

Wednesday May 1, 2013

## The power of deceptive metaphors

By Jim Taylor

My recent fall off a wall shattered more than my elbow. You remember the nursery rhyme:

*Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,*

*Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.*

*All the king's horses and all the king's men*

*Couldn't put Humpty together again.*

Presumably Humpty didn't have an orthopedic surgeon available. I did, and he put my elbow back together. But re-assembly is not the same as recovery. Most of the day, I carry my injured arm in a sling.

On the one hand, the sling protects my damaged bones and ligaments. It prevents me from attempting too much, causing further damage.

On the other hand, there is no other hand.

Anything I used to do with two hands – from tying shoelaces to unscrewing the cap of the toothpaste tube – I now have to do with one hand. Or do without. Some things, like buttons, my wife Joan can do for me. Other things, I have to learn to do differently.

Take one trivial example. I was never conscious before of what I did, in what order, when taking my pills at night. Now I'm forced into an inflexible sequence. I have to turn on the tap before I can fill the glass with water; I have to pop the pills in my mouth before I sip from that glass.

## Steep learning curve

It's humiliating to realize how much I used to take for granted.

Everything takes twice as long to do. And takes twice as much energy. Does that make it four times as difficult? I'm too tired to figure it out. I need a rest...

I used to feel impatient with people who took longer than I did. Now I'm the one who takes longer.

For me, this is a short-term disability. Others will never "get over" their disability.

I'm beginning to realize that many of my figures of speech – such as "on the one hand, on the other hand" – come from an able-bodied perspective. It's like saying to a blind person, "Do you see what I mean?" Or telling a paraplegic to "put his best foot forward."

This realization causes not quite as much shock as my discovery, some 30 years ago, of the way my language took maleness for granted. Spokesman, chairman, man-hours – such words tilted the playing field against women's participation.

I wasn't alone, of course. Psychologists such as Jung, Piaget, and Kohlberg all treated boys' developmental experiences as the norm for everyone. Until, as my late friend Doug Hodgkinson used to say, "Carol Gilligan blew them out of the water" with her book about the growing experience of the other half of humanity, *In a Different Voice*.

No doubt the same shock came to anti-slavery abolitionists when they realized how prevailing religious metaphors of sin as dark, black, without light – in contrast to portraying goodness and purity as white, bright, shining – reinforced the perception of African slaves as less than human.

The words we use shape the way we think.

I hope I can remember all this when I have two useful hands again.

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## YOUR TURN

Most of the letters about last week's column on mentoring agreed with me that what we learned from our mentors mattered more than any rules provided.

Ted Wilson suggested, "Thinking is THE most important skill that mentors can pass on. Instruction manuals, lecturers, lesson plans -- none of those teach us how to think the way a mentor does. I remember my sister learning to tie an apron on. She had to take her shoe tying experience and do it behind her back. When she had mastered it, she went to Dad to show off her new skill. Dad was quite impressed, but then asked, 'Did you think to wrap the apron strings around you and tie them in front?'"

Charles Hill suggested a practical implication: "Monkey See; Monkey Do. Don't drive fast keeping alert for a radar trap and then tell your children to keep the law."

However, Peter Gunning noted that mentoring can impart the wrong lessons: "Here in South Africa, we learned our morals all too well. Particularly racism. (The law which prevented you marrying someone of another race was called 'the Immorality Act'.)

"So I expect the 'moral' of your story is, be careful whose morals you are following. Choose your mentor carefully!

"The church is particularly good at mentoring morals. So we still have people who think Christianity is all about 'Fish on Friday'; 'Going to Church'; 'Sabbath Observance'; 'Fasting before Communion' etc. I wish we were better at 'Love one another'; 'Don't Judge' and 'God's Mercy & Grace'!"

Fran Ota commented, "Rules and regulations have been on my mind lately. The United Church has a handbook of 'guidelines' for Ministry Personnel Committees -- but interpretations of that document vary from conference to conference and person to person. We read exactly the same words in the same language, and yet still have different interpretations of those same things. -- and it causes no end of confusion in congregations as to appropriate process. Some people think 'guidelines' means they can ignore them if they don't like them."

I'm sure I recall reading at least one additional letter which identified flaws in my reasoning, but I can't find it now. To whoever wrote it, my apologies.

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## PSALM PARAPHRASES

By my reckoning (I get confused sometimes!) this will be the Sixth Sunday of Easter. Which should make the chosen psalm, number 67. As I read about the weather extremes being experienced in the prairie provinces and the American Midwest -- everything from grass fires to blizzards to flooding -- I thought this might be an appropriate paraphrase:

1 Send us mild temperatures and gentle breezes, God;  
 Make your sun shine softly and your rain fall regularly.  
 Then we will know that you smile upon us, and bless us.

2 Then all will recognize your kindness, your power to save.

3 And the people will praise you, God. All the people will praise you.

4 The nations will know you are not capricious.  
 You do not favor one region over another.  
 You do not give rain to one and drought to another;  
 You do not feed one and starve another.

6 The earth pours out its produce without stinting;  
 like our God, it withholds nothing.

7 Who then are we to withhold anything from others?  
 As God has blessed us, let us bless others.

5 Then indeed will all the peoples praise you, God;  
 all nations will know you and praise you.

For this and other paraphrases, you can order *Everyday Psalms* through Wood Lake Publications,  
[info@woodlake.com](mailto:info@woodlake.com) or 1-800-663-2775.

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#### 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](mailto: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](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [www.traditionaliconoclast.com](http://www.traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto: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](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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