

Wednesday January 22, 2014

Good bosses, bad bosses

By Jim Taylor

Bad bosses – we’ve all had them. I may even have been one.

Dr. Eric Kuelker, a clinical psychologist in Kelowna who specializes in corporate leadership, writes, “Scientists followed 4,000 workers for two years. They found that employees who worked under a manager they didn’t trust were three times more likely to become depressed than those who worked under a good boss.”

I recall a particular boss, who had a magnificent intellect, coupled with scorn for lesser mortals. He knew more than anyone on his staff, and made sure we knew it. He had a great deal to teach us – and I acknowledge that I did learn a lot from him – but apparently nothing to learn from us. He was a perfectionist, never satisfied with our performance. He was irritable, critical, and inaccessible.

I will say this for him – he didn’t play favourites. He didn’t dish out any rewards to anyone.

He would qualify for a term invented by Yale University’s Marcia Wheeler in 1996: “toxic leadership.”

Toxic leaders

Jean Lipman-Blumen, professor at Claremont University in California, later defined toxic leaders as *“individuals who, by virtue of their destructive behaviours and their dysfunctional personal qualities or characteristics, inflict serious and enduring harm on the individuals, groups, organizations, communities and even the nations that they lead.”*

Strangely enough, that boss created a remarkable cohesiveness among his staff. We were united in disliking him. For some, the feeling went as far as loathing.

Another staff member saved my sanity, and perhaps my career, by inviting me for an evening lubricated by alcoholic drinks called “Rusty Nails.” I spent several hours venting frustrations that had been eating me alive for three years.

I can’t say I felt much better the next morning – hangovers don’t induce happiness -- but I found I had purged enough animosity to avoid doing anything for which I might be held criminally responsible.

Beyond comprehension

Whether or not we’ve had bosses as toxic as that one, we recognize the symptoms. And so I find it strange that many churches promote worship of a distant, perfect god who knows everything, demands unquestioning belief and obedience, and favours a selected few.

Those sound a lot like the qualities of toxic leadership.

Granted, the early church didn’t have many organizational models to choose from. The Roman army was certainly the most successful model available. So church leaders copied it. Constantine made it official, when he adopted Christianity as the official religion of the Roman empire.

Most social analysts cite the military as the classic example of authoritarian, top-down, organization. It’s efficient. But it’s almost the opposite of the new way of living that Jesus practiced and Paul taught.

Only a few sects – relatively speaking – deliberately rejected a top-down structure. But they too tended to worship an almighty God on high. Deviation from the accepted will of God could be punished by exclusion, discipline, or burning at the stake.

Even today, few churches encourage people to think for themselves, to question traditional doctrines, to explore new ways of carrying out their responsibilities.

Which makes me wonder how a God of unconditional love might treat her employees.

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YOUR TURN

I'm not sure what it was about last week's column, about the long chain of symbols that turn into words, that caught your interest, but I got several e-mails from first-time writers.

Heather Richard, or example: "I particularly appreciated today's column. I have argued repeatedly in Bible study groups and UCW meetings (often to the consternation of others) that the Bible cannot be taken out of context. The authors of the various books (primarily men) lived in times where women were considered property, homosexuality was anathema, and families stayed in the same area and profession for generations. God may have inspired the message, but it had to be interpreted in terms the authors understood. I wonder how the message would change if the authors lived in today's world of rapid change, globalization, and with our dominating technology?"

I don't think I have heard from Dan Wilkie before, either: "Thank you for your thoughts and understandings about sounds and letters, and how different people can react to different understandings especially around the Bible. I too think the original writers who put pen to paper if you will, would be appalled at the way their works have been interpreted and used."

And another, Olivia Ellis, who simply wrote, "Well said."

I hadn't heard from Karen Stoner for a long time. Her letter said, "Your column gave a fresh approach to a very old, but not stale, issue. I thank you. In seminary we are exposed to different approaches to biblical text, and I digested those approaches and grew greatly because of that process. The problem for thinkers and digesters is that many people are completely closed-mouthed and closed-brained to such a process. They smile or frown at us and ignore us, or berate us, and stay right where they are on the matter under discussion. Such persons told me I was swayed by radical voices, and I would try to say that Jesus was a radical voice, that without being swayed in the beginning of the movement he inspired, the writers would have never written their inspiring words. The second you translate any words, I would say further, they change for the next reader. That can be very enlightening, or very disturbing, depending on whether anyone continues to really examine them by hearing, seeing, thinking and processing. The ones who berated this idea had already turned off and turned away."

