

## **THAT WAS THE YEAR THAT WAS: HIGHLIGHTS AND LOWLIGHTS FROM 2010**

*Dick Bagby, December 26, 2010*

Those of you who remember the early 1960s may recognize that my title alludes to a popular TV show of that era, *That Was the Week That Was*. Like the *Daily Show*, it was a light-hearted look at the news, full of humor but also provoking some serious thought. Some things are so deadly serious and disturbing that we need to find some humor in them to save our sanity.

Sometime around the start of the year, we learned that the Rev. Nancy Anderson, our minister for the past eight years, would retire this summer. Nancy had a vital role in our church, and she had been here long enough that many of our members had no experience with anybody else. There was a small amount of panic: what will we do without her? The answer seems to be what many of the older members expected: we'll do just fine. We'll get an interim minister for a while, and then we'll find a new permanent minister. I believe this is the first time we've had a full-time settled minister serve here until retirement, and this orderly, planned transition is a whole lot easier to deal with than the abrupt departures we've experienced in the past.

This being an election year, political events dominated the news, and even the major events that weren't really political seemed to have serious political implications. Take **the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico**, for example. It was a disaster on many levels. In addition to the environmental damage it wreaked on a major ecosystem, it was a devastating blow to the economy of the Gulf Coast coming in the throes of a recession, and it struck an area still trying to recover from Hurricane Katrina. Did the government deserve the blame for a lack of oversight, and if so, which government? Should the government have taken immediate action itself to mitigate the damage, or forced a more rapid response from British Petroleum, the primary stakeholder in the operation of the oil rig? Should there be more government regulation of oil exploration and development, or do all of the oil companies except BP do such a great job that no further regulation is called for? Or is this simply an unfortunate event that just happened, one of the unavoidable hazards to living in such complex times, and not a reason to change anything we've been doing? How does this square with our professed reverence for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part? What do you think?

In April there was **a significant explosion in a West Virginia coal mine**, killing 25 miners immediately and leaving 4 potential survivors trapped underground. A rescue was attempted, but 4 days later their bodies were found; I was unable to learn whether they had died in the explosion or had survived it but been unable to survive until a rescue. The operator of the mine, Massey Energy, claimed that they had an enviable safety record, but apparently they had a substantial record of ongoing safety violations and foot dragging in response to complaints from mining regulators. In particular, already this year there were numerous citations for defective equipment to monitor methane in the mine and to reduce the levels when they become dangerous; it was methane that caused the explosion.

Then in August, a cave-in left 33 men trapped in a Chilean mine. Remarkably, all were rescued after 69 days underground; survival equipment was already in place for just such an event. Nonetheless, all the top regulatory officials for Chilean mines were quickly dismissed, and 18 other mines were shut down within a few days. Some have said that the mine in which the cave-in occurred was inherently unstable, and men should not have been allowed underground there. I saw an interview with someone associated with the US mining industry, who said that compared to the US, Chilean mine safety standards were notoriously lax. I don't know about that. From what I read, the US mine safety regulations are not enforced effectively, and what struck me

about Chile was the extraordinary concern for the lives of the miners, as evidenced both by the remarkable rescue and the presence of effective survival equipment deep underground in the mines. Does it have anything to do with the fact that Chile has a left-wing government, presumably caring more for people than for corporations?

One of the biggest news stories of the year was the effort to rework **the way we pay for medical care** in this country. Under the old rules, a growing but limited percentage of the population relied on Medicare, which would almost certainly be seen as socialized medicine, except that people love their Medicare while hating socialized medicine. Everyone with a reported income pays taxes to finance Medicare. There are **powerful voices calling for the bulk of medical care to be financed through private insurance**, largely paid for through employee benefits, but only about half the country is covered this way, and the percentage has been falling for some time, as more people lose employment and more employers decide they cannot continue to subsidize coverage for their employees. Many of the long-term poor depend on Medicaid, which is a form of welfare. Unlike Medicare, there are no dedicated taxes to pay for it, so Medicaid is a favorite target when budgets need to be cut. The remainder of the population either goes untreated or gets treatment and is billed for it at a far higher rate than is paid by either Medicare or private insurance. Some who are billed for it actually pay up, but many do not; some are forced into bankruptcy and others simply don't pay the bills. Local taxes generally subsidize indigent care at public hospitals, which provide far costlier services than doctors can deliver in their offices, but with fewer barriers to receiving treatment. What's not to love about this wonderful system?

