

## BIBBY'S BLOG

Research,

Reflections, &

Rants



Musings of a Multi-Focused Mind

### BIBBY BLOG - "Reflections on Tom Harpur"

Jan. 21, 2017

Tom Harpur passed away on January 2nd of this year. He would have been 88 in April. Many people knew him as the long-time religion editor at the *Toronto Star* and as the provocative author of books like *For Christ's Sake* and *The Pagan Christ*.

Tom played a very special role in my life. I came to the University of Lethbridge in 1975 after spending my first year out of graduate school as a Visiting Assistant Professor at York University in Toronto. My greatest fear about finding myself in Lethbridge - on the heels of being in Toronto - was that my work and I would simply disappear.

On a Monday in May of 1976, Tom called me after previewing a *Man Alive* program that was featuring some of the religion findings from my just-completed, first national survey. He told me he wanted to do something with it for the *Star*. I assumed it would be a small story in the religion section on Saturday. The next day - a Tuesday - I learned after being deluged with media calls from Toronto that his story had appeared as the main headline on the front page.

That marked the start of my career-long involvement with the national media. Tom and I met from time to time from around 1976 through the early 90s. On one occasion he told me was working on a book about the importance of people understanding what the historical Jesus had to say about life today. When he told me he was tentatively entitling it, "Jesus for Our Times," I suggested to him that it was a great thesis but a blah-ish title. I mentioned to him that Harvey Cox had written an article for *Playboy* a few years before that carried a title he might consider using: *For Christ's Sake*. You know how that off-hand idea landed.

Tom was a classy individual. A Rhodes Scholar, he suggested to me when we corresponded during my sabbatical at Oxford in 1981 that I "have a pint" for him at one of his favourite pubs. Yet, he also suggested we meet at a take-out hamburger joint near his home in Thornhill in 1985 where I gave him a copy of my freshly-minted book, *The Emerging Generation*. It included the somewhat corny but accurate inscription, "To Tom Harpur - Who helped to transform a potential geographical cage into a national stage."

On at least three occasions when he was still with the *Star*, I would call him with a press release-like synopsis of a research finding, he would "find the story," and it would be published on a Saturday; we then would appear together on *Canada AM* within a day or two to reflect together on what I had found and he had written.

Tom rescued me from oblivion and laid the groundwork for my career as something of what has subsequently come to be described as "a public intellectual" who is pretty good at "knowledge dissemination." From those early experiences with Tom, I realized it was possible not only to bridge geographical isolation but also to bridge the unnecessary gulf between what happens in academia and what matters to the rest of the world.

My debt to Tom Harpur is simply immense.