

CHRISTMAS CARDS, PRIDE OF WORK, AND THE DEMISE OF HOME DELIVERY

Deep thoughts on the eve of Winter Solstice '08

First and foremost—and I thank Correspondent Steve for pointing out the need for we nontheistic types to stand up for a little bit of reality during the "Holiday Season" (as we're being inundated with sentimental images of big spending at your local corporate retailers and the ultimate divine baby)—that the solstice marks the point of daylight starting to get longer for the year. Humans of all shapes and history have been celebrating this simple fact for obvious reasons:

- More minutes of the day in which you can actually see things
- Closer to planting your spring legal hemp or marijuana crop[1]
- In northern climes, only a few more weeks until golf season

The wording on the clip art I've been told is actually Polish for "wish you were here, the surf is up, my girlfriend sure looks hot in a bikini, and have a nice vacation." But that's the Happy Solstice look I'm aiming for. I jest... jest have to bring up a few matters that have dawned on me on the eve of the New Day boundary of greater light:

- 1) Auto "bailout"
- 2) End of the Christmas card custom
- 3) Declining workmanship
- 4) End of a newspaper era

Bailouts Up the Ol' Wazoo

I opined on these, especially the automotive one, to start last week. Where we are now on Saturday, December 20, 2008, is that it appears the Great Decider and his Head Bandito of Treasury, Henry Paulson, are going to cough up \$17.4 billion in loans distributed between GM and Chrysler. In return, the automakers must satisfy <someone(s)> in the federal government by March 31, 2009, that they have <really good plans> for the future, or they have to give back the money.

No doubt the devil is in the details, but I'm reading in the tea leaves that key suppliers are facing the likelihood of failing for lack of business imminently. In any case, my sense is that these wholly unConstitutional government loans being tendered to a major American manufacturing sector are at least as "beneficial"—and likely to be paid back—as the wholly unConstitutional government loans of far higher amounts that were already tendered to undisclosed recipients in the banking, investing, and insurance industries.

Here's a comment from investment leader Jim Rogers, which I found particularly illuminating. He's the first one I've seen saying anything about the immorality of loaning money (ultimately taken from competing businesses that have acted prudently and are successful) to firms that are not acting or have not acted with similar financial care or acumen. It's a perfect illustration of the Randian evil of altruism: sacrificing the good to the bad. Rogers, too, recognizes that morality means little in politics or economics these days; his main point is economically "it ain't gonna work."

Wherefore the Unique Joys of Christmas Carding?

What's this all about? The previous Solstice season I wrote a column about my custom and rationale for sending out, yes, Christmas cards. It's been going along swimmingly for the most part over the years, but this time I note a troubling decline in the responses with any literary matter: I was never much a fan of the typed chronicle of what Aunt Millie and the munchkins had been up to all year, but at least it showed some writing effort. That's what it's all about for me: I want to exchange sloppy verbal sentiments, handwritten, hopefully upbeat and witty, heartfelt, friendly, timely, individualized, brief, etc. Obviously the literary Christmas card tradition is on a downward cycle... just as the Christmas card tradition itself.

Don't get me wrong, anyone's photos of themselves and/or their children with nary of word of, "Dude, you have no idea how hectic and stressful our lives are these days, Jimmy may be let go from the salt mine, we're doing everything we can to make sure the kids have shoes," are as welcome in my mailbox as ever. I know as much as anyone how tough the times are, and I'm happy for any nonverbal stamp-and-photo gesture. Perhaps we've entered the "no news is good news" era. Alas unfortunate for annual sentimental penned pleasantries.

Declining Workmanship 'R' Ussins

I've mostly been a fan of buying the best engineering at the most affordable price, especially when it comes to timepieces. I recall Dad, back in the prehistoric era before digital technology and liquid-crystal displays (LCDs) or even light-emitting diodes (LEDs), once purchased a Bulova watch with a miniature tuning fork that supposedly kept time to a millisecond per year. He was so proud of it, and it was expensive. But later, when the cheap digital watches came out that were equally accurate, he loved to show off his two-dollar Timex from the drug store.

Well, recently after one such cheap digital watch coughed up a fur ball—the alarm stuck "On" and I had to take it out back and put it out of its misery with a hammer—I continued in the family tradition. A local CVS drug store has a small rack of digital watches, mainly from SHARP, which is a brand I've had good experience with (my EL-512 Scientific Calculator hasn't lost a sine or cosine decimal place after 30 years). Here's one for \$14.99 and 40% off; a 15-year limited lifetime warranty, I kid you not.[2]

So first try, I buy a standard dial version and go to set the time. The stem doohickey, the little rod and adjuster knob assembly, pulls right out of the watch. Probably not the design intent, but who can tell after reading the directions. They are in English, but that's about it. The 1 pt. Arial heading on the first page greets me:

Congratulations! You are now the proud owner of a SHARP timepiece, made by highly skilled craftsman to ensure quality and reliability.

