

Evaluating Legislature a matter of character and values

William L. Spence/Lewiston Tribune

"And the cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon,

"Little boy blue and the man in the moon.

"When are you coming home, Dad?

"I don't know when,

"But we'll get together then.

"You know we'll have a good time then."

Harry Chapin, "Cat's in the Cradle"

BOISE - The curtain has dropped and they're all heading home.

Now for the reflective pause, the inevitable search for meaning. How does this session stack up? What was accomplished? Where did they fall short?

It's Judgment Day, boys. Time to strip naked and step on the scales.

And the winner is ...

Ah, I know that hollow feeling, the familiar self-loathing. Winners, really? You think yourself capable of deciding such a thing - think yourself so well-informed?

No, the sum total of a legislative session cannot be captured on a scorecard. Lawmakers are not prize steers to be weighed and measured. There's more to it than that.

Like the busy father in Harry Chapin's "Cat's in the Cradle," it's easy to come to the Statehouse and get caught up in the issues. There's no end to them - no end to the tweaks and adjustments, the modest improvements, no end to the emergencies and major policy reforms.

It is important work that legislators do, and there's lots of it.

The longer I'm here, though, the less some mere listing of political battles won and lost seems to matter. As critical as budgets and policies may be, the true measure of a citizen Legislature is in its people, in the character and values of these 105 senators and representatives.

That character often is masked by the daily rush of business. Every now and then, though, you get a reminder that the dry, intellectual exercise of crafting law is grounded in the passions of the heart.

I think of these as moments of grace.

About a month ago, Senate Majority Leader Bart Davis stopped by the press room and we got to talking about his future plans. He mentioned his interest in clown college - not because he really wants to become a clown, but because he wants to learn balloon-tying. He said he only knew one good balloon trick and needed to expand his repertoire to keep his grandkids entertained.

I was completely charmed by that story. I made the mistake, though, of mentioning it to my editor. He said it was the most pitiful thing he'd ever heard - some lonely old man resorting to balloon bribery so his grandkids will talk with him.

That's why no one likes editors: They are spiritual black holes, sucking all light and joy from the world.

I wish he'd been on the Senate floor last week when Davis took a moment to introduce his family, who were sitting in the gallery.

Davis' daughter and her family are moving out of state to attend graduate school. He didn't expect to still be in the Senate when they return, so he asked for the privilege of introducing his wife of 40 years - "the best friend I've ever had" - as well as his children and 14 grandchildren, noting them all by name.

"It's our family and friends who bring us here," Davis said. "We care about them. We want a good education for them. We want safe roads for them to drive and good jobs to keep them home. We love them with all our hearts."

Working with people like Davis can be a humbling experience. They have a perspective on the legislative process that goes far beyond the tally of bills that passed and bills that failed. Such numbers don't tell the story here, any more than the final score tells the whole story in sports.

As on the field of play, you'll find heroes and goats in the Statehouse hallways. You find quitters and chokers and those who never give up, who never stop trying to improve the state.

Poor sportsmanship can be found here as well, and it is as disappointing as in any locker room. The accusation that women legislators must "spread their legs" to get committee chairmanships, for example, was unworthy of any statesman, as were the personal attacks against House leaders.

But it's also true that the lawmakers who disrupted the session as it wound toward an end were fighting to improve the process - even if they didn't communicate it very well.

I spoke with Rep. Rick Youngblood on Monday about the "shenanigans" that kept the Legislature from adjourning last week, and he very appropriately - and politely - took me to task.

"That's not the right way to think about it," he said.

Legislation can fly through this place near the end of a session. Almost a quarter of all bills approved this year passed the House and/or Senate last week alone. That can be overwhelming, Youngblood said, so lawmakers have every right to slow things down.

The legislative process may be messy at times, he said, but that's because it's not a dictatorship. It's messy because it's collaborative, meaning minority views sometimes keep things from going as planned.

Davis said much the same thing in his closing comments Wednesday, with one addition.

"I've learned to trust and respect the process," he said. "I believe this difficult and political process we're in works. It's not supposed to be easy. ... But let's not forget the legacy given us by our predecessors: this civil and dignified legislative process. I hope we maintain it going forward."

Spence covers politics for the Tribune. He may be contacted at bspence@lmtribune.com or (208) 791-9168.

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