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**TO CUBA WITH LOVE AND BACK AGAIN?**

by Jonathan Wilson

The story is told about a guy who gets lost and stops to ask a local for directions to his destination. After a long pause, the local responds, “Well, I don’t think you can get there from here.” For over half a century that has been much the case for Americans wanting to travel to Cuba. Even now it’s not easy.

Cuba lies south of Florida about 90 miles. The Castro Regime came to power after a violent revolution over fifty years ago. So Cuba and the United States share a revolutionary history. The United States sponsored embargo of Cuba has been in place ever since their revolution. As far as I know, no other country honors the embargo. Can you imagine England maintaining a self-defeating embargo of the American colonies for half a century after our revolution?! Reminds me of the kid in the playground who, wanting his own way, threatens to hold his breath until he turns blue. Go for it. Despite the embargo, the economic plight of the Cuban people, from all appearances, was as good as I’ve seen things in Mexico, Belize, Ecuador, and Peru.

More recently the embargo has been slowly easing and that fact created the legal basis for my trip there last month. To get there required flights to Toronto book-ending a round trip flight booked between Toronto and Havana that happens daily. It couldn’t be accomplished on-line with a single booking from and back to Des Moines. Moreover, I felt like a mobile ATM since credit cards issued by US banks cannot be used in Cuba, so I had to carry cash – Canadian cash – stowed in pouches around my waist, around my ankle, and around my neck. I felt like a cash stuffed scare crow, but I managed and never felt at any more risk of a mugging than with a walk around downtown Des Moines.

I think I can say with confidence that the place is crawling with gay men. I don’t know about lesbians because my gaydar doesn’t work with lesbians. But it was going off aplenty with numerous handsome men that I saw there. I met a charming gay couple, one a successful architect and his partner an accomplished, bilingual guide. They shared some fascinating insights about the Cuban experience and culture, and the confirmed that homosexuality, while not protected, is quite common and mostly accepted tolerantly.

Perhaps the most interesting insight was about the embargo which, if it’s been intended to put pressure on the Castro Regime, has been decidedly counter-productive. I was told that since the beginning, every perceived short-coming of the Castro Regime has been conveniently blamed on what? – the US embargo. That scapegoat has given the Regime cover for everything from the shortage of milk, meat, bread, and cement, to opportunity . . . I was also told that lifting the embargo would likely change the political dynamics in Cuba almost overnight. Without that excuse for deficient performance, there would be tremendous pressure on the Cuban government for change – not unlike the pressure we’ve seen recently in the Arab world.

The accommodations were flawless, both the hotels and food, as well as an abundance of taxi cabs. Havana, at least, is ready and set for the American tourism that will cascade there when the embargo is finally lifted. They won’t have to start from scratch to accommodate the visitors. Except for the hurricane season, the weather is also flawless. The people are wonderfully friendly, particularly to those few Americans who have been able to visit despite the embargo.

And did I mention the plethora of gorgeous gay men?

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**CALENDAR**

▼ The next FFBC meeting is 7:00 A.M., Friday, March 6, 2009 at Hoyt Sherman Place.

Our speaker will be the bishop of the First United Methodist Church, the Rev. Dr. Julius C. Trimble.

▼ R.S.V.P. by Wednesday March 4 to [JonathanWilson@davisbrownlaw.com](mailto:JonathanWilson@davisbrownlaw.com) or 288-2500 by phone.

Why do you 'put your two cents worth in,' but it's only 'a penny for you thoughts?' Where does the other penny go?

## Good Eats and Great Community in Elkader

by Bruce Carr



Our speakers on the first Friday of March were the creators and purveyors of the excellent "Couscous Royale" pictured here -- the signature dish of Schera's Restaurant & Bar located in truly beautiful downtown Elkader, Iowa (pop. 1,338). Algeria-born Frederique Boudouani and his partner, Iowa-born Brian Breuning, charmed and inspired us with their story -- a story that initially reminded me of the old radio soap-opera (that aired before either of them was born!) which asks the question: "Can this gayboy poet from a tiny farming community in the midwest find happiness as the spouse of another gayboy, son of an international Algerian diplomat, who's never lived in a city of less than two million?" The answer, as Brian and Frederique clearly demonstrated, is a resounding YES.