During the legislative negotiations, everyone agrees that there was a lot of disinformation, but there was considerable controversy about what that was. Attempts to mandate that insurance cover discussions between doctors and patients about end-of-life decisions got turned into the creation of death panels, which would then decide whether the gravely ill would be treated or denied treatment. Of course, such panels already exist; we know them as insurance companies, who decide whether treatments have too high a cost-benefit ratio to be covered by insurance and which patients are too big risks to be allowed to purchase coverage. The whole discussion was a powerful reminder of the extent to which we as a people believe what we want to believe, embracing what supports our beliefs and ignoring what calls them into question.

One of the things I could never understand about the controversy was the role of the US Chamber of Commerce. The high cost of benefits that must be paid by US employers is generally seen as one of the leading obstacles to competitiveness for what's left of manufacturing in this country; at least it's frequently cited by manufacturers during negotiations with unions. In spite of this, the Chamber lobbied fiercely for preserving the status quo, ignoring its adverse effects on US businesses.

The controversy did not end with the passage of a bill that fell far short of the single-payer system many on the left wanted, but you would never know that by listening to the voices on the right, who are now trying to block its implementation. Their favorite target is the provision that establishes fines for those who choose not to obtain insurance coverage, a provision designed to reduce the risk to insurance companies, who will now have to provide immediate coverage to applicants with pre-existing medical conditions. Many on the right see the bill as the start of a process moving inexorably toward the single-payer system they abhor, while many on the left see the bill as a last attempt to avoid the single-payer system they want by preserving a major role for private medical insurance. What do you think?

While all this was going on, **the TEA Party movement** began to develop some real clout. Its critics were quick to point out the irony in their complaints about unacceptably high taxes coming at a time when their taxes were the lowest level they had ever experienced. But the movement was about more than taxes,

although just what it is about seems to be beyond the comprehension of outsiders, judging by the way they've denied the ways they've been characterized in the media.

Passions rose to a fever pitch when a Muslim group announced plans to build a community center, which would include a place to worship, not too far from the site of the 9/11 disaster. That was just too much to bear for those who wanted the site to be holy ground for real Americans, dedicated to the memory of those who perished there. And they had already borne a lot, what with having to block the passage of a bill to compensate the 9/11 responders for the medical problems they developed as a result of their work at the site, and having to believe that 9/11 somehow justified going to war in Iraq and causing the deaths of so many. What ever happened to the American ideal of religious freedom? We keep using that phrase. Perhaps it does not mean what we think it means.

**Another hot-button issue was immigration and border control**, which probably rose to the forefront because of our economic problems. Somebody's got to be blamed for those problems, but certainly not us. This all came to a head during the summer when Arizona passed a law requiring the police to routinely check the immigration status of those with whom it came into contact. Somehow the assurances that this would be done in a nondiscriminatory fashion were not entirely convincing, and many who advocate for the disenfranchised called for a boycott of Arizona. That's been put on hold for now, while the courts rule as to whether it is legal for Arizona to execute such a policy. What do you think will be the outcome?

There was a lot of **good news and bad news for gay rights advocates**. In the wake of the California Supreme Court's decision that banning same-sex marriage was unconstitutional, several groups got together and put an initiative on the ballot to do just that. It passed, and then---surprise---the constitutionality of that initiative was challenged in the California court system. That challenge was upheld, with the judge carefully spelling out a long list of reasons why his ruling could not have gone any other way; he all but said that you're not only wrong, you're ugly too. Nonetheless, his ruling was appealed, although there was some speculation that it might not be in order to limit the effect of the ruling. The last thing the opponents of same-sex marriage want to do is to lose in the US Supreme Court and thereby create a binding nation-wide precedent. But appeal they did, and hearings began December 11; we're still awaiting the outcome.

