

Wednesday April 16, 2014

The perils of playing it safe

By Jim Taylor

Stop me if you've heard this story before.

There was this rock star, see. He started with an acoustic guitar and a mouth organ. But then his songs caught on. So he went electrical. He added a drummer, some backup singers, a brass section. Fireworks and lights. Enough amplifiers to levitate small children. And all the whizz-bang gimmickry a recording studio could generate.

He became rich and famous.

But then he decided to do a nostalgia tour. Just him and his guitar. So he called his managers in. He said he would be out of reach, out of touch. He divided the market up into zones, and told them they were on their own.

When he eventually came back, he called his managers into his penthouse office, one by one, to find out what they had done in his absence.

The first manager said, "I listened to all your records and read all your songbooks. I realized that you were a genius as well as a brilliant performer. So I tried to make your insights even more widely known than they were already. I encouraged writers to quote you. I made your songs available to church choirs and school music classes without charge. I sponsored philosophy forums where university students debated your concepts."

"How much money did that make?" asked the rock star.

"None," admitted the manager. "At least, not directly. But far more people know you now. You're quoted more often than Shakespeare. And coincidentally, sales of your songbooks and CDs keep going up."

"Well done," said the rock star, and called in the second manager.

"I've been zealous about collecting royalties," said the second manager. "If they bought sheet music, if they bought a CD, if they sang your songs at a school concert, if they quoted your words in a magazine article or a book, I made sure they paid you something for it. I didn't threaten anyone; I just pointed out that using your words or music without compensation was like stealing from you. They always agreed that you deserved a fair return for your creativity. The royalties have been rolling in."

"Well done," said the rock star, and called in the third manager.

“I didn’t want anyone stealing your stuff,” said the third manager, “even if you did swipe some of your best riffs from Tchaikovsky and Verdi. So I turned down all requests for permissions. Nobody used your songs in commercials; no one quoted your best lines in books or editorials. Your creative efforts belong to you, and I kept them locked up tight until you returned to administer them yourself.”

“You stupid twit,” said the rock star. “Just who and what did you think you were serving? If no one sings a song, it doesn’t exist. If no one hears my words, they’re meaningless.”

“But I was just protecting your copyright,” protested the manager.

“Get out!” roared the rock star. “You’re fired!”

He gave that manager’s territory to the other two. And he sent a tweet to millions of followers on Twitter: “Playing it safe is the only sure way to lose.”

I wonder who he intended his message for.

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YOUR TURN

Last week’s column on the opposing forces of evolution and entropy was a bit of a think-piece, but it drew some interesting responses.

Helen Arnott, like me a missionary child, wrote, “This article helps me to understand my own thought processes when it comes to trying to make peace with all the different gods in my own life, especially the Christian God and the Hindu ones like Shiva, Vishnu, and so on. I think I’ll let the theologians wrestle with the theology, and I’ll continue to choose life.”

Charles Hill “had a difficult time getting my teeth into this one. Do you deny the existence of an identity (ego) after physical death? Is there potential for a ‘spiritual’ world, perhaps another dimension (some scientists suggest up to 10 separate modes of existence) which coexists with the three-dimensional body? If this is true, why would be not all be hedonists at the expense of others? Many are, of course.”

As I think I've said before, I'm willing to wait and see about a continuing existence. If there is, I'll be delighted (probably). If there isn't, I won't exist to be disappointed. Of course (as a friend pointed out) those who do believe in a life after death could make exactly the same argument. And we'd both be right.

Isabel Gibson felt a long-forgotten Bible verse tugging at her memory: "Who knew I knew any Deuteronomy? Provoked by your article, I found this half-remembered quotation: 'I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live.'" (Deut. 30:19, New International Version) Ya gotta love Google.

"We could do much worse than have that as a mantra: 'Choose life. Now.' (In keeping with your earlier article about there only being a Now.) In fact, I'm not sure we could do any better."

John Willems also turned to a Bible verse: "Jesus said, 'I have come to give you life...'. I'm with you about going with life! Seems that I have more purpose in living than dying, recognizing that I am going to die. So enjoy today!"

One my lines said, "I suppose that if biblical literalists deny evolution, they have to deny entropy too. "

"I suspect you have it the wrong way around," Judyth Mermelstein responded. "The wish to deny that life leads inevitably towards death [entropy] comes first. It leads people to the idea that their lives will be eternally prolonged, with their personalities either improved or substantially unchanged in the afterlife. [They would reason that] a Being who can make things work that way could not possibly have failed to make things perfectly in the forms they were meant to have for eternity... From there, the resurrection of the body and eternal hymn-singing follow, along with the notion that God planted the fossils to test the faith of sceptics unworthy of Heaven.

"Frankly, I can't imagine anything less appealing than being stuck in a decomposing human body, or anything weirder than an omnipotent all-wise Creator who would play that kind of trick."

PSALM PARAPHRASES

Every year, I complain that the RCL prescribes Psalm 118 for two Sundays in a row. With an overlap of verses, even. Last week, it was supposed to encapsulate Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem; this week, it's supposed to celebrate his resurrection. Perhaps the traditional psalms have a shortage of resurrection themes. This year, I'm going to rebel against the lectionary. I'm going to send you a non-Psalm, part of a poem by W. B. Yeats – whose poems often throb with theological references – that the resurrected Jesus might have empathized. The poem is called "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" but I'll substitute the lake he knew.

I will arise, and go now, and go to Galilee...

**And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening's full of linnets' wings.**

**I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart's core.**

For paraphrases of most of the psalms used by the RCL, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publishing, info@woodlake.com.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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 web links 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;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- 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.

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I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at jimt@quixotic.ca, or send a note to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca
