

Examples not to follow

by Sabine Eiche

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Are people in responsible positions (parents, teachers, public servants and the like) still concerned about setting an example to others? Or have role models become anachronistic – except for those promoted by the entertainment industry?

The concept of role models has a long history. It was a subject often treated in the writings of the ancient Roman Cicero (106-43 B.C.), who referred to role models as “*exempla*” (plural of the Latin “*exemplum*,” which gave us such words as exemplary, example).

In English, the word example has lost much of its original cachet, perhaps because we’re so used to hearing it in the phrase “for example.” In German, the word for role model is “*Vorbild*” (literally “before image”), a concrete, vivid term that comes much closer to the original role-model sense of the English word example. “*Bild*” (image) shares a root in Old High German with “*Bildung*” (education, literacy, culture), which has entered English with the term *bildungsroman*, meaning a coming-of-age novel – Dickens’ *Great Expectations*, for example, is a *bildungsroman*.

Ideally, then, a “*Vorbild*” or role model is an educated and cultivated person, with high standards – qualities we look for in someone who holds a position of great responsibility.

The examples set by people holding responsible offices in Richmond have been on my mind lately. On April 23, the Wednesday after Easter, I rode my bike into Minoru Park and noticed something different about the light on the southwest side. Then the screech of power saws assaulted me. Turning in the direction of the tennis courts, I saw several felled evergreens. They looked like slain giants on a battlefield.

I went over to where the (heritage?) trees lay. In front of the temporary barricade were signs – small and low down – giving a 48-hour notice of the impending removal of the trees, scheduled for April 23. Hardly eye-catching, the notice was probably missed by all but the most vigilant. Given that the tree removal is connected with the project for the new development of the sports facilities and seniors centre – a commendable project that’s been given so much coverage in the local press during the last months – why didn’t the city allow for a well-publicized advance warning about the cutting of these

trees? The city website refers only generally to “a limited amount of tree removal” – and it DOES NOT mention the trees were to be destroyed to extend the parking lot. Why are cars being privileged? Where are the bicycle paths?

The sacrifice of Minoru Park’s trees for increased parking facilities is disturbingly reminiscent of another practice, much lamented by locals – the destruction of old trees on private lots in order to turn the front yards of monster houses into paved parking spaces.

Does the city really believe it’s setting a good example here? Is it justifiable to damage the environment for the sake of a grandiose public project? If the city believes its behaviour is consistent with its vision “to be the most appealing, livable and well-managed community in Canada, ” perhaps it’s time somebody went to the optometrist and got their prescription changed.