"Established December 2006 in historic downtown Elkader," reads their Website [www.scheras.com](http://www.scheras.com). "We strive to provide a unique dining experience along the banks of the Turkey River. Drawing from Algerian, North African, and Mediterranean cuisines, along with a mix of Midwestern favorites, we offer a healthy and exciting alternative to the same-old-same-old. Enjoy the beauty of Elkader in this full-service restaurant and bar featuring many local favorites and North African dishes. Full patio overlooking the river in the summertime...."

But Schera's has become far more than just another exotic eatery in the county seat of Clayton County in northeast Iowa. Frederique and Brian were determined that their establishment would be a place where locals and other visitors can feel safe, maybe a little less lonely. "I'm not saying Elkader should be a gay resort," Frederique said, "but gay people can be integrated into society." And the couple's contributions to Elkader go well beyond a tasty meal and interesting conversation. Brian joined the Chamber of Commerce; Frederique became active in the county's historical society and took charge of the town's sister-city relationship with Mascara, Algeria. He lends his hospitality and translation services to visiting delegations from

Algeria and other Arab nations. He also has plans for a computer business, Elkader Technologies, which will include a business incubator to help the town become a center for hi-tech employment. And creating jobs and stimulating economic development for Iowa, collaborating with Iowa universities and colleges, is only one side of the equation. In the building that will eventually house the incubator, Boudouani hopes to open the Algerian-American Center for Global Peace and Understanding.

The story of Brian and Frederique's move from Boston to Elkader actually begins on September 11, 2001. As described by Erica Stewart in the *National Trust for Historic Preservation* just last January, "the terror attacks left Boudouani with many unsettling questions, which for him as a Muslim-American were amplified a thousand-fold.... This led him to research the history of Islam in the US. He was astonished to discover that the first mosque built in the US was in Cedar Rapids, and that Elkader was actually named after Abd al-Qadir, the "George Washington of Algeria"—the only town in the US to hold such a distinction. Three Americans, who were neither of Arab nor Muslim background, founded the town in 1846 to honor the Algerian general and poet who -- like the English poet Lord Byron in Greece -- fought in resistance to colonial occupation in the mid-1800s.

"Discovering Elkader's history gave shape to Boudouani's desire to improve understanding and communication between the two cultures. He and Breuning traveled to Elkader several times from Boston and fell in love with the place -- and decided to relocate. But how to make it happen? As Frederique's doctoral degree from MIT in computer engineering and Brian's master's from Boston University in creative writing did not seem to be of much use, the idea for Schera's was born. Named for Boudouani's sister Scheherazade (and for the story-teller in *One Thousand and One Nights*) Schera's serves a mix of Algerian, North African, and Mediterranean cuisines—along with American favorites like cheeseburgers. 'I'd never ever heard of a pork tenderloin,' Frederique told us. So from its first day, Schera's gave Iowa a place to enjoy delicious food, both American and North African, and it has continued to evolve into a gathering spot where people can learn about the Arab and Muslim world in a friendly, welcoming environment.

"For Boudouani, the rewards are simple, and many. 'In all honesty, it warms my heart to see someone who is raised in Elkader and has been a farmer his whole life, come in, order couscous, love it, and come back again and again.' And Iowans have proved their loyalty to Schera's in more ways than returning to the restaurant to eat. When the floods of 2008 hit, Schera's suffered about \$250,000 in damage and was closed for several months. But the flood brought out the best in Brian and Frederique's fellow Iowans: they received help with the clean-up from neighbors and strangers alike -- some traveling all the way from Des Moines. Others wrote checks to help the owners re-open the restaurant. 'The outpouring of support was just amazing,' Frederique said. 'I still get choked up about it.'"



2 What disease exactly did cured ham actually have?

Why did Kamikaze pilots wear helmets?

## Unknown

Review by Gary Kaufman

**Unknown** begins calmly with serene shots of an airplane flying among the clouds and landing in Berlin. Dr. Martin Harris (Liam Neeson) and his wife Elizabeth (January Jones) were on the flight and soon arrive at their hotel. Dr. Harris was attending an international biotechnology seminar where he was to present a paper of his, and at that conference it was expected that a major breakthrough in fighting world hunger would be announced by the benevolent Arab Prince Shada. The Prince's modern ways had made him unpopular in his country, resulting in many assassination attempts.

