as if we'll ever experience a stress-free life, right? The issue is handling it. Your surgeon walks into your room followed by a gaggle of unfamiliar white coats. You read the newspaper or listen to the TV news. How often do we torment ourselves about a past we cannot change? A past that we let rule us today? How often do we fret about a future that hasn't happened yet? The curse of our own apprehensions and expectations? Pray for a good harvest, a Scottish proverb recommends, but keep on hoeing. True. Watching Ernie Kovacs, Laurel and Hardy, Monty Python also is cleansing

What, me worry? Yes, me worry. Let's sing-along with folksinger Glenn Yarborough: "Worry is a rocking chair, You go back and forth but you get nowhere."

Would you like a Mayan worry doll? I've begun to sleep with my Mayan worry doll, a Honduran gift. As Central American legend goes, I tell her my worries at night, then slip her under my pillow. When I wake refreshed, I listen to her whisper how I can handle my worries.

There is good stress. Someone runs the red light. Your body acts to hit your brakes. There is bad stress. Grinding your molars, kicking your cat, ulcers, sleepless nights, short-tempered, hair loss, punching the wall, Jersey gestures. Bad stress: taking your issues out on others. You may have heard about Toxic Stress and how Adverse Childhood Events require early intervention. Growing up abused, impoverished, neglected, berated, produces disease and social maladjustment, which is why hospitals must partner medical treatments with social workers to promote emotional, psychological, and spiritual resilience. Someone caring observed: "Better to build healthy children than repair broken men"

One of my demons is rage. Others have experienced my wee bit of temper. There's a scar on the back of my right hand when I punched my fist through a window. In third grade, I ripped a door off its hinges. Despite being a proud Jerseyan, I try to reign in my temper. I did so the other Sunday when driving to Sunbury. A pushy driver tailgated me, frustrated with me driving the speed limit. Bless me, I behaved. I didn't go Jersey on him. I can't always contain it, however, especially whenever there are valid reasons to become enraged. Rage rose in my gorge the other week, hearing about those innocents brutalized, shamed, tortured, butchered by Hamas terrorists. I become enraged wherever mobs maltreat people. My stomach churns over willful cruelty. My first real lavatory fistfight happened in Junior High, me sick and tired of a bully picking on my friend. It ended up with me laughing at the situation and him. My two older brothers punched harder.

The problem is that my rage, however justified, only worsens the situation. Sowing Dragon's teeth. Got to break the cycle without compromising principles or morality. Why do we manufacture these terrible nightmares? Yes, there be real Halloween monsters and ghouls, and they are us. When all choices are horrible, how to choose the least worst? The source of my faith had the guts to warn us how we mustn't let their inhumanity make us inhuman.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
November 23, 2023
"A Thanksgiving Crucible"
Word Count: 750

The pilgrims' virtue became their curse. So describes Arthur Miller in his play, "The Crucible." A reading of "The Crucible" might become a yearly tradition along with our annual playing of Arlo Guthrie's song, "Alice's Restaurant," while basting our turkey. Both help keep Plymouth Rock in perspective, with Miller's play dramatizing what happened 40 years after the Mayflower. It's also personal, as my ancestor lived it and got hanged for it.

There's nothing wrong with Muslims obeying sharia law or Jews faithful to the mitzvahs, the commandments. There's nothing wrong with Christian fundamentalists wanting to regulate governmental school prayer. Just don't require that I to have to obey or believe the same. Just don't think religious laws supersede Constitutional law.

Voicing similar theological principles as Lincoln's first National Thanksgiving Proclamation, John Mackay, Moderator of the Presbyterian Church, released before Thanksgiving 1953, his "Letter to the Presbyterians." This demonstrated the worthy and bold church of conscience upon which I, literally, was nursed. Mom found it amusing and prophetic how during my baptism, infant me grabbed the pastor's preaching tabs and wouldn't let go. Did the Reverend Harold Scott chuckle? Mackay's letter, warning against "fanatical negativism," publicly confronted McCarthyism, yet another example of an outbreak of extremist madness. Mackay, having witnessed as a missionary in South America the ruin caused by the secular religion of communism, warned how in hating a system we mustn't allow ourselves to hate individuals or whole nations. Mackay warned how combating one totalitarian system with another dooms us for disaster. Mackay warned how democracy, through fear and in the name of expediency, can run the danger of succumbing to the same evils we oppose. Mackay proclaimed how, "The majesty of truth must be preserved at all times and at all costs."

