

*Wednesday July 25, 2012*

## **The greatest compliment you can pay**

By Jim Taylor

A small voice from the back seat asked, “Grandpa, did you go away last week?”

“Yes,” I said. “I was at a school reunion.”

Another question: “What did you do?”

I explained what a reunion is.

“Did you see a lot of people?”

My grandson is somewhere between five and six – the village he came from in Ethiopia wasn’t fussy about recording birthdates. It’s the first time I recall him asking questions about someone else. Usually, his conversations centre entirely on himself.

By some coincidence, that same weekend I read a newspaper article about listening. Listening is not a skill that we work to develop, but perhaps we should. Pauline Oliveros, founder of the Deep Listening Institute, claims that it’s one thing we should all learn to do well.

Too many of us listen only for a break so we can take over the conversation. Or so we can set the speaker straight. Or so we can toss in a joke that shatters the moment of seriousness and turns talk back to trivialities.

Nope, listening means listening, really paying attention to what someone else is saying. It means setting aside any desire to argue, to dispute, to convince others of your viewpoint. You can ask questions, of course. But not to challenge. Only to hear better what this person is saying, and why.

It may also mean listening to what they’re not saying. Perhaps to things that they’re afraid to say, even to themselves.

This kind of listening is a sign of deep respect.

## **Listening to each other**

And I realized we had practiced Deep Listening at our class reunion, without knowing it.

For three days, formally and informally, we listened to each other. Yes, about the school days we had in common. But also about our careers, our families, our lives... We heard things some of us never knew before. And maybe some things that we had never risked telling others before.

Genuine listening, says Oliveros, may help us remember ourselves differently. It can change us.

During our time together, no one expressed judgement. Not once did anyone say, “You’re wrong!” Or, “You shouldn’t say that!”

Because we were all dealing with the same questions: “Who am I? How did I get to be who I am now?”

Such questions matter more as we draw nearer to the end of life. We want to know, to recognize, to acknowledge, the factors that shaped us. Some decisions were made for us; others we made ourselves. They all weave together into a tapestry that is visible only in hindsight.

Listening to each other helped to bring the tapestry into focus. The apparently simple act of listening affirmed what each of us had become.

Sometimes I jest that I don’t know what I’m thinking until I hear myself trying to say it. But that implies having someone who cares enough to listen to the thoughts I’m fumbling with.

If there’s no one willing to listen, can I hear still myself think?

Listening may be the deepest compliment we can pay each other.

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## YOUR TURN

I write a column with my heart in my mouth, expecting a chorus of censure. Like, for example, last week's column declaring that the Bible could be wrong. And what comes back? Approval!

"What an excellent column," Grace Hawke wrote. "It has always frustrated me that people quote the Bible to back up every crazy and bigoted idea that runs down the track, without any regard to the reality of different times, different cultures. No, you certainly cannot squeeze today's feet into yesterday's sandals (wonderful metaphor!) and trying to do so lessens the impact of the overall message."

Nan Erbaugh, pastor at a Church of the Brethren congregation in Dayton, wrote, "I'm going to share this column with my leadership team at church. Why are we so afraid to say that we think the bible is wrong sometimes? It's as though we are afraid to say that the emperor has no clothes."

James Russell asked, "Are you familiar with 'Misquoting Jesus,' by Bart Ehrman? Ehrman apparently became a renowned biblical scholar in part because he started as a bible literalist. He wound up discovering as he studied the Bible more and more that there were errors -- from translations, transcriptions, and perhaps purposeful editing -- which made a literalist approach clearly wrong. If you don't know it, you might want to read a copy.

About a different religious tradition, Sonja McCrimmon noted, "I have just finished reading 'Infidel' by Ayaan Hirsi Ali. She maintains that the Quran can be wrong, and has had to have armed protection! I can understand the wish to have a complete, definitive, written moral guide but I think it's as likely as having a magic lantern."

The column prompted Dan Wilkie to share his own experience (which I suspect may be shared by many of you): "I grew up in a house with more literal interpretations of the Bible, but after studying the Bible for a number of years and experiencing it in many ways, it has helped me immensely to consider the Bible, not so much as God's word to us, as much as our attempts as human beings to understand a God we cannot see, in a form we may not truly understand. Then, by taking this image of the Bible, and applying the contexts of history, previous understandings and nuances of language, and the fact that each of us as human beings tends each hear and read the meanings behind various texts as we do, it then becomes easy to understand why there are so many contradictions in understandings of the Scriptures.

"As for Leviticus, applying these same principles, it is easy to understand that Jewish elders taught the purity codes to the Jewish People as a way to stand apart from the balance of society. Is the Bible flat wrong? I doubt it. Rather it is probably more about our failed human attempts to understand the truths that apply in our own context, using Christ's teachings to love God and love our neighbors as we love ourselves... After all on these commandments hang all the laws and the prophets."

Bob Chandler also shared some learnings: "The priest teaching my confirmation class said that the Bible contains the word of God but not every word in the Bible is the word of God. And a critic of the Presbyterian Westminster Confession (which states that the Bible is the only infallible rule of faith & manners) said that it substituted an infallible book for an infallible pope!

"As a former Presbyterian now an Anglican I was appalled that a prominent group writing a statement of faith essentials [would state] as one of its articles the inerrancy of scripture. And there are still Anglican evangelicals who promote these essentials of the faith. God help us! God expects us to use our 21st century minds when interpreting scripture for our day."

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## PSALM PARAPHRASES

Psalm 14: Several centuries ago, French mathematician Blaise Pascal devised what's still called "Pascal's Wager." It goes something like this. If you gamble that there is no God, and there isn't, you gain nothing. If you gamble there is a God, and there isn't, you lose nothing. If you gamble there is no God, and there is, you will lose everything. If you gamble there is a God, and there is, you will win everything.

I based this paraphrase on Pascal's Wager.

1        Only fools declare, "There is no God."

They delude themselves.

Their actions reveal their foolishness;

whatever they do turns out badly.

2        For there is a God, who knows what they are doing.

God loves those who seek justice, show mercy,  
and walk humbly with the Holy.

3        But those who turn their backs on God will lose their way;  
they will stumble in the darkness of their own shadow.

4        Can't they see what fools they're making of themselves?

They crunch people's dreams like popcorn;

they grow fat on others' famine.

They deny the reality of a divine presence.

5        When they discover their error, they will subside

into putrid puddles of terror,

They have challenged God;

they cannot win.

6        But we who have nothing must rely on God.

7        God, save us from those who prey upon us.

Topple the proud from their pedestals,

and restore us in a universal Jubilee.

Then all your people will be glad.

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

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### YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, [www.seemslkegod.org](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com](mailto:isabel@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>](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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## TECHNICAL STUFF

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