After arriving at their hotel, Dr. Harris noticed that he did not have his briefcase, and he catches a cab back to the airport to retrieve it. On the way a crash occurs causing the taxi cab to go off a bridge into a river, and Dr. Harris is saved from drowning by his cab driver (Diane Kruger). He regains consciousness four days later in a hospital, with no recollection of anything other than his name and that he has a wife, Elizabeth. After awhile he sees a televised news item that mentions the biotechnology seminar. This prompted him to remember why he was in Berlin, and he leaves the hospital to try to find his wife. When he returned to the hotel where the seminar is being held and his wife is staying, however, his wife denies that she has ever seen him before, and she is being accompanied by another person who she says is Dr. Martin Harris.

As bits and pieces of Dr. Harris' memory returns he slowly discovered aspects of his past, some of which were disturbing. The audience is also confused because they have seen his relationship with his wife -- very loving and caring -- yet they have seen this same woman deny who he was. People then started trying to kill Dr. Harris, so he knew he was onto something, he just had no idea what. As more came to light, Dr. Harris remembered more about his more brutal self.

This movie is kind of a combination of **Erasure** and **Spice**. Liam Neeson's character's memory has been erased, and there are moments where the audience begins to doubt the nature of the film's hero. The action scenes, once they start, just keep the tension building right up to the end. There are chase scenes that rival **The French Connection**.

I am usually not into action movies, but in this one the incredible action sequences are combined with the mental element arising from the fact that the audience and the central character don't know what's going on and why. Both he and the audience are thereby kept involved and guessing, which adds to the suspense.

So, if you like action movies with lots of plot twists, this movie is for you!

*Why is it that people like to say they "slept like a baby," when everyone knows babies wake up like every two hours and have likely wet themselves, or worse?*

## Is an IQ Test Too Much to Ask?

by Jonathan Wilson

Perhaps there should be an IQ test as a prerequisite to serving in the Iowa Legislature. Evidence particularly the recent bill proposing to legislate that life begins at the moment of conception, with all the rights and protections of a human being – and the provision that the legislation would not be within the Supreme Court's jurisdiction to review (a telltale sign that it's sponsors knew it would not pass constitutional scrutiny, if you ask me).

Such a law has all kinds of implications for issues relating to homicide, among other things: (1) an IUD – one of the oldest forms of contraception – causes the miscarriage of a fertilized ovum. Would the user be guilty of murder?; (2) under current law, lethal force is legitimately used to prevent someone from killing another person – the legislation would appear to establish open season for killing abortion doctors; (3) and what about the 35-40% of all pregnancies that miscarry – if a fully recognizable human being begins at the moment of conception, God is slaughtering more human beings in the womb than are being killed by any other cause.

Paradoxically, those who claim to believe that fully

*Why did Superman stop bullets with his chest, but duck when a revolver was thrown at him?*

## BRIEFS & SHORTS

Be sure to RSVP for the April 1 meeting no later than March 29. E-mail [JonathanWilson@davisbrownlaw.com](mailto:JonathanWilson@davisbrownlaw.com) or call him at 288-2500. Our speaker will be YouTube sensation Zach Wahls of Iowa City who spoke so eloquently before the Iowa Legislature in support of same-gender marriage.



Thanks to Mike Smith for his introduction of our March speakers, Frederique Boudouani and Brian Bruening, owners of Shrea's Restaurant in Elkader, Iowa. **Save the Date:** A road trip to Elkader is being planned for September 17-18, 2011. More details to come.



Be sure to peruse the front table for a book you might like to read. Book donations are always welcome. Thanks to Fred Mount for taking over the book table.



Consider making a tax deductible contribution to the FFBC scholarship fund, or designating FFBC for your United Way contribution.



*Everyone is entitled to his or her own opinion, but none of us is entitled to our own facts.*

## **Standing up for Middle-class Iowans**

by Senator Matt McCoy

Middle-class Iowans are the target when Governor Branstad and legislative Republicans push to cut health care, slash wages and retirement benefits, and eliminate the ability to bargain collectively.

The collective bargaining law works well in Iowa. Republican Governor Bob Ray and a Republican-controlled Legislature created the law nearly 40 years ago. Since then, Iowa teachers, firefighters, police officers, nurses, prison guards, snowplow drivers and other public employees have become nationally recognized for providing top-notch services that benefit all Iowans.

Paying employees a living wage has never jeopardized the state's fiscal health or put the state budget out of balance. In fact, when the Wall Street recession hit Iowa, public workers voluntarily took unpaid days off and reduced retirement savings to save the state \$28 million and help keep the state budget balanced.

