

Sunday July 1, 2012

Raging rivers illustrate a principle

By Jim Taylor

For about ten days now, this quiet corner of B.C. has made it onto national newscasts. The coming of spring always results in extra runoff down mountain streams. Safety officials warn against standing on banks that rushing streams may have undercut, or worse, actually venturing into the water.

But this year, extra snow fell during the last months of winter, overloading the snowpack. Then heavy rains dumped more water directly into streams already in flood.

And the waters did what they always do – they followed the path of least resistance, downward.

Across the lake from my home, bulldozers and excavators carve a new channel for Shorts Creek to keep it from slicing through the only road serving the community and historic park at Fintry.

Farmers in Enderby had to move their cattle to higher ground when the Shuswap River overflowed its banks.

In Canoe, steps that used to lead down to a gently sloping beach now go straight into deep water.

And in Sicamous, houseboat charters shut down. Hummingbird Creek ripped out Highway 97 north, tossed cars and trucks around like Tinkertoys, and flooded recreational campgrounds.

The power of rushing water

Pictures of floods tend to show vast stretches inundated by still waters, people wading along what had been streets, or basements filled with floating furniture. These pictures identify tragedy, but they don't show the awesome power of rushing water.

Perhaps television camera operators simply can't get close enough.

I don't know why those streams devastated the Okanagan more than they ever have before. Maybe it's climate change. Maybe forestry clear-cutting affected the watershed. Or perhaps God wanted to punish Alberta vacationers for sipping margaritas on Sunday afternoon. Who knows? I'll let others point fingers.

For me, the floods dramatize a principle of life that we often overlook.

I remember, years ago, getting trapped by another set of rampaging torrents. My wife and I had driven all day through pelting rain, to her parents' home in Ainsworth Hot Springs, on Kootenay Lake. Across B.C.'s Monashee ranges, spray splashed over our car as normally bubbling streams hammered against wood-planked bridges.

We got in about midnight. By next morning, we couldn't leave Ainsworth. Woodbury Creek had washed out behind us; Coffee Creek, ahead of us.

We went to see for ourselves.

We could feel Coffee Creek long before we could see it. A deep rumbling came up through the soles of our feet. The rush of water tumbled huge boulders down the streambed, bouncing them off each other like billiard balls. Occasionally a rock the size of a steamer trunk came ricocheting up out of the welter of mud-brown water.

A thick mist hung in the narrow valley, dripping off the forests, condensing on our glasses -- spray driven by sheer water pressure, exploding droplets into the air.

Trees went by. Crashing rocks pulverized their trunks. Their root systems cartwheeled downstream like spinning parasols.

The “Goldilocks Principle”

I have never been able to think of water as benign since then.

Oh sure, boats skim placid lakes. People swim. Children paddle. Dogs splash in and out. We drink it, wash with it, soak our lawns and gardens with it.

But that’s when water is under our control.

Water symbolizes what I call “the Goldilocks principle.”

You remember the story of Goldilocks? She kept finding porridge, chairs, and beds, that were too hot, too big, too hard... Or too cold, too small, too soft...

But fortunately, she always found a “just right” in-between.

It’s a universal parable. Good things need to be “just right.” Too much of even a good thing is harmful. So is too little. Of anything. Warmth. Money. Independence. Medicine. Discipline. Even (forgive me, Arnold Palmer) golf.

There’s nothing wrong with any of these things. They may be necessary for survival. But even good things, taken to an extreme, can become harmful.

No one knows how much is “just right.” A Bedouin nomad in Saudi Arabia’s arid Empty Quarter and an Irish dairy farmer will never agree on what constitutes the proper amount of rain.

But they’ll each know when they have too much, or too little.

Children need physical interaction with adults to build their neural pathways. But too much physical contact, in some forms, turns into abuse; too little, into neglect. Similarly, prescription drugs save lives. But overdoses and failure to take them equally have negative effects.

