

Wednesday June 6, 2012

## The brief intimacy of shared glances

By Jim Taylor

Do you know the difference between a small town and a big city? No, it's not the size of buildings or the traffic density. It's certainly related to population, but there's no clear line of distinction.

It's in the eyes.

Where people think of themselves as belonging to a smaller community, you're expected to meet another person's eyes. In a larger community, you're expected NOT to.

I did not recognize that distinction when my wife and I moved from Prince Rupert, a city of about 10,000 on the remote north coast of B.C., to Toronto, then hovering around three million.

I walked down the street towards the subway station, expecting to see people I knew. Indeed, I did -- people who worked in the same building, people who ate with me in the company cafeteria, people who sent me inter-office memos....

But they didn't see me. They walked past with their eyes focused straight ahead, and down. They never looked up.

It felt almost as if they didn't want to see anyone they knew.

### Personal space

Perhaps it's a function of crowding. When you don't feel crowded, you're less defensive. As Sheila Heti noted, in an article in *Spacing* magazine, "Privacy is so scarce in a city, it is gracious to look away."

And less risky, too. Meeting a stranger's eyes on the subway could be considered harassment. Meeting strangers' eyes on downtown streets could seem like an invitation to ask for money, to solicit for sex, to beat you up...

Hockey players and chimpanzees apparently share a common trait -- to stare directly into another's eyes is to challenge them to a fight.

Of course, the reverse is also true. Those who retire from a big city to a rural community sometimes feel as if they have no privacy left. Everyone catches your eye, nods, or waves. People expect to discuss church business in the supermarket, politics at the soccer game, bereavements at the council meeting...

### Fleeting connections

"It is difficult to accept that we really are free," Heti observed, "to look or not look as we choose, without affecting anyone for the better or worse. It feels as though what it means to look at someone, and what it means to decide to not look, is as central an ethical dilemma as any; the question of our responsibility to each other really comes down to how we interact with people...."

Interaction -- that's the crux. We humans seem naturally curious about faces. Long before conscious thought, babies stare into their parents' eyes. When we take pictures, we include people's faces rather than, say, their feet. In the family portraits we hang on our walls, eyes are always central.

But what are we looking for, when we meet another's eyes? Heti uses the word "communion" -- not the formalized ritual of worship services, but the acknowledgement of our common humanity.

So our eyes lock, if ever so briefly. We admit to each other that we have just shared an embarrassing moment, that we all stumble sometimes, that petty officials can lack empathy, that someone made a kind gesture....

Then the moment of intimacy passes, and we go back to guarding our separateness again.

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## YOUR TURN

In last week's column, I suggested that epiphanies at this stage in my life tend to be regrets for having unintentionally hurt someone.

Wayne Irwin concurred: "My epiphanies nowadays tend to move me to immediately pray forgiveness for myself and forgetfulness for the person I have somehow hurt."

Isobel Gibson wrote, "In our instant gratification world, this is a refreshing and pragmatic, yet optimistic, take on epiphanies."

Dale Perkins – just back from a visit to Israel and the Palestinian territories – found it "very appropriate for me at this stage of life. I realize that as I'm attempting to gain more control over my life, I have stopped listening and being empathetic with others. I guess I've stopped learning from those experiences I interpret as negative. And some (most) of the commentators who wrote in to you offered sanguine advice as well. So it was a good way for me to begin my day."

Randy Hall wrote, "I thought of my son, Zach, who pronounced at the age of 3, 'I'm so angry I could lift the world!' He's 31 and still playing Atlas.

"I also thought of a saying by Tony Campolo: 'Are you feeling lustful toward someone? Wait two weeks and it will go away.' Yes, the waiting you talked about is an important time in the incubator. What comes out is most often something different than what went in."

"Stephen has one exceptional mum," Peggy Whiteley wrote. "Some of us were taught to bury, rather than recognize, our feelings -- and we're the worse for it."

And I think it's all right for me to pass along this personal reminiscence from Margaret Carr: "Emotions can be wonderful things and also hurtful to yourself as well as others. When my husband died quite suddenly I found myself turning back in time to 'The Nurse' now 80 years old. I kept calm and collected so my children could cope, and there were no breakdowns, especially not from me. Now almost a year later, and because I kept it all inside, I have been sick with one thing or the other and am just getting over the terrible pain of sciatica. According to the doctor all my sicknesses are connected to my husband's death and my 'being strong.'

"My epiphany also took time -- I must be myself, I cannot change who I am, and really I don't want to.

"My husband always said I wasn't happy unless I had someone to look after -- could he be right?"

Frances Mayes offered a minor amendment to Charles Hill's recommendation in the Your Turn section: "I make one exception to the 'non-anxious presence' don't-give-advice rule. When someone is really depressed, I will push them to get help. Depression robs one of energy and motivation, any movement is the first step to recovery."

I think that the "non-anxious" – also non-judgemental – rule would also not apply if, say, someone admitted to planning a bank robbery or a murder. Sometimes vigorous advice is essential!

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## PSALM PARAPHRASES

For Sunday June 10, Proper 5, the lectionary calls for Psalm 138. I'm told that in biblical times, worshipers prostrated themselves on the ground before the Holy of Holies, while reciting Psalm 138. For us, it's a strange position from which to express gratitude. But the image gave me a start for this paraphrase.

- 1        This is your turf, your home, your territory.  
          I am so glad to be here, God, that I kiss the earth you walk on.

2 I fling myself into your soil, I inhale the sweet musk of humus,  
 I extend my arms to embrace your planet.  
 But you lift me up from my humble position.  
 You take me in as your guest.  
 You have made me one of your family;  
 you have even given me your name!

3 You have taken me under your wing.  
 When I cry out, you cover me;  
 I benefit from your strength.

4 Foxes may lord it over the chicken coop,  
 and squirrels over the sparrow's nest,  
 But no creatures challenge the eagle's rule;  
 They cower before the eagle's eye and ruthless claws.

5 As the eagle soars above field mice,  
 so do you, Lord, rise above us mortals.

6 Daily duties keep us scurrying close to the earth.  
 But you watch over us from on high;  
 you can see danger long before it draws near.

7 Troubles grow around us like tall grass  
 But in the shadow of your outspread wings,  
 predators scatter like leaves before an autumn wind.

8 There is a place for me in your plans.  
 You will never abandon me.  
 You will work out your purpose for me, no matter how long it takes.

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## YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, [www.seemslkegod.org](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com](mailto:isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto: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](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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## TECHNICAL STUFF

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