

Bill Rea ? Things are better than before

This is another of those occasions when I believe I must put a few facts up front before proceeding.

I am not gay, and I never have been. But I also am quite happy to accept the fact that there are gay people among us. Indeed, that has been the case for some 40 years, for reasons I will get to in a couple of paragraphs.

As most people who know me are aware, I have been very, very contently involved in a heterosexual relationship with a woman for many years, and I have been happily married to her for almost 20 of those years.

But I like to consider myself a realist, so I appreciate there are lots of people, equally content as I in homosexual relationships. It's really not a big deal. In fact, as far as I'm concerned, it's no deal at all.

There are two, and only two people on this planet whose sexual orientation is a matter of the even remotest amount of interest to me. One of those people is myself, and the other is my wife (for obvious reasons, I would submit). When it comes to the sexual orientation of the rest of the world, I don't give a damn.

This column was prompted by two events that occurred over the last several days.

The most recent was the death of Jim Nabors. I watched a lot of TV in the late '60s, and one show I always enjoyed was *Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.*, in which Nabors starred. As time progressed, he acquired another impressive gig, namely singing *Back Home Again* in Indiana before the start of the Indianapolis 500, an event watched by millions. In those days, I was a young man interested in vocal music, and I was impressed with the set of pipes Nabors had (make that envious). But as I read about his life over the last couple of days, I read he had been partnered with a guy for some 42 years, and they had been married for the last four. They had apparently been married in Seattle about a month after same-sex marriages were made legal in the state of Washington.

The interesting thing is so little was made of this in the obituary material that appeared in the last several days. The fact the Nabors was gay came as no shock. I came into such knowledge some years ago. I forget exactly how I learned about it because, as I stated above, I didn't care.

The other event was when Prime Minister Justin Trudeau stood up in the House of Commons and apologized to gays for wrongs done to them in the past by the federal government, such as purging such people from the civil service or the military. I have read the statement, and I give the PM full marks for eloquence, as well as his attempt to address certain wrongs that have been done in the past.

I believe those two events have sort of underscored the change in attitudes over the last couple of decades.

When I was a kid, remarks about one's sexual orientation was one of the most common taunts one heard in the hall or school yard. I was victimized lots of times. Having a last name that rhymes with 'gay' didn't help. Some of the taunts were good-natured among friends, amounting to little more than bantering that goes on between kids, and adults too. In such cases, I like to think I gave as good as I got. Other cases were mean-spirited, basically amounting to bullying. The people behind those taunts are in my past, and I don't miss them.

I was lucky enough to have an early lesson in dealing with people of that certain orientation.

I grew up living across the street from two gay men. They kept pretty much to themselves, and the neighbours on the street respected their privacy.

One of the guys was an enthusiastic gardener. The two of them travelled a lot, so I was prevailed upon to water his plants in the house a couple of times per week when they were away. I wasn't able to handle such chores when I went away to university, but my father was happy to take it on. As the two men got to know each other, they realized they had quite a lot in common. They had both travelled extensively in Europe, and they shared interests in things like art and wines. In time, these guys became close friends of my family.

There were major benefits.

When my father took ill some 25 years ago, those guys bent over backwards to help my mother. They were over at the house the night my dad died, and one of my most vivid memories of that evening was one of them sitting in a chair in the living room with tears streaming down his face. He made no effort to hide them.

Those guys took care of my mother, having her over to dinner lots of times, and quickly accepting invites to dine with her ? both my mom and the gardener were splendid cooks. They also kept an eye on my mother. I got a call at work one morning from one of them, saying he hadn't seen Mom in a couple of days, and just wanted to make sure all was well. It was, and it made us feel good that these guys were on deck.

My mother insisted they be included on the guest list at my wedding, and she needed to do no twisting of my arm to get me to go along with that.

Alas, both of those men have been dead for many years, but I well remember the good lessons I learned from our association. And I reflect they were lucky to have lived in a neighbourhood that was not judgemental in those days. Fortunately, things have improved a lot. I was reminded of that over the last week

