

Wednesday October 16, 2013

Putting distance between our faces

By Jim Taylor

The awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize last week got me thinking about the weapons we use in wars.

In the beginning, combatants had to confront adversaries directly. They fought with hands and teeth. Clubs and spears moved combatants fractionally further apart. Bows and arrows allowed people to kill at a distance. Guns let snipers pick off victims who didn't even know they were targets.

In recent wars, airplanes flying so high that they were almost invisible dropped bombs and missiles on unsuspecting victims far below. Today, remotely controlled drones pick off houses, villages, even individuals, halfway around the globe.

You can't get much more distant than that.

But then it occurred to me that the same thing has happened to our communications.

From speech to writing

In the beginning, all communication took place face to face, one to one.

The first mass communication probably involved someone standing on a pyramid or a hilltop and shouting. Like Moses, perhaps, transmitting God's commands to the Hebrew escapees huddled at the base of Mount Sinai.

Since religions are the oldest organizations I know, I'll continue with the religious theme.

There's no record of Jesus writing anything – except for one ambiguous reference to him writing in the sand. But the story doesn't specify what he actually wrote; some translations suggest he merely doodled in the sand.

Communication was still oral. Peter *spoke* to the crowds after Pentecost. Paul *spoke* to people around the Mediterranean.

The written scriptures – the epistles and gospels – didn't come until later.

For centuries, letters were also one to one. With no way to make multiple copies, you wrote to a specific individual.

Perhaps, like most of Paul's letters, you expected your correspondents to pass your message around. That makes them a bit more distant, a bit less personal.

The gospels came later, written for a more undefined audience. Matthew apparently wrote for Jewish converts to Christianity, Luke for Gentiles.

Technology comes between us

Each new technology since then has further distanced the writer from the audience. Gutenberg's moveable type and the printing press meant that Bibles and other documents could be distributed to anyone, anywhere. Writers no longer needed to know their audience personally.

Today, most of us get most of our information from dramatically distant sources – from newspapers edited in Toronto or Vancouver, from television studios in Atlanta or New York, from observers in South Africa or Egypt, transmitted by satellite or Internet...

There's nothing face to face about most of our communication anymore, even if faces appear on the screen.

Electronic social media supposedly bring us closer together. But unlike personal letters, 90 per cent of the electronic communications I send and receive involve people I've never met, and probably never will.

A sociologist somewhere calculated that it takes 17 hours of continuous interaction to build a friendship. Continuous -- not a few seconds at a time.

That statistic casts some doubt on the validity of "friending" someone on FaceBook.

Increasingly, therefore, I treasure those situations – like congregations, clubs, and recreational activities – where I can build real relationships with flesh-and-blood friends, face to face.

Copyright © 2013 by Jim Taylor. Non-profit use in congregations and study groups, and links from other blogs, welcomed; all other rights reserved.

Please encourage your friends to subscribe to these columns. But if you forward a column, please identify yourself as the sender, so that I don't get accused of sending out spam!

To send comments on this column, to subscribe or to unsubscribe, write jimt@quixotic.ca

YOUR TURN

I wrote, last week, about not getting too comfortable with our culture, our church, whatever.

Fran Ota reminded me that sometimes we can settle into a comfortable rut about being uncomfortable with the status quo. She wrote, "After years of preaching awareness, mindfulness, and not getting comfortable -- I find too many get more upset with the preacher. Maybe that means we're doing our jobs, I don't know. The ones who comment, on the way out of church, "THAT really made me think!" are usually the ones who are on that page already.

"Nor am I setting myself outside some of this -- just that perhaps we have to develop levels of awareness which help us to 'catch ourselves up' and not get comfortable."

Charles Hill described his own uncomfortable situation: "I exist, right now, in three cultures. The community college culture and my church culture both rarely question anything. Both value possessions, athletics, and in some way being 'better' than others.

"My third culture a few hours a week, consists of criminals who have served time, are usually eager to learn new values and new behaviors. There are exceptions of course. Even in the face of more incarceration, a few are unwilling to question what their immediate street culture has taught them. On the street, in the business world and in church, questioning 'what is' can get you killed, physically, emotionally, economically."

Among other things, I wrote, "Whenever we treat our culture's conventional wisdom as holy writ, we should feel uncomfortable."

