

Moral Lighthouses

Preston Manning



NUGGETs



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Your Reporter had the privilege recently of listening to Preston Manning, one of Canada's hardest workers for national and political integrity. Now mind you, he was sharing the stage with my sister, who was my reason for being there. Valedictorian, she was claiming the Turtle Award for long-term dedication to scholastic upgrading - something like twenty years to get the Master's degree.

Going to her graduation brought me back to one of my personal roots, which I honour even though I've moved on. And listening to Mr. Manning - upon whom her institution was conferring an honorary Doctorate of Divinity - was a plus I hadn't anticipated. I've respected Mr. Manning since I was young and he first came out of Western Canada to shake up Ottawa - even though I never voted in his direction. I've heard that upon retiring from the House of Commons in 2001, where he was Leader of the Opposition, all the MPs stood and gave him a rousing round of applause. Well, he deserved it. Since then, Mr. Manning has been senior fellow of two Canadian research bodies: the Fraser Institute and the Canada West Foundation. If you check his website, prestonmanning.ca, you will see that he is developing a Canadian centre for building democracy. His interests have always gone beyond politics to include the relationship faith has with science, business, politics and conflict resolution.

Listening to Mr. Manning reminded me that our Canada has historically been built by the efforts of those with varying reasons for their efforts. Not the least of these reasons is faith, although unlike our neighbours to the south it was not - and is not -- a primary one.



Canada as a political entity has always welcomed immigrants from many countries. But are they truly welcomed at the communal level? Do we appreciate their input to our multi-cultural mosaic? Or does mutual fear and distrust intervene, as it always to some degree has since 1867? What is the base from which each of us operates? And how do we choose to face our differences?

Mr. Manning has an answer that has sustained him over the decades and gave him the impetus and energy to make an indelible impact on our political system. He is not claiming that every Canadian should share his answer, or even like it. But he is saying we need to face the questions together, and there I agree with him completely.

The twentieth century saw the global development of dialogue, which sets up a format of listening to the other without attempting to force the other into one's own framework. Your Reporter looked around during Mr. Manning's talk and realized that here was where that process had begun for me, in a space where different denominations overcome distrust and history in order to work together for a common goal. Though now outside of that faith community, I am still involved in that process. As an extremely basic example, when edited for Boreas, Mr. Manning's choice of capitalization was maintained.

Each such community often now works with others of different faith bases. And those of faith are reaching beyond their set limits to interact and work with non-faith groups, perhaps political (in Mr. Manning's case), perhaps economic, or perhaps simply community undertakings like our Out of the Cold programme. We often disagree, since we span the spectrum from traditional to experimental, but we agree on the basic motivation: to build a country, and perhaps someday a world, where none of us is shamed or abandoned by our social net.



MORAL LIGHTHOUSES

By Preston Manning

When I was a Member of Parliament and couldn't sleep at night, I would get out my copy of the Canadian Constitution and read it. This was more effective in inducing slumber than the counting of sheep.

In due course I would come to Section 91 which lists thirty things for which the national government is responsible, including (ninth on the list) responsibility for "Beacons, Buoys, Lighthouses, and *Sable Island*"

"Sable Island?" I asked myself. Why would our Constitution even mention Sable Island, a sliver of sand 44 kilometres long protruding from the Atlantic Ocean 160 kilometres east of Nova Scotia?

As with many sections of the law, there is a story – an instructive story – behind the dry and terse words of the statute. Sable Island lies near one of the world's richest fishing grounds and along the major shipping route between Europe and North America. It is also located in one of the most dangerous regions of the Atlantic.

Underwater sandbars extend for many kilometres beyond the visible ends of the island, constituting a great hazard for any passing ship. Three great ocean currents converge in the vicinity, constantly shifting the location of the sandbars and making the waters turbulent and treacherous. Dense fog enshrouds the area for more than 125 days a year when the warm air borne by the Gulf Stream hits the cold water of the Labrador Current.

By 1864 when our constitution was being drafted, Sable Island was well known as the Graveyard of the Atlantic. More than 350 ships have been wrecked on or near its shores – drowning thousands of people and animals and washing up tons of mangled cargo and wreckage on its desolate beaches.