Today Republicans claim that the state is broke, even though the state budget features a \$900 million surplus. Despite the facts, Republicans are wanting to cut preschool for four-year-olds, local schools, higher education, and health care. That's the only way they can set up a slush fund to hand out hundreds of millions in tax breaks, mostly to out-of-state corporations and super wealthy Iowans.

Even though our state budget is in much better shape than most other states, Iowa has been caught in the corporate-backed effort to undermine the rights of all working Americans. House File 525, which has been approved by the Iowa House, would end collective bargaining for public employees in our state. It's essentially copycat legislation similar to bills introduced in Wisconsin, Ohio, Kansas, Missouri, and other Midwest states.

On March 7, the Iowa House held a public hearing on the bill. I appreciated seeing almost 2,000 middle-class Iowans from across the state rally at the Capitol that night.

I don't understand why Republicans insist on blaming teachers and other public employees for the effects of the Wall Street recession. Don't they remember that not long ago the average salary of Iowa teachers ranked 42<sup>nd</sup> in the nation?

A new report by the Iowa Policy Project proves that state workers do not earn more than similar workers in the private sector. You can read it at [www.iowapolicyproject.org](http://www.iowapolicyproject.org).

I support working Iowans and a strong middle class. That includes defending the rights of workers to bargain collectively.

*Editorial note: Increasing costs to parents of four year olds for pre-school, unpaid furloughed employees, and reductions in other services critical to middle class citizens are all, in effect, "tax increases" for them.*

## **IQ Test (cont.)**

recognized human life begins at the moment of conception typically attribute that conception to God's will. If God doesn't – can't – make a mistake, logic would have to ask why He seems to have changed his mind when a miscarriage occurs. It also makes one wonder whether fertility doctors should be put out of business next. Logic would suggest that those finding it difficult to get pregnant or carry a baby to term should accept their childless fate stoically as the will of God.

Since voters are the sole arbiters of who does and doesn't get elected to the Iowa Legislature, perhaps they are the ones who should be required to get the IQ test. While doctors strive first and foremost to do no harm, legislators should strive first and foremost to avoid being an embarrassment. Too many of them are not achieving that standard.

## **Mob Rule is Democracy Fit for the Toilet**

by Jonathan Wilson

The immediate term wishes of the majority of us, and the right thing to do, are not always the same thing. I remember reading about a small town that decided in favor of more direct democracy and had citizens voting with their toilets. Those favoring a proposal were told to flush their toilets at a particular time, and those opposing it were told to flush at a different time. The greater drop in the water tower level would decide it. Aside from the obvious infirmities of no voter registration, no way to adjust for those with multiple toilets, and the potential for someone to "vote" with a nearby fire hydrant, it did eliminate the middleman, so to speak.

Ours is a representative democracy; there is a middleman, or woman. Every elected official in a representative form of democracy must strike a balance between voting what he/she perceives to be the will of constituents, on the one hand, and doing the right thing, on the other. In the latter case they must take on the burden of explaining successfully to constituents why what they did was the right thing to do. If they're to get re-elected, which is the foremost agenda of most folks holding elective office, they need to do that successfully before the next election or rely heavily on short public memory. Too many opt for neither of those and act more like gumball machines, doing in automaton fashion what they think is the majority's immediate, short-term will.

*To love unconditionally and to have compassion for all things is to reward yourself with every moment of life.*



*How important does a person have to be before they are considered assassinated instead of just murdered?*

end, we remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence and inaction of our supposed friends who let the indifferent decide.”

Some issues afford elected representatives more latitude in striking the balance when, being better informed on specifics, they find there’s some degree of disconnect between the right thing and the majority will. In those cases, fair minds can easily differ on where the balance should to be struck. No one with a modicum of humility can say confidently who is right and who is wrong in those instances. Striking the balance then is never a test of either conscience or courage.

On issues of human rights, however, there is less latitude and, in fact, there should be a presumption in favor of striking the balance in favor of human rights. And issues of human rights invariably call for both conscience and courage.

When I was growing up I remember seeing western movies that depicted a sheriff (read: a unanimous Iowa Supreme Court) standing up to a lynch mob to protect an accused prisoner. Just imagine how un-heroic (and unacceptable) it would have been in those movies for the sheriff, in the end, to say indifferently that since a lynching was the will of his constituents, have at it.

