

Wednesday May 22, 2013

Practice makes perfect – but only if you do it!

By Jim Taylor

“What are you going to write your column about this week?” my physiotherapist asked.

“You,” I replied.

Laura Snyder and I both write columns for a local newspaper. But we only discovered that connection after I began taking physiotherapy from her to restore full movement to my damaged elbow.

Laura has given me a number of exercises. She expects me to do them regularly. No, not just regularly. Not once or twice a day. Five times a day would be better, like Muslims called to prayer. But constantly would be the ideal. Deliberately extending that elbow as far as it will go while I’m walking. Rotating my wrist under the table during dinner. Struggling to bend my elbow enough to comb my hair.

To be effective, exercises can’t be an optional extra, an add-on to life. They have to be integrated. Into everything. All day. Every day.

More than mere knowledge

Unfortunately, I have tended to believe that if I know how to do something, I don’t need to actually do it.

But knowing how is not enough to train muscles and joints. I know how to play the violin. I know what the notes on a page signify. I know where my fingers should go to create those notes. I understand the markings for bow position. But my attempts to create those flowing, liquid cascades of melody sound more like a cat fight than Fritz Kreisler.

In his book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell claims that it takes 10,000 hours of practice – and more -- to achieve mastery of any craft. Others argue for at least 1,000 hours practice just to achieve competence.

For years, I belonged to an organization called Faith at Work. Every meeting closed with some form of group prayer. Sometimes we did “one-word” prayers – each person saying a single word that summarized their feeling. Sometimes we tossed a ball of yarn, randomly, across a circle, until everyone had had an opportunity to express a thought. Sometimes we passed a rock hand to hand, imagining what that rock might say to us if it could speak.

Each new variation opened up possibilities. Each new form of prayer broke the shackles of too-familiar routines.

Or could have, if I had chosen to practice it. Regularly. Constantly.

I didn’t. After all, once I knew how, why should I bother practicing?

24 hours a day

Now I realize that without practice, nothing changes. The kind of person I want to be requires constant practice. Not just one or twice a day. Not even five times a day. But integrated into every element of my life.

I can’t be grateful occasionally. I have to practice being grateful constantly.

I can’t turn on compassion when the situations arise. I have to be compassionate all the time.

Random acts of kindness make a useful slogan, but random acts are not enough. I have to practice kindness daily.

I can only develop friendliness, generosity, trustworthiness, on a full-time basis. Anything less is like an alcoholic claiming he can stay sober and get sloshed at the same time.

My elbow's physical health is teaching me some important lessons about my spiritual health.

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YOUR TURN

I may have been a shade intemperate in last week's column, taking on scripture, sacraments, and fundamentalism all at once.

Steve Roney called my comments "high heresy to a Catholic. Jesus is physically present in the Eucharist."

Conversely, Jim Henderschedt wrote: "In the Lutheran tradition (of which I am a part) I see the tendency to try to establish that relationship between person and Jesus through sacraments and liturgy - sometimes at the expense of scripture and the Gospel witness. I may be going out on a limb but my observation is that with our sacramental emphasis we are coming very close to worshiping the rite instead of worshiping the Lord. Thanks for starting my day of with a BANG."

Tom Watson endorsed my description of communion: "If you are referring to the communion being served by intinction, with people getting in long lines and chattering all the way up to receiving the elements and back, I agree. But, you see, if one happens to be in a church where pages and pages of liturgy are read during communion, no wonder people are chattering -- they've been trapped by so much boring verbiage that they need to break free."

But Tom added, "You're going to have to help me, though, with your baptism images of 'Chinese water torture or CIA waterboarding'..."

The "Chinese water torture" line wasn't originally mine. A foreign student observed the priest anointing an infant's forehead with a few drops of water, three times, in the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit...

That's when he came up with "Chinese water torture -- drip! drip! drip!"

Waterboarding? I saw a simulation of it once on tv. The similarity to a Baptist immersion, with a cloth covering the adult's face and then the head thrust under water, face up, struck me.

Carl Freeto did some musing: "Sang Chul Lee may well have gotten a clearer picture by reading [the New Testament] than he could have by watching the church). However, my experience is that the community of faith often times does 'act out' a life that, at least reflects Jesus. It is easy to see 'modern followers (who) hate blacks, Hispanics, and gays, denigrate women, love guns and punitive legislation, and despise the environment' and forget that the church often is acting out those very odd non-conformist beliefs that our leader taught and lived. As in the first century, it's hard to see and appreciate the work of the actual church (the followers then were not a religious entity but simply followers.)

"And, quite frankly, why would we be surprised when the non-churched, regular folk seem better equipped to 'see' him than religious professionals? Isn't that the story we hear when we encounter the story of his life?

"Just as in first century, a faithful church is not going to be loved by the world. Calvary awaits...I'm just thankful that we are not called to win the battle but to follow, and that is enough."

Isabel Gibson shared a memory: "Decades ago in Saskatoon, when I was a yet-to-be editor, I thought I could improve on the Lord's Prayer. Now there's hubris for you! I didn't tackle all of it, but did rework the first lines, and found that they spoke to and for me better than the original:

Our God, who art with us and beyond us,

*Hallowed be thy name.
Thy will be done by us
As it was by Jesus.*

“All to say -- yes, that's how people meet Jesus, if meet him they do. In us.”

William Hepburn loved my spelling of “Repugnican” and hoped it wasn’t an accident. No, it was intentional.

PSALM PARAPHRASES

I consider Psalm 8, the reading for Trinity Sunday, one of the great psalms. I’ve done at least three versions of it. Here’s one of them.

My God, my God! How amazing you are.

I would describe you in terms of the stars or the skies,
the forest or the farthest reaches of the universe,
But they are your creation, and you are their creator.
You are all creation.

Our weapons, our bombs, our power to destroy, dwindle into insignificance
compared to the cry of a newborn baby.

On a starry night, with your glory sprinkled across the skies,
I stare into the infinite ends of your universe, and I wonder,
Who am I?
Why do I matter?
Why do you care about me?

We humans are less than specks of dust in your universe,
our timeframe shorter than a second in the great clock of creation;
Yet you have adopted us.
You have given us a special place in the your family;
you have trusted us to manage your earth, on your behalf--
to look after not just the sheep and the oxen, but also the wolves that prey on them;
To tend the birds, the fish, and even creatures we have never seen at the bottom of the sea.

My God, my God! How amazing you are!

For this and other paraphrases, you can order *Everyday Psalms* through Wood Lake Publications,
info@woodlake.com or 1-800-663-2775.

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 "SeemslikeGod" page, www.seemslikegod.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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