Well that one man who knows what he's doing was obviously out to lunch the day the company manufactured this baby. No problem, maybe some kids got into the package or it was jostled during shipping; in any case I'm willing to give the CVS-SHARP conglomerate another try. The second watch is a similar model, a different color. I first set the date by moving the stem out a couple of notches, then I move the stem to the first notch and set the time. Right at 3:00, just as in the figure above... and just as the figure above, my second watch will mark the correct time twice a day.

Two bum steers in a row! It got me to thinking back to when American-made products were top quality (well after the Germans) and the shoddy stuff came from Japan. Then that changed: Japanese manufacturers, taking the great W. Edwards Deming's lectures to heart. So into the early 1990s, anyway, Japan became known for making the best-quality products, notably automobiles. "American-made" became a disparaging phrase. Today, Americans don't make much of anything en masse and we get our cheap crap from China—origin of my SHARP watch.

I don't really have a point here, except to note—even in my profession of technical writing—turning out a sophisticated product of impeccable quality in a reasonable amount of time with the highest individual pride of accomplishment, well, that's becoming as rare as hen's teeth. Where is the care, where is the intelligence, where is the love?

The End of News-Paper Home Delivery?

Yesterday morning I'm telling Mom—I'm still hanging out for various reasons in my temporary outpost away from the Free State and in the Michigan VAW[3] —"Hey, we got to make sure to tip the paper guy huge."

Well, five inches of snow fell last night and the paper guy brings the Detroit Free Press right to the door. I mean literally right to the door: all I have to do is open the door, lean down, brush off the snow dust, and pick up the paper. In all my adult years at all the places I've resided I've never managed to get the delivery guy to put the doggone paper right on the doorstep. (Sure the Detroit Free Press has its limitations and hangups when it comes to understanding the freedom concept, but it's a comparatively decent professional news vehicle.)

As I'm exclaiming how wonderful it is to get such an exemplary product delivered to our doorstep, I set that morning's paper on the table and see the headline: Free Press unveils historic changes. The major change for just about everyone who has the paper delivered to the door every day is "we're not going to be delivering the paper to the door every day, anymore." You still receive home delivery Thursday, Friday, and Sunday.

Okay, some modest changes to the online environment where subscribers will receive special e-editions. Yada yada yada. The story is "Something needs to be done if we're to keep on publishing at all, we have to do this to survive." Granted, it's a unique strategy countrywide—and the environmental aspects are positive—but some regular readers scratch our heads wondering why it's such a headache for the media cartels—of which the Freep is certainly part—to make money with a daily newspaper.

Could cartelization itself be the core problem?

Detroit Media Partnership manages the business operations of the Detroit Free Press and The Detroit News, including production, advertising and circulation. Gannett Co, Inc., owner of the Detroit Free Press, is the general partner in the Detroit Media Partnership and MediaNews Group, owner of The Detroit News, is the limited partner.

That's my two-minute Google result for who has the gold in this operation. Whatever happened to local papers? And frankly, ever since I learned that the only two principal newswires, AP and Reuters, are owned by the Rothschild dynasty—the veritable eye of the pyramid—there doesn't seem to be much point in delving into who's who at the lower echelons. Some point to extreme labor union problems for the Detroit papers.

But my guess is the main reason for modern newspapers struggling is they can't let go of old, oligarchical, centralized corporate models. It occurs to me that, for example, instead of the Free Press issuing an edict that nobody gets everyday home delivery, why not see if there's any market for someone(s) buying the home delivery business(es)—and running them independently but as associates? Surely, most of the delivery recipients are willing to pay what it takes, especially for doorstep service.

Anyway, just an idea. Certainly the future of human business is neighborhood, community, noncorporate, distributed, and away from the Almighty Oligarchy. And whatever my local freedom-oriented print newspaper becomes, it will surely come back to my doorstep for a price.

Happy Solstice 2008!

###

[1] "Remember kids, don't buy drugs! Become a rock star and they give you them for free!" From the Christmas season classic, Love Actually.

[2] How many people do you know that will hold on to a \$10 watch for 15 years?! Moreover, what are the odds that anyone will spend \$5 to have the watch shipped back to the maker for a repair or warranty claim?

[3] vast authoritarian wasteland

2008 December 22

Copyright © Brian Wright | The Coffee Coaster™

Big 3 Auto Loans | Newspaper Decline | Christmas Card | Workmanship