Sable Island was recognized as being *so hazardous a place* – so dangerous to ships passing anywhere near it – that maritime delegates to the Confederation conferences insisted that the new national government be made responsible for erecting and maintaining lighthouses and lifesaving stations on its shores.

An interesting story, you say, but of what possible relevance to us or to you, the graduates whom we are honouring here today?

For me the constitutional reference to Sable Island is a reminder that there are still hazardous coastlines in our world today – morally hazardous coastlines – places and situations where conflicting views of right and wrong collide, where the sandbars of public and elite opinion shift with the currents, and where the fog of controversy and uncertainty obscures the hazards that lie beneath the surface.

It is on these morally hazardous coastlines that individuals, families, communities, companies, and even nations can be shipwrecked just as surely as the ships that foundered and sank off Sable Island years ago. It is on such coastlines that we particularly need men and women like our graduates, willing and equipped to serve as moral beacons and lighthouses – sources of illumination capable of warning us away from dangerous shoals and directing us toward safer harbours.

My purpose today is to challenge each one of us – but especially you graduates – to think and pray about your responsibilities to serve in these life-directing and life-saving capacities wherever God may call you.

Let me ask: If you were in charge of placing lighthouses and lifesaving stations along Canada's moral coastlines, where would you put them?

You can't put a lighthouse on every rock and island that protrudes from the ocean on coastlines thousands of miles long. You put them only at the most dangerous places. So what, in your opinion, are the most hazardous situations and places along Canada's moral coastlines?

While you are thinking about that let me describe one such place which I have been exploring over the last few months during my stay at the University of Toronto.



I teach a course on public policy and the genetic revolution to fourth-year political science and life sciences students. We explore public health and safety issues along one of the most rapidly changing scientific coastlines in the world today, the coastline of genetic science – genetic testing stem cell therapies, and cloning – scientific developments dealing with the formation and transmission of life itself, developments with enormous potential for good on the one hand but enormous potential for evil if misused.

In discussing the navigation of this coastline, I asked fifteen of my students each to describe on a single sheet of paper what value framework currently guides them in making ethical decisions. How do they personally decide whether an objective is good or bad or whether the means to achieve it are right or wrong?

In other words, what beacons and guidelines already exist in their minds and hearts to warn them away from unethical practices in life or genetic science, and to point them toward ethical ends and means?

The results might interest you:

* Five said they rely almost entirely on subjective criteria centred in themselves. “I guess it comes down to *me* – what will the impact be on *me*, what will *my* parents and friends think about *me*, will this score *me* points with God?”

* Three applied a broader humanist framework. “What will be the ramifications for *others*?” was the guideline, including application of an expanded version of the Hippocratic oath – Do no harm to others.

* Three took a more pragmatic, utilitarian approach. Count up the pluses and the minuses; calculate the costs and benefits; pursue whatever course will yield the greatest good for the greatest number or the least harm.

* Three offered creative mixtures which defied categorization and included elements of all of the above.

* Only one was explicitly Christian, relying for guidance on the character of a moral being beyond the self and humankind, and a moral code based on that character.

In other words, we as a class were all over the map, just as we Canadians are as a people. If we had been constituted as a group of policy makers or scientific researchers required to make an ethical decision I don't know how or what we would have decided. There was one Christian beacon in our midst, but it was only one among many and was frail and flickering rather than strong and clear.

My point: There is a need for stronger, brighter, dearer moral lighthouses along the scientific coastline – particularly in the region of the life sciences and applied genetics – but who will erect and maintain them?

And the same question could be asked with respect to:

* The *decision-making coastline* of the boardrooms and the cabinet rooms of this world – to prevent Enron-like disasters or Ad-scams-like scandals from being repeated.



* The *media coastline*, where truth and falsehood constantly collide and where clearer and brighter expressions of truth and commitments to truth-telling are desperately required.

* The *medical coastline* – dotted with hospitals, genetic testing laboratories, *in vitro* fertilization clinics, abortion clinics, maternity wards, palliative care wards, and hospices – places where many beginning-of-life and end-of-life decisions are made.

* The *sexual-relations coastline* – in an age and society where sexual stimulation is at an all-time high and sexual restraint is at an all-time low.

* The *social-justice coastline* – where the stark differences between the rich and the poor, the weak and the strong, the free and the un-free cry out for acknowledgement and redress.