Now to the more regular contributors. Vern Ratzlaff commented: "What a powerful and evocative treatment of the intricacies of perception in the printed text. Many thanks."

Isabel Gibson quoted George Bernard Shaw:

"Words, words, words, I'm so sick of words

I get words all day through,

first from him, now from you!

Is that all you blighters can do?"

She went on, “That (more or less) was Eliza's rant in ‘My Fair Lady’; sexual innuendo notwithstanding, it's a fair point. Too easy to get hung up on finding the right words, or preoccupied with parsing fine gradations of meaning (especially in Holy Writ), instead of taking action against ‘a sea of troubles’ (to complete the mix of genres).

“I'm to the point where I don't think it's any harder to understand than this: Love yourself, and love your neighbour as yourself. Regrettably, understanding it doesn't make it any easier to do.”

Laurina Tallman added a further layer of complexity — variations in human perceptions: “However you express it, experience is written in nervous systems that on the whole -- or about 80% of the time -- work much the same way because our organs of perception are very similar and some of them, e.g., the eyes, have been normalized. The variety of language sounds and squiggles approach that commonality of experience.

“My learning about differences in auditory perception and how to normalize them helps to extend that commonality. A great many people have similar sensations about the experience of "hearing God speak." That's what the Bible is aiming to convey and it covers a broad spectrum of abilities and incapacities for experiencing life on those frequencies.

“I am working with two people interested in my discoveries whose first languages are Chinese and Russian and Kazakh; our conversations circle those areas of differences in the ways our languages have enshrined experiences common to all. Fascinating!”

Don Snesrude thanked me for the psalm paraphrases, and continued, “Enjoyed your last email regarding the translation of various languages into a written form. Even when I was a student in the ‘60s I questioned the words of the Bible I was studying to become a teacher but took only one course in theology for half a semester. Back then and in my early youth I thought one would lose some meanings from Aramaic to Greek to you know English. Nevertheless I still have a ‘thirst’ for reading Borg, Sponge, Crossan, etc. I used to attend a meeting where some of these authors were being studied in a casual yet informative way. I was rightfully teased about how I would read... reviews of other contemporary theologians, and I still do. That way, one said in our group, I was saving money instead of buying those rather expensive books!”

However, last week's column sent Margaret Carr down a tangent: “You almost drove me out of my mind with your ‘floccinaucinihilipilification’ word. I have to know the meaning of every new word I see or hear. I finally realised I could find it on the computer even though my dictionaries failed to help.”

Margaret suggested – kindly, I hope – that I should look up “logorrhea.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

The RCL calls for Psalm 27, verses 1 and 4-9. It seems to me that selection staggers across two different moods: verses 4-6 read like a song of confidence, but verses 7-9 sound more like a lament of abandonment. So I'm giving you a paraphrase of the first six verses. You might be interested in the event that prompted this paraphrase -- the same week that a friend was to be married, she was diagnosed with cancer.

1 In the darkness of the night I lie awake and tremble.
But with the dawn, fears fade away.
When I can see with my own eyes that there is nothing to be afraid of,

why should I fear?

If I could see with God's eyes, I would know I have nothing to fear.

2. No, not even if scalpels carve up my flesh,
even if treatment poison my body,
I have nothing to fear.

Malignant forces that might harm me will surely self-destruct;
By their own rapacious appetites, they will destroy themselves.

3 Though fate stacks the deck against me,
I will not despair.

Though tumors grow within me,
Yet I will remain confident, as long as you are with me.

4 I have only one desire, one goal in life:
I want to be part of your family.
I want to look along the Thanksgiving table
and to feel the bonds of kinship--
with my cousins, my ancestors, my descendants.

5 Within that family I can feel safe.
I can hide my face in my mother's skirts;
I can rest my head on my son's shoulder.

6 Within that family, I need no longer fear what anyone thinks of me;
I can sing and dance;
I can be the joyful child that you meant me to be.

For paraphrases of most of the psalms used by the RCL, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publications, 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 Reynolds'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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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-

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