

*Wednesday January 15, 2014*

## **The long route taken by a word**

By Jim Taylor

In my bookshelves, I have a Hindi New Testament. I know exactly what the first words in the fourth gospel will say: “In the beginning was the Word....” But I can’t read those words. The Devanagari characters are meaningless black squiggles.

Which is, in fact, all that any of us see on paper. But our minds turn them into meaning.

If I hand a sheet of music to a friend, I know what he’ll say: “I can’t read this. It’s just marks on paper.” If I give that same sheet to his wife, she can sit at the piano and play Fritz Kreisler’s lilting Liebesleid.

Both of them are looking at exactly the same marks on paper. But what a difference in understanding their meaning!

## **Symbols for symbols**

Anyone who claims that what they see on paper means exactly what it says – especially about the Bible -- hasn’t thought much about how those marks got there.

I’m not referring to the mechanics of printing ink on paper. Rather, the process begins with someone thinking. Someone becomes aware. Of something. An object, an idea, a feeling.

To communicate that awareness, the person uses sounds. But the sounds themselves are simply a series of vibrations radiating through the air. They bear no resemblance to whatever the speaker became aware of.

To get turned into written words, that series of sounds has to get sub-divided into its smallest components – the atoms of language, if you will – so that each sound can be represented by visual shapes on paper or parchment. The International Phonetic Alphabet uses 107 characters to define all possible vowel and consonant sounds in any language; English tries to do the same with just 26 letters.

But the letter shapes are also utterly abstract. Most letters bear no visual association with the sound they represent – perhaps except “o,” which does look a little like a mouth making a sound.

Then you, the reader, have to re-assemble those abstract shapes, that stand for abstract sounds that make up spoken words that stand for an idea, back into meaningful words. Assuming you understand the words at all. “Floccinaucinihilipilification” doesn’t make it into many vocabularies.

But you can’t do it if you can’t decipher the squiggles. Hindi and English share many sounds. But they render them in drastically different ways.

Even words as familiar as “In the beginning was the Word....”

## **Opportunities for error**

I can accept that the original thought may well have been inspired by God. I cannot accept that a puppet-master God also operated all the tongues that mouthed the sounds, the quill pens and woodcuts and metal letters and sequences of ones and zeros, in this or any other language, that created the marks that you see and read.

It’s commonly claimed that there’s only six degrees of separation between any two people on the planet. There’s at least six degrees of separation between any modern reader of the Bible and the persons who originally thought those words.

The original writers might be appalled to see how time and translation have bent their intent.

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## YOUR TURN

I was impressed by the sensitivity of the letters that came in about my column last week, on darkness.

Ruthanne Ward: "I so appreciate your thoughts in 'The Hushed and Holy Darkness'. I was at the Festival of Homiletics in May and Barbara Brown Taylor spoke on this very theme. I think she has a book coming out about walking in the darkness.

"As an introvert in an extroverted culture, I have often pondered the loss of wisdom in such matters. People seem to be anxious for answers, when silence is often so much more poignant and healing. We are called to move, to act, when stillness might be the better choice. And we hurry to turn on our lights, our TV's our computers -- anything to dispel the darkness -- when sitting in the dark (or walking in the dark) might be much more life giving.

"Silence, stillness and darkness -- soul nourishing elements our world has forgotten about."

Bill Peterson added a story: "Both the original column about dark/light and today's responses reminded me of a different viewpoint expressed by an autistic child. The author wrote a book about an autistic child making its way in the world. Somehow/sometime the child became aware of the Genesis story about (paraphrased) "all the world was dark and then the light appeared." This was a high level autistic who had learned that light had speed. The child asked; 'What is the speed of dark? It was here first.'

"That expression has stayed with me and has made me constantly aware of people's differences, both in ability and in viewpoint or perspective."

Bob Stoddard noted, "It's not just missing the pleasure of a starry night -- the light pollution of many areas has an effect on humans, animals, and plants. Light pollution upsets sleeping patterns and the production of melatonin, as well as disrupting the circadian rhythms of many forms of life."

Bob Walker brought a unique perspective to the subject: "Thank you for another piece of prose frosted, as it were, with a poetic ... Darkness should be stripped of all of its linkage to evil to the extent that too many people among us fail to relish its holy and holistic touch on every form of the flora and fauna at residence on this planet that rotates from dark to light for the common good.

"Allow me to say that those of us who are blind — either so born or born into a journey from sightedness to blindness — have lived in the holy reality of darkness, to borrow your adjective. My journey into ultimate blindness took 70 years, now nearly 13 years later the darkness still marks my days and nights, but ruling my days and night it does not. If the deity we call God is the actual source of all of life, might that mean living in darkness — literally and metaphorically — is an act of holiness, not a curse? I think so, joined — so I aver — with John Milton, Helen Keller, and the hymn writer whose name evades me. ... Living in darkness, those three blind people brought a true light to darkness without erasing the darkness itself."

Mary-Margaret Boone had an insight to share: "As I prepare for a baptism service I am reminded of a come-uppance I once received from a mentor and colleague. I was so excited about preaching in an architecturally modern church that was full of light and I loved it. I remarked how dark and dreary some of our very old churches could be. My colleague reminded me of the different roles of light and darkness and said sometimes when people need solace, the

darkness represents a warm blanket allowing you to enjoy solitude, and sometimes the light can be abrasive and intrusive. Each has its own uses and attributes.”

Barbara Minter wrote, “I resonate to your enjoyment of darkness and the stars. I had forgotten about the beauty of stars until I adopted a dog and had to take him out. I looked up at the sky and was filled with wonder at the sight of so many beautiful points of light. It is especially beautiful in the winter.”

Dorothy Haug had her own thoughts about winter: “Often one of the bleakest times weather-wise -- gray, foggy, barren -- it also provides blank canvas for reflection, inner dialogue. With the insomnia which accompanies this month comes a kind of freedom to step out of regular patterns. On evening walks, I love those last few houses that shine their Christmas lights into the dark.”

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## **PSALM PARAPHRASES**

Psalms 40:1-11.

1 I believed I could make it on my own.

But I slipped and fell.

I sank into a morass of my own making.

2 God heard my cry.

God lifted me out of the mire and set me safe on solid ground.

3 Like any addict who quits, I must talk about what has happened to me.

Like a robin at dawn, I must sing God's praises to the skies.

I will risk being a bore;

If just one person hears me, my work has not been wasted.

4 Too many today chase false gods;

They try to multiply their own gains.

5 But the richest returns come from God.

You can't begin to count your blessings!

6 God does not want us to wear frowns or long faces;

God wants us to find childlike joy in shining drops of dew,

in whispering pine needles, in warm mud between the toes.

7, 8 Our delight becomes one with God's;

Our personalities blend.

9 So I will not keep silent;

I will proclaim my good news privately and publicly.

10 I cannot keep it to myself.

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](mailto:info@woodlake.com).

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#### 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](mailto: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](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [www.traditionaliconoclast.com](http://www.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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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](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca), or send a note to [sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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