

“Traffic Light Frenzy” December 20, 2009

Some of you are like me, and live where we have to cross Keystone Avenue on a daily basis. Now currently, the city of Carmel is busily putting in roundabouts, which I dearly love and am excited for all of them to be finished. Nonetheless, our cross street is going to be one of the last, so I still have to rely on the traffic signal to get safely across.

That’s a bigger challenge than we might guess, because a lot of folks don’t really abide by the traffic lights, at least not in the way it was intended. Of course, we know that green means we can go, and here in the States, red means that we’re supposed to stop. The yellow light is understood as caution, and when the light turns yellow we’re supposed to slow down and prepare to stop.

However, that’s not always the way drivers respond to the lights along Keystone. Never a day passes when I sit there waiting for the light to change that I don’t see someone run through the yellow, going full speed ahead. That’s even true of the red light! At least once a day, I see a driver blow through the red light, failing to stop, and endangering the lives of all those waiting to cross.

Clearly, it’s not supposed to be that way. Red clearly is telling us that we no longer have the right-of-way; the drivers going the other way do, and we’re to yield to them. The yellow light is one I’ve always interpreted as meaning we need to use extreme caution if we’re already in the intersection and move through as carefully as we can. However, if we aren’t yet in the intersection, we’re supposed to stop. At least, that’s what I was taught in driver’s ed. Maybe the rules have changed over the years, but it’s almost as if every color of light can be disregarded, if a driver is so inclined. “After all,” people seem to say, “I need to get through here...I’m more important, so you’ll just have to wait. No stopping or slowing down for me!”

If you stop to think about it, that’s really a pretty selfish and self-centered way of thinking, but it often seems to overrule all care and caution. I guess we’re all just in a big hurry to get home, or wherever we’re going, and haven’t much regard for anyone or anything other than our own needs.

One could almost apply the same logic to the holiday season that is fully upon us. I

really have trouble identifying with those folks who get up at o-dark-thirty the day after Thanksgiving to be first in line at Wal-Mart or Target! What’s so important that we have to have that we will stand in the cold, rush in the door when it opens, and even trample any poor soul who dares to get in our way? And yet, unfortunately, that’s sometimes what happens. I have trouble figuring out what’s so precious about saving a few pennies that we would get ourselves into such a frenzy to rush and stress and buy, but something certainly seems to be.

Christmas seems to lend itself to going overboard on a lot of things. We often go all out decorating; we “shop ‘til we drop;” we load up the credit cards and spend all our cash, and we do it at a frantic pace. It’s busy, busy, busy, and most of us fail to slow down, much less consider stopping. It’s as though we treat every task like a green light, going at it full speed ahead. Instead of enjoying and appreciating the holidays, we get ourselves stressed out and exhausted!

Maybe we’ve got it all wrong; maybe we’re missing the point. Maybe the “stuff” isn’t it. Perhaps Beatle John Lennon said it right when he was quoted as saying, “**If everyone demanded peace instead of another television set, then there’d be peace.**” If we want to stop all the craziness, we have to act like it, and pull back, slow down, and stop. To use the analogy of the day—instead of ignoring the traffic lights and speed right on through, we need to acknowledge all the signals and begin to abide by them. We need to heed the red light telling us to stop the frenzy, and obey the yellow signal cautioning us to slow down and proceed more slowly. Maybe we would benefit by thinking about the reason for which traffic lights were invented—to ease the traffic snarls and create some sense of order and peace in an otherwise chaotic world. Likewise, the signals of our own lives tell us when we need to slow down, stop, take a deep breath and get re-centered.

Business guru, Tom Peters, tells about a chaotic incident he experienced at a Vermont grocery store on Christmas Eve. He said he groaned as he entered the store, because it was absolutely jammed, and he only needed to pick up the few things he had forgotten. He quickly grabbed what he needed, and headed for the express check-out lanes.

Big mistake! What a mess! The lines were long, and crossed one another and wound down every aisle, creating mass confusion for shoppers trying to get to the shelves, as well as for those who’d finished shopping and were

trying to check out. People cut in front of one another, patience evaporated and tempers flared. There was no sign of Christmas spirit in that little store, and no one left there feeling very good about the whole experience.

Tom Peters thought there surely might have been a better way to handle the situation. Of course, shopping earlier would have helped, but that clearly had not happened. And after all, who among us has not forgotten one thing or another, and had no alternative but to run into the market to pick something up? How might things have turned out differently? How might the situation have been resolved in a more positive way?

Peters suggested that maybe someone directing traffic like a traffic light or police officer does, might have eased some of the confusion. I find myself wondering if it would have changed anything if someone had started singing a Christmas carol like "Silent Night," or begun passing out candy canes. Maybe someone could have helped the shoppers in front of them by bagging their purchases, or some could have helped by assisting the people who were still looking for items to find them. Had anything like that happened, my guess is that a totally different spirit might have prevailed, and everyone would have left feeling far better than they actually did.

You see, when we forget the reason for the season, we typically get into trouble. We forget that it's about love and kindness, and their outgrowths—patience and good spirit. When we're in such a frenzy, all we think about is ourselves and what we think we want or need, and then there's chaos both around us and within us. We lack the one essential element for a happier and more satisfying holiday—an inner peace.

Our Bible passage might be a good reminder for us to consider. This is Zachariah's song of praise for God, and his celebration at the birth of his son, who became known as John the Baptist.

At any rate, part of what Zachariah says is our Bible passage:

God's love and kindness will shine upon us
Like the sun that rises in the sky.
On us who live in the dark shadow of death
This light will shine
To guide us into a life of peace.

The Bible passage is trying to help us understand that Christmas is all about the light of God's love becoming real in the world, and it's about the promise that God's love and kindness will shine, and will guide us into a life of peace. It shows itself in ways that we often miss; we just have to slow down and stop long enough for it to catch up with us.

What might some of the ways in which we might find some inner peace? It really doesn't have anything to do with what's going on around us; it's about our inner heart, our inner being. As Mahatma Gandhi once said, : "Each one has to find peace from within, and peace to be real must be unaffected by outside circumstances."

I wonder what it would be like if we chose to let go of the anxiety and negativity that all too often rages within us, and chose instead to pull back, slow down, and breathe in the moment. What about stepping outside in the cold night air, looking up at the starlit sky at night, taking in the silence? What about pausing long enough in the midst of our typically hectic day, and breathing a prayer to God to fill with us quiet and peace? What would it be like if we began each morning with a time of quiet reflection, and centering ourselves in God, and calming calm our inner activity? What would it be like if we chose to quiet ourselves enough to take in the laughter of a child, or the smile on a mother's face? What about willing ourselves to look for the love and beauty that exists all around us?

In order to know an inner peace, we have to stay centered in the light of God's love—the love that slows us down and quiets our souls, the light that will lead us to peace—the peace that so many of us seek. My prayer is that in the few days between now and Christmas, the light of God's love will shine upon us all, and guide us into the life of peace that God offers us.

Closing:

Robert Fulghum wrote these words:

"Peace is not something you wish for; it's something you make; something you do; something you are; and something you give away." The peace that we're looking for comes from God and is a gift of love to each of us.

May the peace of Christmas be yours and mine.

Have a good Sunday, and truly go in peace. Amen.