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Are not all of these morally hazardous coastlines – where dozens of Sable Islands lie hidden in the fog – all calling for the establishment and maintenance of moral lighthouses of the highest order?

What manner of lighthouses should be erected?

Socrates and the Greeks, and the scientists and administrators of our great universities, would most likely say, “Erect the Lighthouses of Knowledge. Educate humankind, better inform them about moral hazards and they will learn to avoid them”

Certainly there is a place for the Light of Knowledge. But this generation of Canadians is more broadly and more highly educated than any other. That in itself, however, does not seem to provide sufficient light to substantially improve the quality of our moral choices.

Moses of the Ten Commandments, or the great Roman lawgivers, or the Supreme Court of Canada – if asked what manner of lighthouses should

we be erecting in order to achieve the good and just society – would most likely say, “Erect the Lighthouse of the Rule of Law. Make and enforce just laws to guide people into the right path and away from the destructive path.”

Certainly there is a place for the Light of Law. But we also have the great lesson of the ancient Hebrew people who had laws to cover every area of human existence. And yet after their four hundred year experiment with the absolute rule of law, what was the conclusion of their later prophets? It was that unless laws can be written on the tablets of human hearts, and not just on tablets of stone or in statute books, law by itself is insufficient to protect human beings from the moral hazards of life and direct them into the paths of righteousness. Something more than law is required and someone greater than the lawgiver is required.

Suppose however that we were among that group of Galileans who sat on a sunny hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee many years ago, listening to Jesus of Nazareth. We would have heard Him address this very concern that we are wrestling with in our day. We would have heard Him introduce the concept of “persons” as “living lighthouses”

“I am the Light of the world,” He says. The great source of morality and moral guidance is to be found in a *person*.

“You, my disciples, are the Light of the world . . .” We ourselves can be sources of morality and moral guidance to the extent that we are rightly related to Him and reflect His light.

There is a place for the current flurry of interest in ethics – in the boardrooms, in the Parliament, at the universities, in the hospitals and research laboratories. We all need rules of ethical behaviour to which we subscribe. But we also need more than moral guidance – we need moral strength.

When we bend and break our rules – as we all do; when we fail to live up to our own ethical standards no matter what they are – as we all do; when our moral shortcomings rob us of moral authority even with ourselves, let alone with others; it is then that we need a personal relationship with



a being morally superior to ourselves to provide us with forgiveness and cleansing from our moral failures and new spiritual resources from outside ourselves, from which to live the moral life.

We Christians believe that laws and ethical systems serve their true function when they act as schoolmasters to bring us to the grace of God Himself. We also believe that that grace has been most perfectly revealed to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

When we pray with the Psalmist of old, "O send out thy light and thy truth," we believe that you graduates are an integral part of the answer to that prayer.

We pray that you will shine with that special light wherever God places you – in the families and personal relationships He has given you; in the places of study and work where He has planted you; in the communities and countries where you will live; in the boardrooms, cabinet rooms, schoolrooms, bedrooms, homes, universities, newsrooms, television studios, maternity wards, genetics laboratories, palliative care wards, hospices, social agencies, NGOs, and courts; and on the social justice frontiers of our nation and the world.

We pray that you will shine with a true Christian light – a light not clouded by self-interest or the spirit of coercion, but radiating self-sacrificial love and a Christ-like respect for freedom of conscience.

I pray especially that He will place many of you at those Sable-Island-like places where moral hazards and ethical fogs and treacherous currents abound, and that you will shine as lighthouses that no darkness or storm can ever extinguish.



Your Reporter listened and understood Mr. Manning's concern and call, yet has one question for him

Mr. Manning let me preface with the observation that many non-Christian Canadians fear allowing Christian morals to dominate will set us back, that there will be a loss of the human rights gained legally at such high cost in recent decades. Our Canada has a wide range of attitudes and faiths and cultures, so you have often worked with those who maintain other lighthouses than Christians. Do you think, or can you accept, that these others are as capable of warning and guidance as yours and help to maintain – indeed, to make stronger – our ethical and moral system?

Our Canada does embrace a wide range of attitudes, faiths, and cultures other than Christian. While the above remarks were directed to the graduating class of a Christian university, for non-Christians they may raise several troubling questions which deserve a response.



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