In 1931, in northwest Iowa during the height of the depression, a judge was confronted by a mob that was angry about him signing foreclosure decrees, and the mob wanted him to stop. He refused, standing in favor of law and order – the right thing to do. After torturing him, the mob dragged him to the outskirts of town with the intent of lynching him. They stopped only when the local newspaper editor intervened to remind them they’d be guilty of murder.

Which is not to say that the majority doesn’t eventually get whatever issue figured out appropriately. After a decade of polling, for example, according to a recent ABC News/Washington Post poll, a majority of Americans now favor gay marriage. When it comes to equal rights guaranteed by the Constitution, however, a minority shouldn’t have to wait that long for the majority to come up with the right conclusion. It’s necessary for judges to do their job, and elected officials to back them up, if Constitutional guarantees are to have any meaning.

The theocratic mob of today is made up principally of self-styled “Christians.” It’s ironic that Christians trace one of the foundations of the faith to the wrongful actions of a mob that turned on Jesus and prompted his crucifixion. Now just over 2000 years later it’s the “Christian” mob at work and the martyrs who showed both conscience and courage were three ousted Iowa Supreme Court Justices.

In that toilet democracy and a close call, the issue could be decided by those who are indifferent to the outcome and just happened to be sitting on the toilet relieving themselves. In martyring those justices in the retention election, those who sat it out decided it. To paraphrase Martin Luther King, Jr., “In the

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## My M.O. (Monthly Observation)

By Steve Person

### At Home with Bill Bryson

The year 1851 was one of those landmark years when extraordinary things happened. The Great Exhibition opened in London in the spring, and the Crystal Palace became an instant success, ushering in that latest of international happenings, the first world's fair. Karl Marx accepted a position as a foreign correspondent for the **New York Daily Tribune** even though he never wrote a word (Friedrich Engels did all the writing for him). Charles Darwin published a tome about barnacles, setting himself up as the expert for a later work that dealt with evolution, and an obscure novelist named Herman Melville presented his opus, **The Whale** (later **Moby Dick**). It was a flop under both titles. An obscure country parson by the name of Thomas Marsham moved into his newly built home in an even obscurer village in Norfolk, England, establishing the setting, unbeknownst to him at the time, for author Bill Bryson's latest best seller, **At Home**.

Des Moines native Bill Bryson is one of those authors who can take a huge subject such as the English language and tame it for the average Joe to understand as he did with **Mother Tongue** or chronicle a 1200-mile stroll entitled **A Walk in the Woods**. With **At Home** the author chose as his starting point his home in England, the one Thomas Marsham began to inhabit in 1851.

This time, Bryson started with a small subject, his home, and dissected it room by room and area by area. That dissection, however, led to greater and more exacting examples of each specific area with research that was not only interesting but downright fascinating. Each chapter introduces the reader to a part of the house, and Bryson extrapolates from there with amusing and elucidating stories pertinent to that room or part of the property being covered. In the chapter about the dining room, for example, he goes into the history and use of those common condiments found on most dining tables—salt and pepper. "Sodium chloride is strange stuff," he writes, "because it is made up of two extremely aggressive elements: sodium and chlorine. Sodium and chlorine are the Hell's Angels of the mineral kingdom. Drop a lump of pure sodium into a bucket of water and it will explode with enough force to kill. Chlorine is even more deadly. It was the active ingredient in the poison gases of the First World War and, as swimmers know, even in very dilute form it will make the eyes sting. Yet put these two aggressive elements together, and what you get is innocuous sodium chloride—common table salt." Pepper, first popularized in Europe by the Romans, was literally worth its weight in gold for hundreds of years.

The chapter about The Garden (yard to Americans), gave Bryson full rein in his description as to why gardens (yards) became so popular in mid-nineteenth century England. "The age was vividly marked by epidemics of cholera and other contagions, which killed vast numbers. This didn't make people want to garden exactly, but it did lead to a general longing for fresh air and open spaces....In the middle of the nineteenth century, London had just 218 acres of burial grounds. People were packed into them in densities almost beyond imagining....St. Marleybone Parish Church packed an estimated one hundred thousand bodies into a burial ground of just over an acre." One can only imagine what the stench must have been like.

**At Home** is a delight to read and goes down as my second-favorite Bryson book, right after **Notes from a Small Island**. I hope you will give it a try.