

Abstract principles in real life

By Jim Taylor

If a child ran across the road in front of you, you'd slam on the brakes. And you'd trust that the driver behind you had left enough space to stop without rear-ending you.

Would you do the same for a duck?

That's the case currently before a court in Montreal. Four years ago, Emma Czornobaj, now 25, stopped her car on Highway 30 to help a family of ducks attempting to cross the road. She got out of her car to shoo them to safety.

A motorcyclist and his passenger smashed into the back of Czornobaj's car. Both died.

Czornobaj has been charged with criminal negligence causing death.

Not hypothetical anymore

It's a real-life illustration of a hypothetical dilemma often posed in psychological tests of human ethics.

Suppose, the test typically suggests, that a dastardly villain has bound and gagged the beautiful heroine and lashed her across the railway tracks. A train is rolling down the tracks towards her. You can switch the train onto a siding to save the heroine. But if you do, the train will plow into a work crew instead.

Would you save the heroine? Or the work crew?

Would you run over a mother duck and her brood of waddling little ducklings? Or would you stop and risk getting rear-ended by another vehicle?

In such a situation, does anyone really apply abstract principles like "the greatest good for the greatest number"?

It seems to me that the hypothetical test overlooks two key elements in

any such decision – immediacy and relationship.

Relationship. Am I in love with the beautiful heroine? Or is my brother a member of that works crew? If I know one of the potential victims personally, I will naturally give preference to saving that person.

Immediacy. If I can save the heroine now, I'll worry about the works crew later. Perhaps the train can be flagged down. Perhaps the workers can be warned to flee. Perhaps... Perhaps...

Prison possibilities

All of us, I suspect, instinctively prefer to avoid doing immediate harm. We have a deep distaste for letting someone get hurt now, for the sake of avoiding greater harm at some indeterminate time in the future.

For Czornobaj, clearly, the ducks were right now. She could save their lives by stopping. Other occupants of the highway were a less immediate concern; they still had time to react.

I'm not trying to pre-judge the courtroom case. From a distance, I can't judge the relative merits of legal arguments over whether Czornobaj took adequate precautions while stopping on a busy highway. Whether the motorcyclist's speed affected his ability to stop. Or whether the driver behind is always responsible in a rear-end collision. And more.

What interests me is that a hypothetical question, typically posed as a means of getting participants to explore their own reactions, has been translated into real life.

Depending on the court's verdict, it could result in up to 14 years imprisonment for Emma Czornobaj.

Which adds a further layer of complication to the hypothetical dilemma – would you still save the heroine if it might lead to a prison sentence?

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YOUR TURN

Last week's column suggested that "to do" lists might be a form of prayer – of prioritizing the important things in life, and of defining purpose.

Isabel Gibson liked the idea: “It would be ideal to see a list of tasks for the morrow as an opportunity, rather than an obligation; to be grateful for the day, rather than resentful of the things that fill it.

“Not that I live this ideal – but seeing a to-do list as prayer sounds like a good start.”

Fran Ota also makes “to do” lists: “I used to be able to keep everything in my head. At the UC national office, my files were stacked in the order in which they needed to be done, with the most urgent on top. Even in Presbytery and Conference roles, I could keep dates and meeting clear. Now, I make 'to-do' lists. I am not sure it's because I can't remember everything (although that might be part of it) or whether it's just that at 68 life is so busy that the days run one into the other. But when in pastoral ministry, trying to create interesting and different worships, sometime a list of things is needed so that they are in place for the morning service.

“But when I go to sleep at night, whatever comes the next day, comes.”

Charles Hill commented, “For me on many days, the real downer would be the ‘What I Did’ list.”

Jane Wallbrown added a twist: “Post-its! That's my to-do lists. I have them on my computer screen, I have them stuck to the bottom of my screen, I have post-its stuck on various parts of my very large desk! I was given a work iPhone this January where they have very convenient Lists tab. They even have a time tracker. I tried and tried to join the modern age but have ended up going back to the blasted post-its.

“Now...if you put just one thing on a post-it, you have the satisfaction of throwing it away when THAT task is completed. Better than a list with scratched out completed tasks but more and more at the end.

“I can't do anything at night by lists. Praying...yes. But a praying to-do list? Never. Do I wake up with tasks on my mind? Yes. Sometimes problems solve themselves while sleeping and wake me up when solved. Sometimes I come awake sharply realizing that I have forgotten to add something to my blasted post-its to do.”

Laurna Tallman wondered if I was being truly consistent.

“You wrote: ‘I don't, and won't, believe in a deity who diddles with

reality to assist believers and impede unbelievers.’ And: ‘But simply preparing that list in an attitude of prayer -- rather than frustration -- helps to put my mind into harmony with [God].’

She asked, “Don’t you think the meaning of the second statement is a validation of the meaning of the first one?”

It depends, I suppose, on how one imagines God. I don’t see God as something external that intervenes in natural events. Rather, I think of God as a relationship. I don’t have a relationship WITH God; rather, God IS the relationship I have with anything. So I hope I can act in harmony with those relationships....

Jane Bennett wanted to continue with the thread about gardening. She sent along her favourite poem about gardening. “My favourite is the 4th verse,” she writes. It goes,

The kiss of the sun for pardon,
The song of the birds for mirth ---
One is nearer God’s heart in a garden
Than anywhere else on earth.

David Gilchrist also liked the Kipling poem that Frank Martens found for me. “Kipling,” he wrote, “is also one of MY favourite writers. That poem is a long one, and my favourite verse is the 5th:

Our England is a garden, and such gardens are not made
By singing:- ‘Oh, how beautiful!’ and sitting in the shade,
While better men than we go out and start their working lives
At grubbing weeds from gravel-paths with broken dinner-knives.

It reminds me that Prayer is not just a matter of sitting in comfort with folded hands; THAT can only be a prelude to the action part of Prayer.”

And William Ball was catching up even further back, on the column about heaven as a razor for sharpening our thinking. “Whoever said heaven was about us and what we conceive as the best good (car-racing, etc.)?” he asked. “Naturally we anthropomorphize this; we often can’t think beyond a human-based or human-centred model. Whatever heaven is, I don’t think it is primarily about us. Just as in some ways this life is not ‘about us.’ We so easily put ourselves at the centre of whatever is being discussed. Is this a kind of ‘original sin?’”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

For this coming Sunday, the Revised Common Lectionary recommends Psalm 116: 1-2, 12-19. When I look at it, I remember a family scene. The little girl got out of the car. Her eyes suddenly lit up. "Nana!" she said, pointing, "Nana!" And she raced across the lawn to her grandmother, who waited with arms open wide.

1 Granny listens to me.

I tell her my stories, and she believes me.

2 When others blame me, Granny doesn't jump to conclusions.

She doesn't get upset;

she doesn't always support someone else.

She really listens to me.

12 How do I thank her?

13 By running to her with my arms stretched out whenever I see her.

14 No matter who is there, I run to her.

15 Granny says I'm precious.

16 Everyone else expects me to do things their way.

But Granny doesn't expect me to be anyone but myself.

I would do anything to make my granny happy.

17 I help her set the table, without being asked.

I help her crack eggs for the pan;

I like making beds with her.

18 Even when she has company visiting, I fling my arms around her neck and hug her.

19 I love going to Granny's house.

I hope God is like Granny.

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...

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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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