

Grey's Notes

by Michael Grey



Photo: Ryan MacDonald Photography

Seven deadly sins

ONE of the people I teach, a young guy, about 17, is mad as hell about piping. He eats it up. Loves the tunes, loves to play. He's crazy about piping — a lot like you maybe. I can tell you he's definitely a lot like me. He's the guy that rode around the town where we both live the other weekend in the back of a convertible, with the top down, while playing tunes on the pipes. Top down, breeze blowing, sun shining, chicks (apparently) loving it. This guy has it going on.

Think about where you live. What would be a local reaction to the same bags-out piping ride if you were a piper from Cumbernauld or Saltcoats or Rome, for that matter? What would people think? And for added colour: this is the fellow who a couple of years ago was at a party fooling around with friends on a big outdoor trampoline only to have his then-girlfriend accidentally land on his head — breaking his neck. “I heard a crack and the first thing I thought was, will I play the pipes again?” Forget walking. It was all about bagpipes (he's fine today, by the way — piping in convertible cars aside).

And yet, while passion and enthusiasm is the fuel that fires a person's piping excellence, there's way more to it. A piper might have the “chops”, the hands, the head, to connect the tunes with people, with those who consume the music, but what about navigating your way around the tradition, the customs and many unspoken rules.

Rules. Isn't it always the way? Not unlike golf's unspoken laws that include silence while at play, returning the course as you found it and making sure you and your shadow don't distract other players, piping has its own set of etiquette — unspoken notes to decorum. Any transgression is sure to bring a piper hasty repercussions, or, at the very least, unspoken, damning judgement.

And with buddy's example of piping in the open air breeze fresh in our minds [apologies for the east coast Canadian idiom here], I solemnly look to — where else — the good old Bible, specifically Galatians 5:19-21 — and, yes, I knew you knew that. Here the traditional seven deadly sins are laid out with a few added on for good measure including: fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, wrath, strife [take a breath here], heresies, drunkenness,

revellings — and so on. Phew. No mention of playing any part of a bagpipe march three times but it just might be there — if we read between the lines.

And first up, I'm pleased to say, is **pride**, “a high or inordinate opinion of one's own dignity, importance, merit or superiority”. There's a fine line between arrogance and confidence and pipers — especially competing pipers — frequently are seen to straddle this line. To flaunt a victory, whinge at a loss, berate a fellow competitor or post news of one's own win on social media all break the piper's code. The corresponding virtue is humility as in, we aim to win with grace and lose with humility.

In **greed** there's a huge desire for stuff, for things. A seasoned piper who turns up to play at a small contest of mainly inexperienced players might be seen as greedy. And in a different way a piper who over-plays his welcome at a gathering of peers — you know, by playing 29 minutes of jigs and reels at a kitchen party — would suggest a greed for the limelight. A piper who lays out a reasonable set of tunes and then hands the pipes to an eager up-and-comer would be viewed as charitable.

Who hasn't been bitten by the green-eyed monster, **envy**? To covet the advantages and successes of others is a pretty ugly quality in anyone. The high art that is pipe music along with the competitive framework where much of it sits is a lethal breeding ground for envy. Bitterness over a loss and slagging off a competitor's tune played well are markers of a code broken. Compassion and mutual support lead to the building of great friendships — arguably the best part of the piping world.

When we think **wrath** and bagpipes it's usually squinting Patrick that springs to mind. But we know — if we stop and reflect for a nanosecond — there's more wrath around the place than we'd care to admit. Sometimes fuelled by lager and sometimes fired up by plain old-fashioned raging bad temper, wrath has the

power to destroy friendships, wreck reputations and get people into all sorts of really bad trouble. Publicly railing against a piping judge or collaring a piper we think a little too full of himself (see pride) are some of the weaker manifestations of wrath. Surely patience and forbearance are two of the best qualities any piper — or person — can have.

Yes, there's a clear sexual connotation to **lust** but it's not just about sex. Think of an overwhelming desire, an intense craving for something — yes, a person, but also a thing, like, say a prize. A piper who wants a particular prize to a degree that sees them seek tuition from a potential decider of that prize (a judge) is lustful. To ingratiate,

boot-lick, brown-nose to attempt to gain some kind of competitive advantage is at odds with the honest morality to which we all strive.

Gluttony is a funny thing to think about through a piping lens. Who doesn't know someone or a friend of a friend who's been banned by the proprietor of the local Chinese all-you-can-eat buffet? Moderation and restraint, it seems to me, are especially respected qualities in our world. It's all about balance: in demeanour and performance. Those who are seen to go over the top in any aspect of piping life don't often fare well.

“The secret to piping is that there is no secret,” said John MacFadyen, “It's just all damned hard work.” **Sloth** is our lucky number seven. A disciplined work ethic along with diligence and personal resiliency are highly respected qualities anywhere — but especially so in the piping world. The piper who builds a reputation as always prepared and practised may find the benefit of the doubt fall his way when the rare occasion calls for it.

Yeah, playing great music well is what we all seek to do. But having a sense of some of the unpublished rules of the game might make it all even better. Maybe not as good as playing tunes while riding through town in the back of your girlfriend's father's open-top convertible car — but better. ●