"Let the church be the church" became his mantra, for he saw how God's invisible spirit exercises sovereignty throughout human history whenever the moral divine will is manifested as the practical pattern for our way with each other and whenever Lincoln's "terrible visitation" happens when we don't. Sovereignty works inside-out through faithfulness. Penitence and thankfulness go together.

40 years provided sufficient tinder for the pilgrims to heat a crucible of self-defined righteousness.

The pilgrims differed from the other colonies of that era. Saint Augustine was a Spanish military outpost, from which Roman Catholic Spain eventually massacred French Huguenots who sought refuge in Florida. The Dutch parceled out the Hudson Valley to entice rich landowners and establish fur trading posts with the French farther north, until the English kept sending colonists and took over the region. The passengers aboard the ships disembarking at Jamestown sought riches, then sailed back to England, at least until Lord Baltimore eyed the Chesapeake as his chance for wealth. Wealth explains those privateers who navigated and hunted along America's coastline and throughout the West Indies (including another of my ancestors, who did not get hanged but got promoted). Of course, it's not as if the locals were consulted.

None of these came to these shores to build the New Jerusalem. Whereas, writes Miller, Virginia killed off the Jamestown profiteers, the severe test to survive bleak Massachusetts made the pilgrims defensively self-reliant, defiant, cohesive, hard-working, self-denying, and, periodically, fanatical. Miller notes how the church appointed patrols to arrest those rowdies who tried to duck church attendance. Their creed prevented any form of godless, frivolous entertainment because all entertainment was a vain enjoyment. These pilgrims came neither for furs nor tobacco but to establish a theocratic foothold

onto the “last place on earth to pay homage to God.” Their struggle to build this New Jerusalem gave them a justification born from grievance, leading to stern superiority. “They who were denied freedom of worship would deny that to anyone else, no deviant sects were allowed.” They who had been persecuted claimed a right to persecute those who disagreed with them or refused to conform, “lest the New Jerusalem be defiled and corrupted by the wrong way and deceitful ideas.” Small people need retribution. What a sad, gospel inconsistent life, always needing enemies.

They had the driving purpose and conviction of divine destiny: to bring light into the world and goodness into the wicked wilderness, whether or not it was wanted. And so the Salem witch trials – spawned by vengeance, fear, deceit, greed, and perverted piety -- took place 40 years after Plymouth Rock, thus fulfilling the inherent sin of theocracies and all forms of totalitarianism.

Keep a weather eye out for the madness of righteousness.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
January 4, 2024
“Empty Pockets”
Word Count: 750

Pity what seminary never teaches you. We’re taught Greek and Hebrew so we can accurately interpret Scripture’s original meaning. We read theology. We study church history. Experts teach about delivering three-point sermons. But it took an old-time pastor to warn about a couch in the office. Another old-timer advised this rookie to shut up and listen for a year. I wish our pastoral counseling professors had warned how a handful of needy parishioners will consume most of your attention. This ratio probably applies to anyone who serves the public. Okay, you do what’s needed. Nevertheless, despite investing energy, patience, and attention, you can often sense there’s been little progress. You can resent how their neediness cheats you from an effective use of time.

Beginning May 20, 2016, I’ve compiled columns into a chronicle that’s now 313 pages long, 11 font. It’s titled, “The Donald Years.” More pages, sadly, will be added. I’d rather put it to bed. I realized I composed it for our granddaughter born in 2019 -- “Loving you, always yours.” The prologue is my letter to her. I envision her finding this manuscript left by her dead grandfather (her ‘Ah-Pa’). Perhaps she’ll use it for a history class when they discuss these weird years. Ah-pa, how did America survive those years?