Pope Gregory’s famed Seven Deadly Sins, if you think about them, are all virtues taken to an extreme. Healthy self-esteem exaggerates into pride, hubris. Enjoyment of good food escalates into gluttony. Ambition sours into envy, jealousy.

So too with water. Too little kills; too much kills.

To me, the recent floods illustrate a universal principle. Nothing is intrinsically good, or bad. But when taken to an extreme – either too much or too little – even the necessities of life can turn deadly.

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YOUR TURN

A variety of people simply expressed thanks for last week’s column about assisted suicide – more of them than usual coming as oral comments from local readers. Among those commenting:

- Vern Ratslaff: “Wonderfully and thoughtfully put; much appreciated.”
- Stuart Detzler: “Just when I think you can’t top a column, you do it again.”
- Pat Graham: “I particularly loved you line about gradually expanding the circle of those who are allowed to make decisions about their own lives.”

The longest letter came from Judyth Mermelstein in Montreal. “I suspect an irrational fear of death is what motivates many to object to physician-assisted suicide. Certainly, few who have ever seen what medically-prolonged agony for a dying loved one is like would consider death as anything but a release from suffering.

“Our culture has already come to recognize that to a large extent. When my mother died of cancer in 1957, doctors would not even allow patients adequate painkillers for fear they would shorten the patient’s life. When my

stepmother went the same way about 20 years later, 'do not resuscitate' orders were already available to terminal patients and it was recognized that fear of narcotic addiction was misplaced in these cases. By the 1990s, palliative care was seen to be appropriate -- though there are still too few hospice beds where people can die with more dignity -- and removal of life-support systems became acceptable in most places in Canada if the bodies they supported were effectively dead already.

"In the 21st century, it is well within a patient's rights to refuse further treatment and decide to die at home instead of undergoing painful interventions in a hospital. Not everyone has the means and social supports to do it but most healthcare workers and family members would choose this over useless interventions and institutional surroundings for a longer period of pain. The line between stopping medical interventions and intervening to help end a life is not as sharply-drawn as it used to be.

"An elderly uncle, in very weak condition in a nursing home, whose son is a respected physician, decided it was his time and asked for his breathing support to be removed; this was done with his family all around him and he slipped away quite peacefully and quickly. Not many years back, some healthcare experts would have argued this was a crime and every possible measure should be used to prolong a patient's life, but one hears that argument less frequently these days. My uncle was unable to remove the apparatus or take any active measures himself; technically, his doctor and his son could have been charged under Canadian law for helping him....

"Here in Quebec, we recently held a quite comprehensive public consultation on assisted suicide. Though the extreme opinions were also well-represented, it seems most of us are quite comfortable with the idea of physician-assisted suicide as long as it is completely voluntary and the person requesting it is sane and incurable. It seems most of us see this as respect for the individual's autonomy rather than a 'slippery slope' that leads to compulsory euthanasia."

"From what I've seen and read, I suspect that if there is a failing in the medical establishment (and in most of us), it lies not in pushing suicide but, rather, in prolonging life at all costs," wrote Isabel Gibson. "As you point out, that prolongation can be seen as abuse.

"Good for Justice Smith. Her willingness to step up to the plate on this difficult issue may help us find a better accommodation."

PSALM PARAPHRASES

I have started including a psalm paraphrase for the coming Sunday with my Soft Edges column, on Wednesdays. Why not on Sunday, you ask? Well, partly because psalms seem to me to fit better with the general mood of Soft Edges, which is more likely to deal directly with faith-related matters than these Sharp Edges columns. And partly because Soft Edges is about 250 words shorter than Sharp Edges, and so including the paraphrase on Wednesday won't make the e-mailing quite as long.

That does mean that if you want to receive the paraphrase, and are not on the Soft Edges mailing list, you'll need to subscribe. No charge, just send me a message, jimt@quixotic.ca. Or you can subscribe automatically by sending a blank e-mail to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca.

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

- David Keating's "SeemslikeGod" page, www.seemslikegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@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.
