

Wednesday January 18, 2012

Retirement forever and ever

By Jim Taylor

I never used to read the obituary pages in newspapers. As my own age advances, that has changed. Perhaps I now read the obituaries, as Benjamin Franklin once observed, to ensure that my own name is not included.

A few weekends ago, our local paper had two pages full of fulsome obituaries. And I noticed that none of the persons being mourned had died. Not one. They had, without exception, “passed on” or “passed away.” They had “gone to the arms of the Lord” or “been taken home.” Or some similar euphemism...

What are we so afraid of, I wonder, that we shy away from saying that someone died?

The subject came up in a dinner discussion with a group of friends. And then it morphed – as such discussions often do – into eulogies given at funerals. Where it’s taken for granted that someone who enjoyed fishing has gone “to that great fishing hole in the sky.” Or where a lover of golf will always have fine weather and perfect shots on an impeccable course....

John Burton mused, “It sounds a lot like retirement, doesn’t it?”

Versions of eternity

It was a casual comment, but an epiphany moment for me.

Only in recent years, John commented later, have most people been able to visualize having any retirement activities at all. Until then, they worked until they wore out, and then they died. Increased life expectancy and pension plans have brought the freedom to imagine what one might do if one could do anything one wanted.

And then we extrapolate those life-after-work visions into life after death.

Heaven, it seems, equals Freedom 85.

But I wonder if it really would be heaven.

An old joke describes a couple dying and waking up at a fabulous golf course. Every day, they got perfect tee times. Every day, they had perfect weather. Every shot, they got a hole in one. Finally, they went to the head groundskeeper and suggested that, even in heaven, the course could be made a little more challenging.

“What makes you think this is heaven?” the groundskeeper replied.

I also remember a short story about an unfaithful husband killed in an accident. Every night, two or three gorgeous women picked him up for dinner, dancing, and whatever followed. Their conversation was inane, their laughter vapid, their personalities shallow. But they were, umm, willing....

He thought he was in heaven. Until one night, as he opened his door for yet another meaningless encounter, he had a momentary vision of an endless succession of eminently forgettable partners lined up into infinity.

But by then it was too late...

Not up to me

I don’t know what life after death will be like. I won’t know until it’s too late to tell anyone. Significantly, for me, not even Jesus said anything about life beyond the tomb.

Nor does it matter what I know, or think I know, or believe. “Que sera, sera,” as Doris Day warbled many years ago, “Whatever will be, will be.”

But if there is something that follows death, I can only hope it won’t be boring and repetitive.

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YOUR TURN

I must admit that last week's column, about pedestrian safety, was aimed primarily at readers in my local community. But it certainly struck a responsive chord among you Internet readers.

Nobuko Armitage is one of those local readers, who remembered "every time I go by the spot where a 16-year-old student got killed about a year ago on a rainy dark night walking wrong side of the road. This sad accident had people and politicians talking improvements on our roads. But as you pointed out such accidents will be better avoided if we raise our awareness of things to do when we share the road with cars. Walk on the proper side of the road, wear a reflective vest, etc. Even if we improve our country roads, there would be people maimed or killed if they don't protect themselves."

Margaret Carr wrote, "My Dad used to walk to work past the school. He often stopped kids and told them how important it was to always walk on the left side of the road. Many days he came home for lunch upset that the kids continued to walk on the wrong side. Your article got me wondering if anyone is giving this message to today's children. Maybe we adults are at fault."

Ruth Welham-Umphrey echoed Margaret's concern: "This subject has been a concern of mine for a long time. People do need to take responsibility for their personal safety and not rely on the powers that be to do it all. I was carefully taught in school to walk facing the traffic. Do they teach this in schools anymore? As both a driver and a walker I am keenly aware of how important it is to keep this safety rule. I can see and hear what is coming towards me and can easily step aside for oncoming traffic.

"As a driver I am much more comfortable with a walker who can see me. If you are coming up behind someone you never know if they are aware of you or which way they are going to move. I see teens, runners, walkers and mothers with baby strollers ignoring this rule. Now that you have raised the issue I will speak to them saying, 'Excuse me, you may think I'm being an interfering old lady, but do you know how much safer it would be if you were to walk facing the traffic...?'"

Barb Taft noted, "Slippery walking and driving conditions add to the problem. I've often thought how hard it would be to live with the consequences of hitting someone."

Ian Wood, from Nottingham, in England: "Making sure you can be seen, and walking on the correct side of the road will always improve the odds of not being at the centre of a fatal collision.

"It is equally important that cyclists make themselves visible. I had a close call only last week when I braked to avoid hitting a speeding cyclist riding in the rain at night who came into view at the last minute wearing dark clothing and NO LIGHTS. Perhaps it's the recklessness of youth, thinking that one is invincible, but in any collision between a human and a vehicle the human is unlikely to come out unscathed. As Star Trek's Scotty once remarked: 'I cannot change the laws of physics!'"

Bill Peterson also made reference to cyclists: "Some years ago, Radio Shack had a flashlight-sized strobe light which could be strapped to one's arm. I haven't checked to see if they have it in inventory anymore. Mine still works. I know there is quite a variety of similar strobe-lights and also LED straps for pedestrians and bicycle riders. Maybe pedestrians should check out safety gear for bicyclists."

Charles Hill expressed a contrary view: "No number of armbands or elaborate safety precautions will help. Adolescents know that they are invulnerable. Why else would an 18-year-old sign up to fight a real war? Nearly all of us feel invulnerable. Why do I sometimes drive too fast? Eat bacon? Smoke? (I really don't, but many friends do.) There's no cure for stupid."

Wayne Irwin lives close to McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario: “I am astonished by the carefree attitude of students who wear black with music plugged into their ears, who jaywalk, ride bicycles along the sidewalks, never stop at signed crossroads, ride on the wrong side of the street, and seem unaware when it is raining that they are virtually invisible. One bicyclist was recently found responsible in court for a collision with a car after colliding by having blithely travelled the wrong way on a one way street, completely surprising a poor driver looking the way traffic was coming...”

Clare Neufeld wrote, “Often I have narrowly missed a pedestrian... We used to drive on a dark, extra narrow, winding road in North Delta, with trees overhanging, on cloudy, rainy nights when all the light produced by my headlights seems to get sucked up by the black hole into which I drive!

Clare described a near miss, and continued, “I can only say, as BOTH driver and pedestrian, let's EACH do what we can to reduce the risk, danger, etc., but let us also refrain from ‘expecting the other’ to do it all!”

And this from Joan Carr: “I was recently surprised when another person complimented me on my white coat. She was commenting on how difficult it was to see pedestrians crossing even in the well lit crosswalks when city driving on wet dark nights. As a driver I thought perhaps it was my eyesight at fault when I have been surprised at the appearance of a pedestrian unexpectedly caught in my lights. I very seldom drive after dark now; however being aware of how difficult it was for me as a driver it seemed only sensible to make myself as visible as possible when out.”

On a lighter note, Isabel Gibson defended her use of “catastrophize” – “Also ‘consistify’ -- a big part of my day job, when editing work from numerous sources.”

And Hugh Pett sent along definitions of “catastrophize” from the authoritative Oxford English Dictionary: “To conjecture or perceive disastrous implications or scenarios; to regard a relatively innocuous situation as considerably worse than it actually is. To interpret as disastrous. Also (Psychol.): to perceive (a symptom, esp. one which is relatively mild) as more severe than it actually is.”

ABOUT MY BOOKS, ETC.

I have a few 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...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.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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