Think of the positive things we could have accomplished if we didn’t have to deal with eight years of him? We’re tired of dealing with this sick, scared, and weak old man. What a waste of opportunity, time, energy, focus. Maybe we can rationalize some benefit from our nation exposing its cruel, ugly, and nasty side. It’s tough for a drunk to get sober without admitting there’s a problem. Consider the Law of Conservation of Misery: “Misery is never created or destroyed, just transferred.” Why do we invite his misery to be transferred to us? Still, I’ve learnt how those of you who supported him thought it was a good idea. I congratulate those friends with cojones who voted for Donald but now regret it, now that it’s blatant how poisonous and bankrupting to America he is. Vultures don’t care, don’t share.

We give thanks we today have muscular leadership where principles matter and where constitutional power is deployed to benefit the people’s well-being. Make America great? I’m glad to list how,

because greatness sure isn't happening from those deconstructionists, obstructionists formerly called Republicans. Who wants America made in their image?

First, give us citizens requiring facts. Hear the wisdom of Dr. Who: "You know, the very powerful and the very stupid have one thing in common. They don't alter their views to fit the facts. They alter the facts to fit their views, which can be uncomfortable if you happen to be one of the facts that needs altering."

Greatness? Gun reform, no mass murders, renouncing Christian Nationalism as neither Christian nor patriotic. Let's arbitrate plans advanced by Democrats for immigration legislation rather than exploiting the border mess for political insults. Blue ribbon panels fixing homelessness. Expand health care, especially among Red states getting sicker. Decrease the national debt. Protect civil rights and voting rights. Renew commitment toward personal moral responsibility. Support Ukraine and NATO. Stop licking Putin's boots. Continue improving our economy. Fact: authoritarianism breeds poverty.

Let's talk inflation. Since 1953, it's gone up every year except 1955 and 2009. Given the inflation adjusted price, the price of bread in 1980 was more than we pay today. Gas cost 29 cents a gallon in 1953. Adjusting the price for inflation, 29 cents in today's dollars would be \$3.28 per gallon. Part of today's adverse economic stresses and woes stem from the wealth gap and hindrances to wealth accumulation, plus the cost of iPhones, tuition, cable subscriptions, fees and premiums, football tickets, high-tech cars, this global transition into new industry and business. Mortgage rates? US News and World Report argues how "housing affordability is fairly similar to what it was in the '80s..."

A book, "Born to Kvetch," tells about a Yiddish custom of turning your pockets inside-out on Rosh Hashanah, their New Year. It represents removing sins, ridding ourselves of annoying lint and bits of trash. I like it. Some Jews, heeding Micah 7:19, gather near bodies of water, empty their pockets, and cast their sins into the water: "Thou wilt cast all our sins into the depths of the sea."

Shall we gather at the river? Let's start 2024 fresh, emptying ourselves of who and what holds us back and weighs us down.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
25 January, 2024
"Old Smoothies"
Word Count: 750

It wasn't until I was storing our Christmas decorations that I spotted them. I thought they were lost. But there they were, hung up by their laces behind my Brittany 12 speed bicycle suspended amidst cobwebs from the garage rafters. My black ice-skates. The last time those steel blades tasted ice must have been when I took my youth fellowship to a farm pond down in the Octorara region.

They once were Christmas new. I'd sling them over my shoulder and we roistered toward the ice skate rink at my hometown LaGrande Park. Some buddies would sport ice hockey skates. The younger kids relied on double-bladed skates.

