

Sunday August 11, 2013

It's not easy being a survivor

By Jim Taylor

There have been far too many survivors recently. Survivors must have survived some kind of tragedy. And there have been far too many of those.

Flooding in Australia, Alberta, northern India, Toronto, Europe. Train wrecks in Spain and Quebec. Earthquakes in China. Volcanoes in Indonesia. Wildfires through the southern U.S. states.

Television news salivates over survivors. Obviously, it can't interview those who didn't survive. So it focuses on faces streaked with tears, stuffs microphones up to mouths choked up with emotion, insinuates its cameras into despairing hugs.

We've all seen it after Hurricane Katrina drowned New Orleans, after Sandy swamped New York, after tornadoes ripped through Oklahoma, after a fertilizer plant leveled a village in Texas.

Am I ticked off with television news? Darn right! At what may be the worst moment of the survivors' lives, at a time when what they need most is comfort, consolation, and courage, they're exploited for the sake of voyeurs enjoying someone else's misery.

The pain never ends

Ten years ago this month, the great fire of Kelowna ravaged the eastern slopes of Okanagan Lake. For two weeks, the fire's red glow lit up the night sky. During the day, pillars of smoke turned the sun dark red.

In the end, the fire forced the evacuation of over 30,000 people, and destroyed 239 homes.

A couple of friends – I'll use only their first names, David and Eleanor – had their 30-year-old family home literally vaporized by that fire.

"The word that sticks in my mind is 'surreal'," Eleanor told me. "We got a couple of loads of 'stuff' out. But when we were allowed back to look at our house, there was just nothing there any more. Nothing. And yet some of the plants in our garden were still blooming."

Ten years later, she and David still choke up when they talk about the experience. Family heirlooms, precious memories, familiar settings – all gone.

Progressive stages

Forty years ago, Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross defined five stages of dying – shock and denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance.

I suggest that surviving has similar stages. Because, of course, the mere fact of surviving implies loss.

From my observation, however, the first stage differs significantly from Kubler-Ross's. It's gratitude. Even celebration. We're safe! We made it! Thank God!

Only then comes shock. This can't be happening to us. We've got too much money, too much of our lives, invested in this house, hotel, business, or property.

Third, anger. Can't you see what we're going through? Why must you be so stubborn, stupid, difficult (add your own adjectives)? Whaddya mean we can't go home?

Anger may particularly apply to negotiations with outside agencies. Like governments, who don't move fast enough. Or insurance companies, who can cite fine print excuses ad infinitum.

Dying has a bargaining stage – get me out of this, God, and I’ll never smoke/drink/overeat again. Survival doesn’t -- you can’t bargain with an event that’s already happened. If there’s a bargaining element in survival, it probably appears here, in negotiating with heartless bureaucracies.

Fourth, then, comes helplessness. Utter frustration. Depression. Things will never be the same again; why bother trying? This is too much for us to cope with.

Eventually, as with dying, comes the final stage -- acceptance. Okay, this is how it is. We have to carry on. Somehow.

Maybe, in time, acceptance may even lead to a realization that life has changed, sometimes for the better, without the burden of all that got lost in the tragedy.

Although I’m not sure that full acceptance ever comes. You just learn to avoid the painful hole in your life.

When not to speak

So when should one share these pearls of wisdom? When should one offer advice?

In a word -- never.

In a few more words -- only when the survivor is already reaching the same conclusion.

As Lawrence Kohlberg demonstrated with his research into Stages of Moral Development, humans have difficulty understanding “stages” much above or below their own. Like Kubler-Ross’s stages of death and grieving, Kohlberg’s insights have broader applications.

So there’s no point in discussing eventual acceptance with a person still in shock. An art collector does not want to hear that paintings are just pigments on canvas. A hoarder of souvenirs will not appreciate suggestions that they encumbered his life. Telling a mother, even with the best of intentions, that the death of her handicapped child may ultimately prove a blessing is both cruel and insensitive.

I think that what survivors need most, aside from physical help, is validation of their current feelings. I’ve been there too. You’re not alone. Your feelings are normal.

And – perhaps most important -- this is temporary. But you don’t have to say that. Your own presence offers the assurance that what they’re feeling will not necessarily last forever. You’ve had that experience (or something like it) and you’re still here. You’ve moved on.

At that moment, that’s all a survivor needs to know.

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YOUR TURN

I must admit to feeling a little surprise about the volume and nature of correspondence on last week’s column, which I titled “I am Joe’s Computer.” I knew I was going to be away that week, and I needed something to fill the gap. Wayne Irwin called the column a “classic.” Tom Watson wrote, “Excellent!”

And Bill Peckham called the column, “the best.”

“As I read it,” Bill went on, “I was not really aware that you were teaching a history lesson on the evolution of desktop computers. When I finished I reflected upon my own relationship with computers. My first Mac was one of the original designs by Steve Jobs, a nine inch by nine inch B&W screen which evolved, 20 years later, into a twenty-four inch colour computer with a gazillion (my tech language is not up to your standards)bits of memory.

Over the years I used it for business, but the last 10 years I have used it to satisfy my writing desires. I have become a writer of short stories and now, as of July 29, 2013, a published novelist, *From Out of the Woodwork*."

One of Bill's stories, coincidentally, was about "a computer which was retired from service and took over the world of computers."

In a similar vein, Ron Thomson noted, "Many thanks for always enlightening us, in an often tongue-in-cheek way."

Isabel Gibson asked, "Do you remember that fad in workshops that suggested people write their own epitaph as others might do it? Here's another good thought experiment: What would (will?) our computer say about us? About how we spent our time? About whether we maintained them in any sort of balance? And about how we used all that power -- for criminal activity, exploitation, entertainment, personal development, or the good of others?"

Gwynne Harries' computer emulates Joe's: "My computer read your column for me and the summary it presented brought back many memories. My first computer did nothing but blink binary lights at me, and it's been quite a ride from that time to this. Our computers now provide the best continuing education program that we could own."

But all is not sweetness and light. Gwynne commented, "I do worry that once we are totally electronically organized and dependent, we will experience the addition of charges for every service."

For several readers, the column brought back memories. Cliff Boldt recalled, "I had my first Commodore Pet in 1979"

Ah, yes. And Atari. And KayPro. And Radio Shack, which had its own line of computers. To say nothing of literally dozens of word processing programs, each with its own features and flaws... Now we all seem to be vassals of Microsoft Word....

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at jimt@quixotic.ca.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