While all that was going on, the Iowa Supreme Court ruled that same-sex couples must be allowed to wed on constitutional grounds, a ruling that caught a lot of us by surprise. It seemed far more progressive than we've come to expect the American heartland to be, and indeed, Iowa voters removed the three participating justices who were up for reconfirmation in the November election cycle.

There were several court decisions against the **Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy** that the military has been following since Clinton's presidency, and since President Obama had pledged to bring an end to that policy, many were disappointed that the Justice Department appealed those decisions. Obama had said that he preferred the matter be resolved through legislation rather than through the courts, and having observed the aftermath of the decisions ending racial segregation and legalizing abortion, I can see his point. But as the year went on, it seemed increasingly unlikely that it would come to a vote while he still enjoyed a majority of supporters in the legislature. Just in the last few days, a sense of what's right finally triumphed over political posturing, and the bill has been passed and signed into law, even though there are indications that implementation will take a while.

I think that the gay rights issue is one of the few causes supported by UUs in which we can reasonably expect to see victory in our lifetimes. What's next on that front?

**On the economic front**, we still seem to be sputtering along, with unemployment still unacceptably high, even though the financial services sector is once again making money and compensating executives with multimillion-dollar bonuses. If the TEA Party is right, our highest priority ought to be trimming the national deficit, and presumably they made that clear at least to the Republican Party. And then earlier this month, it became clear that conservatives in the Senate would not allow any legislation to help the economy or the economically disadvantaged unless it also included extending the present historically low tax rates for high earners. The effect of that extension on the economy is perhaps subject to debate, but economists are almost universally on the side of saying the benefit to the unemployment problem is minimal. On the other hand, the effect on the deficit is clear. Was the compromise that finally emerged good or bad for the country?

I was encouraged that **the Senate approved the START treaty last week**. On the other hand, the chief complaint about it was a cause for concern that I had almost forgotten about: the Star Wars missile defense program that had been proposed during the Reagan Administration. It's doubtful whether such a system can ever be both operational and effective, but Reagan's optimism about it is still with us, as well as his inability to appreciate why Russia might well perceive an impermeable defense as an offensive threat. His view of America as a country that would never initiate a war of aggression, even if it could do so with impunity, is one we would all like to believe. But the actions of his heirs would call that view into question, and I don't think that particular view of America has ever held sway in Russia. It's ironic that Reagan's legacy might have blocked the START treaty, since it represents a continuation of one of the best aspects of his legacy: the initiation of cooperative arms reduction between the US and Russia, and the beginning of the end of the cold war.

While the historical record does not indicate that treaties are particularly effective at preventing wars, I still think it's important to agree to them, particularly those agreeing to reduce weaponry, as opposed to those that only promise not to oppose aggressive acts against someone else.

Closer to home, it appears **the Wilderness Act is dead for now**, in spite of the flurry of ads about it, both pro and con, that have appeared locally in the last month. Remarkably, most of these ads have been concerned only with what should have been a peripheral issue: border security, rather than whether the designation of land as wilderness results in better usage of the land. Somehow I find it hard to believe that the Chamber of Commerce, the Las Cruces Association of Realtors, and the real estate developers are united in their opposition to the designation of local lands as wilderness out of their common concern for border security, even though the Border Patrol says that the bill addresses those concerns in a satisfactory manner. It reminds me of the old saying: when anyone says it's not the money, it's the principle of the thing---it's the money. On the other hand, the groups supporting the Wilderness Act have also focused their ads on border security, almost as if that were the only reason they favor the designation of local areas as wilderness. Can't we have an honest discussion about the real issues?

As Ed McMahon used to say on the old *Tonight* show, surely such an exhaustive reckoning of the events of the last year has completely covered all the topics of interest. And as Johnny Carson would then reply, that would be wrong. But I've said enough. What would you like to say?