Every winter, Fanwood flooded a concrete basin near the tennis courts. It was circular, about a foot deep with a thirty yard diameter. It always froze, back then. We'd swagger on down with our ice-skates

swung over our shoulders, lace up, and skate for hours. Some of us would try to cover up our lack of skill by acting silly. The girls would get annoyed when we'd skate behind them and grab the pom pom of their long-tail crochet hats. Then they giggle because that's why they wore them. Years later, you smile at this initiation of discovery. Winter was when you overcame the hesitancy to approach girls. You could even touch them. Your gloves and their mittens gave moral support. You never got cold, even when the mittens and gloves got frosty. You might even invite a girl over to the burn barrel where the fire crackled and you could offer to buy her a hot chocolate. Come summer, LaGrande playground would host movies projected onto a screen hung from a telephone pole. From the recreation shed you could borrow shooting checkers and other games, or else play tether ball or kickball. The ball fields were where the town hosted its summer carnival. When you're a kid every day is a festival. Or should be.

In High School our youth fellowship would carpool over to Echo Lake Park and spend the afternoon skating. There they also kept the burn barrels burning. But you had to bring your own hot chocolate.

None of us would have qualified for the Olympics. We fell a lot. Bumped knees and embarrassment. You lose control easily. We collided because we weren't good at stopping. You envied those who already had mastered the balance of ice skating. But you get up and practice and eventually discover the joy of gliding, sliding. You felt elegant. You felt free. At least until you started up a whip and spun fast and guffawed when the last fellow flew off into the cattails. Then it was your turn to whirl at the end and hold on.

Athol Fugard's play, "Master Harold" ...and the Boys,' takes place in apartheid South Africa. It's a painful play about three persons and their pain -- the young master named Harold and two older black servants, Sam and Willie . Sam preserved his sense of humanity by his love for ballroom dancing. Ballroom dancing serves as a metaphor for his dream for a graceful society, a "world without collisions."

"Old Smoothies," a song by folksinger Steve Goodman, captures this same sense of tearful beauty when he sings about an anticipated sequence in an ice show. The spectacular part of the show would pause. They'd lower the lights, soften the music to a waltz, spotlight two skaters: "Two old people on skates, Sequined septuagenarians, Doing their figure eights, How they'd glide 'round the arena, So serene and sublime, They had been the old smoothies for a long, long time."

Not that I've ever been an old smoothie, but there have been moments when I skated debonair enough. Once or twice at Echo Lake I enjoyed skating with a partner, side by side, right hand in right hand, left hand in left hand. Those tender memories of puppy romance.

Some say that the sense of balance is our sixth sense, joining touch, taste, smell, hearing, and sight. This makes sense. Without equilibrium, life can become dizzy and clumsy.

In my dreams I still skate across Echo Lake or around the LaGrande ice rink, gliding, sliding. I have lost my balance often enough since, skidding out of control. Ice, after all, is slippery. You tighten up the laces. It's a gift when you recover your balance and attempt a figure eight, side by side, right hand in right hand, left hand in left hand. Keeping balance is a gift of grace.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Thursday, February 1, 2024

“Hiraeth”

Word Count: 750

Yes, it could be considered really depressing. Still, I am so proud of them. Some might regard them as valiant. Since retiring from serving Grove Presbyterian Church, I've found myself imitating the little Dutch boy busily trying to help our various struggling congregations. Over these years, I have sensed how our people grieve much grief. One church last December prepared for Christmas Eve services, even deciding to decorate the disused Sanctuary and worship there through Advent and Christmas. They've since returned to worshipping in the downstairs chapel. Several church members reflected on the Christmases past when the Sanctuary was filled with over 300 parishioners celebrating the Christmas Eve candlelight service. This Christmas Eve twenty members gathered to sing Christmas carols and light candles to Silent Night.

Grief. So many losses these churches have suffered over these last decades, few victories in their lives. In one town, once thriving and prosperous, the cherished furniture store has been forced to shutter and close up shop. There are many explanations: changing culture, changing demographics, alienation, loneliness, the loss of social commitment, trust, and cohesion.

When I came to Danville, our Presbytery (our local ruling body) boasted 44 congregations with 33 full time pastors. We now number 32 congregations and 4 full time pastors. Last month we voted to stop using the term “Temporary Pastor” and instead list them as “Contracted Pastors,” because these temporary pastors are rarely temporary. The church's future isn't persons like me.