To which Isabel Gibson responded, "I don't like it when people treat holy writ as 'holy writ' rather than as the jumbled record of a people's search for, encounter with, and avoidance of, the divine.

"So it shouldn't be a big step to refuse to treat anything else as holy writ either, which may be why I get called things like 'iconoclast' and 'devil's advocate.' And maybe some ruder terms. But the challenge -- as you so aptly put it -- is to be aware of the underlying assumptions, the ones that we don't even know we have.

"A late friend of mine used to say that what got married couples in trouble wasn't the things like whether or not they would try to have children -- because they thought to have that conversation. No, what caused trouble was blank assumptions like 'Of course we'll have Sunday dinner at my folks' house...'"

Laurina Tallman cited Isabel in her comments: "Your message comforts me because today I am miserably uncomfortable and that is doubtless exactly how I should be. Struggling to meet new challenges each day is not supposed to leave me feeling cosily pampered.

"In response to Penny's question last week as to how churches need to change, I would say the church is supposed to be the base camp for its members' climb to the summit of Everest.

"The garbage to which Isabel refers reminds me that it often comes attractively gift-wrapped. I have had a personal struggle, as an artist and as a Christian, with the attractions of material comfort and visual beauty (whether in home or church) that sap resources for the essential needs of those who are making the climb from the base camp, whether that be out of drug addictions or onto a world-wide mission field, or dealing from day-to-day with the burdens of work and the difficulties of increasing age.

"Young people especially are facing issues that rarely are *effectively* addressed by a church—but should be. The serious problems of substance abuse, unemployment, unhappy marital relationships, and atheism and despair have been relinquished by the churches to the 'social experts' -- who don't seem to be accomplishing much, either. I guess that is also why so many of us Canadian Christians now work pretty much outside the gates: that's where the action is."

Cliff Gieseke agreed with me that, "We are indeed often too comfortable. Too many are too comfortable with literal interpretations of the Bible, too many are too comfortable with Christianity and won't look at other religions and concepts such as reincarnation [despite] good evidence to support it."

Then Cliff went on to other issues: "Too many people are too comfortable with U.S. government lies about 9/11 and the Kennedy assassination. Only in alternative media will one find an honest discussion on 9/11. I suppose cognitive dissonance is too much for many to deal with. Personally, I prefer the truth even if uncomfortable."

"The three WTC trade buildings clearly came down with the help of explosives and Thermite. Jet fuel and burning office material can't melt steel, yet there was plenty of melted steel. Criminals in the Bush administration orchestrated 9/11. They wanted something like a Pearl Harbor so they could manipulate public opinion and then invade Iraq..."

"The JFK assassination in Dallas, Texas is another example of government lies. The fatal shot clearly came from the front, from the grassy knoll. Doctors who first examined the head wound clearly saw an exit wound in the rear of Kennedy's head. Most likely the CIA coordinated the assassination."

Cliff recommends a book, "JFK and the Unspeakable," by James Douglass, published by Orbis books, the publishing arm of the Catholic Maryknoll order.

PSALM PARAPHRASES

I don't particularly like Psalm 119 – an editor's distaste for wordiness, I suppose – but I did do this paraphrase for verses 97-104.

97 In the maze of modern life, it helps to have clear directions.

98 A clear vision of how things ought to be gives me a great advantage.

99 I don't have to balance this against that.

I don't have to constantly choose the lesser of two evils.

You give me a goal.

100 The world is changing so fast, the wisdom of old age isn't always applicable;

But your wisdom is.

101 Our ways are not always your ways, nor is our wisdom always your wisdom.

102 You have taught me how to discern the difference.

103 And what a difference that makes!

104 You help me see more clearly;

With your guidance, I can grope my way through the gloom.

For paraphrases of other psalms, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publications, info@woodlake.com.

OLD BOOKS AVAILABLE

I have a couple of boxes of old books that belonged to my father and grandfather. As near as I can tell, the oldest is a Shorter Catechism from 1863, the newest a 1994 text by John Polkinghorne. If you're interested in any of them, please let me know and I will send you an Excel spreadsheet with the full list of books – all I ask is that you pay for shipping.

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

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, jimt@quixotic.ca.

To subscribe or unsubscribe, send me an e-mail message at jimt@quixotic.ca. Or you can subscribe electronically by sending a blank e-mail (no message) to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca. Similarly, you can un-subscribe at softedges-unsubscribe@quixotic.ca.

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
