

Wednesday April 9, 2014

Opposing forces in conflict

By Jim Taylor

Ancient Zoroaster got a few things right.

Zoroaster, whose name was probably closer to Zarathustra before the Greeks tinkered with it, lived in eastern Persia about 2,000 years before Christ. He's credited with condensing a pantheon of minor gods into two – Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu (also known as Ahriman) – who exist in constant conflict. Ahura Mazda represents good, or truth -- the spirit of light and enlightenment, present in all of creation; Angra Mainyu stands for evil, lies, and a destructive spirit.

Traces of Zoroaster's dualism survive among supposedly monotheistic Christians who still portray the world as a battleground between God and Satan.

I'm not a Zoroastrian. But I think he was right in identifying existence as influenced by inseparable opposing forces. I would not call those forces gods, though. I think of them as life and death. Neither is intrinsically good or evil, but they are in constant tension.

Evolution and entropy

Life evolves from the simple to the complex. Random DNA strings become viruses, which become cells, which cooperate to survive more efficiently, and eventually turn into biological bodies –whether plant or animal – some of which become autonomous individuals with intelligence, who form civilizations, which themselves grow more complex....

The pattern pervades human development. We start as single cells, which contain only the promise of becoming human. We mature into highly complex creatures capable – like no other species – of manipulating technology for our own purposes.

Entropy, on the other hand, represents the force of death. All forms of energy eventually degrade, or devolve, into heat, which dissipates uselessly into the universal void.

Your car converts the chemical energy in fossil fuel into heat. Some heat gets wasted out the tailpipe; some drives the car forward, building kinetic energy. When you apply the brakes, you convert kinetic energy into heat, which can't be recaptured.

An electric vehicle re-captures some of that kinetic energy, storing it as electrical energy in a battery pack, for future conversion back into kinetic energy. But no engine achieves 100 per cent efficiency. Eventually, that stored electrical energy runs out too, and you have to recharge your batteries.

Entropy is irreversible. Once energy is lost, it cannot be reclaimed.

The final stage of life

All living bodies die.

Even the thermonuclear furnaces of suns, stars, and nebulae will eventually cool, leaving only dark cinders whirling in gravitational orbits around other cinders.

And so I see life and death, evolution and entropy, see-sawing back and forth. For a while, life wins. All living creatures, from the redwood forests to lichens on rocks, from ants to humans, grow in complexity as they mature. They overcome entropy.

But eventually they age, they weaken, they die. And entropy takes over.

Sometimes species proliferate, and evolution flourishes. Sometimes species suffer mass extinctions, and entropy dominates. (Hinduism's Shiva would appreciate this continuous dance of creation and destruction.)

I suppose that if biblical literalists deny evolution, they have to deny entropy too.

Billions of years from now, I expect, entropy will triumph. In the meantime, I'll choose life. I'll celebrate life in all its complexity and diversity, against undifferentiated uniformity.

Life over death. Evolution over entropy. Ahura Mazda over Ahriman.

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YOUR TURN

Mental wrestling is hard work. After last week's column, Isabel Gibson wrote, "There may be only the Now, but we persist in trying to live in other times -- either the regretted or longed-for past, or the anticipated or feared future. Of course, those feelings make up part of our Now. My head hurts. I think I'll go lie down. Right now!"

Ralph Milton suggested, "As someone said, life is what happens while you are planning something else."

Laurina Tallman put a further twist into the relationships of past, present, and future: "Another way of looking at life is that there is no 'now' but only the future that has unravelled past our perceptual organs into the past, leaving fleeting impressions on our nervous system. It is possible for some people to perceive further into the future, at least in glimpses clear enough to provide guidance to the seer in preparing for those eventualities. Study of the past is the more common way of attempting to gauge the unfolding future. As our time sense is controlled through the right ear's stream of sound as it impacts the temporal lobe, the individual's awareness of the 'passage' of time varies according to the sensitivity of an organ that can also be hypersensitive, which throws the 'time sense' off normal. Much human activity is an effort to predict and prepare for the uncertainties of future time and much of Jesus's teaching was directed towards offsetting fear of the future and improving foresight."

Nancy Kerr mused, "It seems to me that today's Now is limited or enhanced by Nows of the past, and future Nows are somewhat predetermined. Having worked and observed in schools and well-baby clinics in New York's Harlem, observed in Chicago's poorest projects and schools, in Denver's Five Points, and visited Mother Teresa's Calcutta, it's clear to me that poverty and the impacts of health and school and lack of food -- yesterday's Nows -- explain, with notable exceptions, today's Now and limit [the future], for most. Similarly, I've worked with children and families who have had a choice in habitat, food, health care, and the best of educational choices and today's Now reflects that."

The rest of the letters continued the theme of why people sit in rows.

This came from Sheila Carey: "I've spent my life quietly sitting in rows -- so although last week's column rang a bell with me, I didn't think to send a comment until reading the comments on it this week. I was the kid who hated working in groups -- 'round tables' make me nervous. But I agree that sitting in circles is a much better way to encourage everyone to take part. My weaving group leaves the chairs in rows for the business meeting, then moves them into a circle for 'show and tell.' Maybe we'd get better participation if we just started with the chairs in a circle."

And Bill Peterson offered an explanation for why some people seem to prefer sitting way in the back: "Sitting in the back is a way of being an 'outsider'. An event photographer is forced to be an outsider. Being an introvert makes it easy to be an 'outsider' unless experience/education/training/rules force or enable one to be part of a group."

PSALM PARAPHRASES

Palm Sunday... or Passion Sunday, depending on your liturgical leanings. So we have a choice of psalms: Psalm 118, supposedly what Jesus and the disciples sang as they moved from the Upper Room to Gethsemane; or Psalm 31, a lament almost as gripping as Psalm 22's "Why have you forsaken me...."

This paraphrase of Psalm 118 tries to capture both feelings. As my original introduction said, "Sometimes, life is a bowl of cherries; sometimes it's a ride to the emergency ward."

1 As we ride the ambulance of life, Lord,
we sense your presence beside us.
2 Your constant love and care comforts us;
Our fears fade away.
19 Where faceless figures repair our shattered souls,
you hold my hand.
21 In a time of terror, you hover over me;
you are the breath of life for me.
22 Vulnerability leaves me isolated and alone;
yet I am buoyed up by compassion.
The moment I most feared has become the moment to remember!
23 This can only be the Lord's doing.
24 Awareness washes over me like returning consciousness.
I am alive! I am not alone!
25 Thank you, God. Thank you.
26 Thank you for those who serve in your name.
My tears overflow with gratitude.
27 God lives in the hearts and hands of healers.
Wherever there are people of goodwill,
wherever kindness and compassion exist,
God finds a home.
28 You are my God; I will thank you with every thought.
You are my God; I will honor you with all I do.
29 I will never feel alone again;
even in the halls of death, your love will hold me up.

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.

TECHNICAL STUFF

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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