Our son, visiting last week from Colorado to check up on his aging parents, taught me a new word: “Hiraeth.” It's Welsh, pronounced, “Heer-eyeth.” It suggests “a home-sickness, a deep longing and grief for a home to which you never can return, a deep grief for lost places of the past.”

On March 25, 2020, I entered into my daily log book the CNN COVID count of 54,869 persons world-wide infected with COVID, with a reported 780 deaths from COVID in the United States. I scribbled that 400 ventilators were shipped to New York but 30,000 were needed.

On Christmas Eve, 2020, I recorded 326, 217 deaths from COVID in the USA. I wrote then how America is hungry, America is starving, and we had a President who preferred playing golf. That failed President played golf and sprayed his face with cosmetics while his people were neglected. Talk about dereliction. He preferred anarchy to solutions, never caring. A year later, the count amounted to 815,423. Christmas Eve 2021, the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols from King's College, Cambridge, was the first time in a century when the choir was unable to participate. Instead of attending Christmas Eve worship, we watched “It's a Wonderful Life.” It's a quaint movie but hardly the same as a late night Candlelight Service with dear friends and shared tears.

My entry for December 31, 2023 mentions that it was a damp and gray day. 100,743,442 persons were reported as infected worldwide with 1,092,661 deaths from COVID in the USA. My final tracking of these numbers occurred on March 18, 2023, with USA 1,123,836 deaths. We walked our dog around the block. I lament all those family, friends, neighbors who were denied the decent eulogies they deserved.

As I serve these congregations today, their Hiraeth is apparent. But so is something else. Foolish me, I've begun to see a glimmer of a people starved for something beautiful, hungry for community, thirsting

for trust and civility, kindness and manners (which some mistakenly call being 'woke'), reclaiming hope, reclaiming humanity, good news. I see a people fed up with the hasty violence and cruelty, tired of hollow lives. I see people rejecting the gloom and doom festering and fostered by angry people. I see these smaller congregations reaching out to each other with genuine amity, fellowship, and love, finding creative ways to worship (without guys like me) which brings meaning to their lives. I see persons saying yes to unknown possibilities. I see persons willing to say yes to what might be, what is meant to be rather than what was.

As a man of faith, I've learnt the error of wanting God on my terms. God help us there. What is to come won't be the church in which I was raised and served officially for 46 years, that's obvious. I won't see it – I'll be dead -- but we are being called, tugged, pushed toward something fuller in the imagination of God. These are chrysalis days. I believe our grandchildren will grow wings.

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Thursday, March 14, 2024
"Amerika First"
Word Count: 750

What do Spain, Lithuania, Germany, Argentina, Croatia, Jamaica, Slovenia, Turkey, Belgium, Serbia, Finland, and Australia have in common? Basketball players playing for US collegiate teams. You've seen some of them this March Madness. So what's this nonsense about isolationism and America First?

Isolationism is an impossible, implausible, impractical endeavor, a fool's errand, a left handed screwdriver, a political snipe hunt, like trying to rake a lake.

Isolationism worked so well for the 17th Century Japanese and three centuries later when isolationism incubated into rabid nationalism and imperialistic arrogance. It worked so well for Charles Lindbergh and the pro-Nazi American First Committee, fomenting fear and hatred. Cheerleading for American isolationism has been an excuse for racism, anti-Semitism, white supremacy. Lindbergh may have been a talented pilot but he was a man with terrible values. The Greatest Generation figured out what to do with Nazis.

Is isolationism even possible today? On the 50th Anniversary of Pearl Harbor I asked Dad about what Pearl Harbor meant to him. He told me how they knew from the radio announcement that it was important, but, son, you need to understand how nobody really knew what Pearl Harbor was. Who knew about Hawaii? It was another world, far, far away. My wife's grandfather was captured in World War I by the Ottoman Army when the British surrendered Kut-al-Amara in Mesopotamia. It took months for Elaine's grandmother and the rest of England to receive word that they were Turkish Prisoners-of-War. How different those wars from CNN newscaster Peter Arnette in 1991 broadcasting live from Baghdad a play-by-play of our bombardment. Come 2024? Instant streams of unfiltered news including barrages of gossip and propaganda.

