

Wednesday May 21, 2014

Cutting through comfortable assumptions

By Jim Taylor

Here's an idea: heaven is neither a place or a time – it is a razor.

I remember a discussion group in our church going mortar and pistol at the issue of disarmament. Some argued passionately that having armaments inevitably encouraged their use. Others argued equally passionately that nations needed to be able to defend themselves; peace was only achievable through a balance of power.

“So,” mused our facilitator, Grant Kerr, “will there be armies in heaven, do you suppose?”

It stopped both sides in their tracks.

Will heaven include death and conquest? Or will people be brainwashed into placid peacefulness?

I know a couple of people for whom heaven – if they actually believe in any such thing – would consist of endless Formula One Grand Prix racing. Flinging their cars at impossible speeds into impossible corners, wringing every possible horsepower out of a screaming masterpiece of mechanical ingenuity.

Wait – does that mean heaven will have gasoline?

And could heaven include inequalities? Would one team be allowed to acquire better cars and drivers than another team?

Would heaven have winners and losers?

By raising such – perhaps facetious – questions, the idea of heaven challenges the superficiality of much of our thinking about what's desirable.

Some, for example, might visualize an endless golf course. Is that still fun if every shot was a hole in one? Or a perfect fishing stream, where every cast hooked a fighting steelhead?

A friend declared, “If there's another life, I want to be a civil servant with a guaranteed pension, indexed to the cost of living, with a permanent medical plan.”

Why would one need a pension in heaven, I wondered. Or does he expect heaven to include illness, hunger, disability, and mortgage payments?

Keep your razors sharp

In these contexts, it seems to me, the notion of heaven serves as a kind of Occam's Razor, slashing through unexamined preconceptions. Occam's Razor is the name given to a philosophical principle devised by a Franciscan monk known as William of Ockham somewhere around 1300 A.D. It states that when choosing among competing hypotheses, the hypothesis that makes the fewest assumptions should be selected. More complex solutions may ultimately prove correct, but -- lacking absolute certainty -- the fewer assumptions, the better.

Don't confuse Occam's Razor with Hanlon's Razor: "Never attribute to malice that which can be adequately explained by stupidity."

The intent of any "Razor" is the elimination of unlikely explanations. Flush the crap; cut to the core.

Please note, I'm not arguing that heaven does, or does not, exist. That's beyond the scope of a short column. This is merely about the concept of "heaven" -- whatever that may be -- as a spur for thinking more clearly about earthly issues. If we define heaven as an ultimately desirable state, why would we deliberately pursue policies that take a different direction here on earth?

Why, for example, do we cling to monetary policies that increase inequalities? Or social policies that treat some people as having lesser value than others? Or educational policies that discourage creativity?

Or are we, perhaps, asserting an unconscious belief that an existence where no one has any needs, desires, or ambitions, would actually be a kind of hell?

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YOUR TURN

Intuitions are, inevitably, hard to define. Tom Watson called last week's column about intuitions, "a very interesting and thought-provoking column. It left me with much to ponder, something which is one of the reasons I enjoy reading your weekly blogs -- you always give me much food for thought.

"I was left, this time, pondering the difference between intuition, the

word with which you started out, and premonition, a word that seemed to apply to the rest of the column.

“When I sit down with friends and sense that one of them isn’t quite on top of their game just then, that’s intuition, but does it necessarily infer a premonition that something is about to happen to that person?

“Maybe it’s just the fact that I love toying with words. Maybe it’s all just a matter of semantics. Or maybe some layer of my awareness just slid apart when I wasn’t looking.”

Jim Henderschedt finds himself on a similar journey to mine: “I can especially resonate with your ‘mind-set’ awareness. Struggling as I am with that same issue, I find myself setting sail on uncharted waters (at least for me) and into only God knows what. A lifetime of training and beliefs are suddenly turned inside-out and all that is left to chart the course is trust and the simple, but profound confession, ‘I believe.’ That’s it. All I have to do now is fill in the blanks.”

Isabel Gibson asked, “Are you going to drop the other shoe?”

I wasn’t sure what she meant. Isabel responded, “The one where you explain/describe the mental mindset you want to change/revisit.”

I didn’t want to go into too much detail in the column, because it involves my wife’s chronic leukemia, but in brief, I realized that I was getting into a “what’s the use” mindset. Simultaneously, I realized that wasn’t helping.

To which Isabel further replied, “I wish you could bottle your flash -- we could all use a big dose of it, from time to time. I myself have tendency to feel sorry for myself because of the intrusive and limiting demands of my (freely undertaken) work.”

John Hopkins “especially liked your reference to the conscious and sub-conscious and your suggestion to pay attention to that voice from within. However, I also would add that intuition is fed by your personal values and fueled by the inner core and essence of your being -- and that is something to which we should always pay attention.”

Finally, June Tink sent compliments about my sometimes oddball metaphors: “The opening sentence in your latest letter -- about not recognizing intuition if it performed brain surgery on you -- made me smile. I’m not sure why, but it reminded me of something Bill Bryson wrote in one of his books. When asked if

he had enjoyed his stay at a rather bad hotel in Darwin, Australia, and would he stay with them again, he declared he would rather have bowel surgery in the woods with a stick!

“Of course it has no relevance at all to your topic but it reminded me of how often you have made me smile with your clever and amusing words and quirky sense of humour and how much I continue to learn from and enjoy your weekly letters. You are so generous in sharing your family joys and sadness with us and I know you have struck a chord with me on numerous occasions.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

In this season of Easter, the psalm selections of the Revised Common Lectionary tend to focus on a theme of God having brought believers through trials to triumphs. That's certainly the theme of Psalm 66:8-20. For the refugees fleeing the fighting in Syria, South Sudan, and the Congo countries, it might be a wish rather than a fulfilment.

8 We owe our survival to God.

We had run out of our own resources.

9 God kept us alive and struggling;

God shielded us when no one else cared.

**10 We have been rejected and despised,
persecuted and punished.**

But we have come out of our ordeal stronger.

11 Once, we were simply a flood of frightened individuals.

We had nothing in common but fear.

**Now we have become a people with a purpose;
our trials have unified us.**

**12 We were the eternal victims;
we were captives and oppressed.**

Yet God brought us through to this new world.

13 We will repay God for keeping watch over us.

From now on, the best of everything we have belongs to God.

**14 We made that promise when we were desperate;
we will keep our promise when we are well off.**

15 For without God, we would have nothing.
16 We will tell our children,
and they will tell their children,
what God has done for us.
17 We were lost and lonely,
a wandering people, unsure of our future.
And God responded to our plight.
18 God was not like diplomats and immigration officials;
God did not judge us by our appearance.
20 Even during the toughest of our trials,
we never ever felt that God had abandoned us.
Thanks be to God.

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 reynoldsrp@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
