

Wednesday March 7, 2012

The many faces of love

By Jim Taylor

In his song “Taxi,” the late Harry Chapin sings that he “learned about love in the back of a Dodge...”

Then I read in my father’s memoirs about him sitting by his wife Chris’s bed as she died, gently spooning teaspoons of soup into her mouth. That’s also love, but very different from Chapin’s groping in the dark.

“Love” has become a catch-all word used to describe almost any kind of warm emotion.

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels,” the apostle Paul wrote, “if I have no love, I am nothing...” Paul’s great hymn to love continues: “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful... It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful... It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends...”

Really?

Try telling that to the couples whose infatuations end in bitter divorce. Tell it to the battered spouse, afraid to go public because it will lead to even more beatings. Tell it to the child, molested in the night, supposedly in the name of love.

We’ve invested far too much in a single word.

The Greeks had a name...

Paul’s Greek contemporaries defined three kinds of love.

- *Eros* was physical love, the hormonal urges that drive two people together.
- *Filios* was what they called brotherly love – the bonds between siblings. Siblings don’t always get along together, but there’s an unbreakable connection.
- *Agape* was compassionate love, a genuinely disinterested caring about others that expected nothing in return.

But those three categories don’t identify all the loving relationships possible. None of them, for example, adequately defines my relationship with my grandchildren.

How does friend love fit? No obligation, no genetic ties, but a deep sense of loyalty.

Or aging love. The bedrock remains; the peaks and canyons of youth passion have leveled out. Time is too short to sweat the small stuff.

Then there’s child love. A child does not love his mother the way she loves him, or her. A child’s love is needy – the need to be fed, clothed, sheltered, protected, and nurtured.

Couple love is *eros*, of course. But it goes beyond mere sexual desire. Two people in love want to be one, emotionally and intellectually as well as physically. It’s more like total immersion in each other.

Mother love – the biblical term was *hesed* or *chesed*, sometimes translated as womb-love – is utterly devoted and self-sacrificing at its best. Even animal mothers will risk their own lives for their offspring. And why not? These children were once part of her own body, closer than any embrace.

And father love – the archetypal warrior or rescuer, the provider and protector who provides discipline and stability, who sometimes becomes dominating and controlling...

So many kinds of love. So many kinds of relationships.

So why do we tend to restrict religious experience to just one model? There are lots of biblical images of all the other kinds of love. But mostly I hear God described as an Almighty Father.

Are divine relationships more limited than human ones?

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YOUR TURN

Bob Stoddard looked at my comments about how some extremist groups in Nigeria and Pakistan oppose polio immunizations, and commented, "And in United States there are families who object to vaccinations for measles, etc. for their children. Some are based on long-standing religious beliefs -- but others seem to result more from anti-government attitudes."

Bev Ireland concurred: "Sadly, Jim, some young parents have been brain washed into believing immunizations can have harmful effects here in the western world. You may remember Jenny McCarthy (who was married to Jim Carrey) making the rounds of the day time talk shows. She was convinced her son was autistic because of his childhood vaccinations. This theory has been disproved by many scientists but media celebrities have powerful influence over some. There have been recent outbreaks of whooping cough in Canada in spite of the fact that pertussis has been included in immunizations for approximately 100 years. Nearly all cases of communicable diseases fall on children of parents who have been too scared to get them immunized."

Charles Hill wanted to know "Does the Law of Diminishing Returns also apply to our life span?"

Briefly, yes. The older I get, the more effort it seems to take to accomplish anything!

Betty Schilling pointed out that although most of us cannot go to faraway places to administer vaccines, some of us can, and do. "Some Rotary members from the States this week will be traveling to India to administer polio vaccine in a massive campaign to help immunize the children there. We can hope Nigeria and other places will have similar experiences soon. Oh, to finish the unfinished in my life before I am unable!"

Isabel Gibson cited my quotation -- Genius does not consist simply of originality, but of saying what others didn't know yet that they were thinking -- and matched it with a quote from the movie, *Fools Rush In*: "You're everything I never knew I always wanted."

Isabel went on "Re the law of diminishing returns, I suspect the world is, somehow, not 'tuned' for completeness. 80% is good enough in so many applications, that having to chase down every last occurrence -- as with the eradication of a disease -- seems like an unreasonable standard. And the effort to do it requires obsessiveness, perhaps. How important it is, then, to distinguish fruitless obsessions (where we unreasonably focus on that last 20% to little profit) from the necessary ones (where only a 100% result will suffice)."

My apologies to those of you who felt you had seen last week's Soft Edges letters before. (Jean Hamilton and Clare Neufeld both wrote to express a sense of déjà vu; I assured them they were wrong. They weren't; I was.) I printed a bunch of Soft Edges responses in the letters section of Sunday's Sharp Edges. Mea culpa....

ABOUT MY BOOKS, ETC.

I still have half a dozen copies of a book my father wrote exploring Christian theology through Christian art.

The problem with art, of course, is that it cannot put an abstract concept on canvas. An artist cannot paint an Incarnation or a Resurrection without putting real humans, in real situations, into the picture. The expression, therefore, has to be grounded in a particular culture and society; the infinite and universal has to be represented in finite terms.

My father – who once took art lessons from members of Canada's Group of Seven – spent much of his life after retiring as principal of the Vancouver School of Theology, seeking out the ways artists through the centuries had attempted to deal with this dilemma. I'm probably biased, but I think that in examining the ways art portrays theological concepts, he explained those concepts better than most theological texts.

The book is "Seeing the Mystery: Exploring Christian Faith through the Eyes of Artists," by William S. Taylor, 94 pages. There are only about 20 copies left in the world. Most of the illustrations are in full colour.

If you would like a copy, write to me – Jim Taylor, 1300 6th Street, Lake Country, BC, Canada, V4V 2H7.

Unfortunately, I can't send these out on the honour system, as I do with my biblical paraphrases. I will have to charge \$30 Canadian to include postage, paid in advance.

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

- David Keating's "SeemlikeGod" page, www.seemlikegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Model T Websites." a simple (and cheap) seven-page website for congregations who want to develop a web presence <<http://www.modeltwebsites.com>>
- 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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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

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