On my first trip to England in 1972 I carried American Express Traveler's Checks to cash in for pound notes. On my last trip to England, I used my credit and debit card. Nowadays, those oceans are mere puddles. Who remembers dialing long distance?

Isolationism – along with her four stepchildren bans, family separation, internment camps, mass deportation – poisons our blood, enfeebles us. How effective were China’s Great Wall, Hadrian’s Wall, Berlin Wall? Sure, we must improve how we legally process immigrants. O’ wait, a bi-partisan bill showed us how until MAGA aborted it. True Americans value our immigrants rather than vilify them. To disparage them disparages ourselves. Well, we did it before with ‘Irish need not apply,’ with Chinese railroad workers, with Jewish and Italian ghettos in New York City. Historian David McCullough writing about the May 1889 Johnstown flood told how the victims vented their rage upon Hungarian immigrants despite the disaster being caused by rich robber barons building their fancy resort. Just wondering, where did you come from?

I suppose I’m going to have to repeat myself: Our USA is not a Christian nation. I add, speaking as an evangelical authority: Nor should it be. There’s a marked difference between being a Christian nation and being historically inspired by the Reformed Protestant ethos. Are we to be grouped with Afghanistan, Iran, among other stale theocracies? “Of all the ‘ocracies,” James Fenimore Cooper teased, “hypocrisy is the most flourishing.” Yes, the principles of Reformed Protestantism supplied the rootstock of what fruited forth as these United States. Never forget that an essential tenet of Reformed Protestantism recoils at an established state religion. Why? We worry whenever religion and state merge, a gangrenous symptom of despotism. The First Amendment wasn’t written to hinder religion from engaging in matters of state. It was written to hinder the state from messing with us. Can you caterwaul and bray about America First when you trash the Constitution and attack those who administer justice? Why hasn’t Trump called off his dogs?

We were founded because we were meant to be the rarest jewel of countries, a country constituted by persons from the entire world yearning for freedom and equality, a nation of ideals, merit, and opportunity, to be a good and gracious land. Thank you for seeing us in this optimistic light. You honor us. Come and uphold the law. Come and contribute. Come and improve America, still a work in progress. We are called the New World for a reason. Here’s a club to which you can belong and be proud of. Besides, given you and me, we’re not particularly exclusive.

Evidently, today’s brand of isolationism isn’t as uncompromising as it was years ago. Fondness for isolationism apparently need not apply when it comes to sinking baskets or wanting to make a buck, Ruble, Yuan, or Saudi riyah.

A Postscript Fun Replay

When I leave home to go to congress
My voters always say to me
Citizens must keep your eyes open less you miss
You really must see what you can see

But when I tell them where've I've been
And what I think I've seen
They look at me and sternly say
You make the bizarre much too routine
Stop telling such outlandish tales
Stop turning minnows into whales

Now what can I say
When I get home today
What indeed could I say what is oddly true
Of what I saw on Pennsylvania Avenue

I've seen men in uniform marching in step
Marines in rhythm shouting hup hup hep

There was a marching band blaring loud
Playing God bless American to the cheering crowd

Flags galore waving in the breeze
And not one daring to take a knee

Mighty tanks come next along the street
Why be humble, quiet, and discreet

Why even we can parade the nuclear weapons
Showing off that we got the bigger guns

And that makes a story that's really not bad
But it still could be better. Suppose that I add

Guns galore brandished on shoulders
Of dozens of very tired soldiers

Soldiers who'd much rather be home with beer
But marched out by a president who needs to be cheered

A president much like Tinkerbell
Because faeries need clapping they tell
For belief in them is the attention they need
And upon adoration and praise they feed

Yes, we all do love a festive parade
But why does it have to be such a silly charade?

See the man in the fake uniform at the center of the route
Let's all give him an appropriately royal salute

Yes, I had seen this glorious bombastic review
And to think I saw it on Pennsylvania Avenue