

*Wednesday November 20, 2013*

## **Why bother trying?**

By Jim Taylor

My dog finds a broken branch in the bushes. A purebred Chesapeake Bay Retriever, she doesn't feel her life is fulfilled unless she's retrieving something – a ball, a stuffed toy, a stick...

She struggles to drag the branch out. The surrounding shrubbery has woven into the branch's twigs. The dog tugs, heaves, jerks. Out comes a branch twice her length.

Dogs don't carry tape measures. But even a dog can recognize that a six-foot branch will not travel easily down a three-foot wide trail between tree trunks.

Methodically, she plants one paw on the main stem while she chomps on protruding twigs. Some snap off easily. Others need to be worried off as she tosses her head from side to side. Almost by accident, I suspect, she snaps off the top end of the branch.

She picks up the shortened branch in her jaws, and trots proudly down the trail ahead of me, holding her head high.

I'm lost in admiration. Not for what she achieved, but for her willingness to try it.

## **Too many challenges**

Of course, with a human brain, I could immediately analyze what she needed to do. With human hands, I could have snapped the branch against my knee to shorten it.

But why bother, when dozens of other branches still litter the undergrowth?

That's the underlying problem. Why bother, when so many bigger issues demand attention?

Why bother feeding a homeless woman, pushing her total possessions along in a stolen grocery cart, when there are thousands more like her?

Why bother recycling dead batteries or used motor oil, when amoral industries treat earth, air, and water like a landfill site?

Why bother working for a more peaceful, more equitable world, when powerful nations base their security (and their balance of payments) on peddling increasingly lethal armaments to lesser nations?

I'm not convinced we're going to leave a livable planet for my grandchildren's grandchildren to inherit.

## **Rescuing starfish**

No one person can change the world. Not even the president of the most powerful nation on earth can do it. Some people believe Jesus can do it, when he returns from wherever he is. I look at human behavior, and think his first miracle would have to be seven billion simultaneous lobotomies.

I don't have any answers. Except that I know it is not an answer simply to ride along on the mythical handcart to hell. The very least I can do is try to apply some brakes.

There's a story going the rounds about a small boy flinging stranded starfish into the sea as the receding tide leaves them high and dry. "There are thousands of starfish on this beach," his mother protests. "You can't save them all."

"Maybe not," her son replies, throwing another starfish into deep water. "But I can make a difference to this one."

Perhaps, that's enough. Perhaps I too can fling occasional starfish back into the sea.

Then perhaps, like my dog, I too can hold my head high as we trot together down the trail of life.

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## YOUR TURN

Last Wednesday's column – or rant – about the idiocy of relying on one-size-fits-all solutions drew some appreciative comments.

Jim Henderschedt wrote, “Thank you, thank you, thank you. I am so glad someone else has recognized that OSDFA (One Size Doesn't Fit All). In our city and other places around the country churches are empty and closing because of the OSFA mentality, and of the stubborn attitude that we will be very happy to receive people as members as long as the like what we like, think the way we think, and worship the way we've been doing it for centuries. My experience also is that churches that are full, thriving, and active know that one size *doesn't* fit all and strive diligently to provide what is needed for those of a different size.”

John Willems agreed: “One-size-fits-all has never worked, but we keep trying and expecting different results. Mrs. Dash is never the answer to any flavour expectation!

“I like the idea of a whistle-tootin' Jesus, though; too bad so many people think of the whistle as a referee calling an infraction rather than listening to the tune Jesus is tootin' and dancing with him. Then sitting down with a glass of wine (or two) to rest and listening to what he has to say. After all, he is the best wine maker the world has ever known.”

Vic Sedo wondered why I hadn't included caraway in my list of spices: “Does your wife have caraway spice in her kitchen? You can purchase the best caraway rye bread at the Carriage House Hotel in Calgary. Bread to die for and the only Restaurant to serve the bread. Caraway flavor is flavor around the world and suspect was used in Biblical days. Canadians don't know what they're missing. Its a popular Arab , Jewish, spice. Check it out! When in south Calgary , I make a point of a purchase before returning to Edmonton.”

Boyd Wilson sent along his own rant from New Zealand about economics, sustainability, religion, etc., which is unfortunately too long to include here.

Steve Roney thought I had biased my own conclusions by using cooking as a metaphor: “How about engineering? Ask a structural engineer whether he is free to vary the laws of mathematics or of physics building to building? No, a square always has four sides;  $2 + 2$  always equals 4. Some things are relative and variable, and some things are absolute. Sometimes you need different sizes for different people, and sometimes one size fits all. We all have a bellybutton, we all need to eat, and none of us should use the spice ‘anthrax’.”

“In economics or politics, you're right. But science and religion by their very nature deal in absolutes. A religion without absolutes (one size fits all) is simply not a religion. It has no use.”

Charles Hill suggested that some people need OSFA solutions: “Those of us with average or higher language skill and ability to think abstractly will be in agreement with you. However... people who have lives filled with fear or who think [only] concretely need certainty in their religion [or] need concrete and always dependable answers. It

takes a substantial degree of mental and emotional maturity to say, 'maybe,' or 'I don't know.' Hence, [we have] a Christianity which ranges from Fundamentalism which takes every word of the Bible literally and has eternally true answers to every question, to the Liberal spectrum that understands the Bible in terms of metaphor and mystery. Perhaps God's gift to us is multiple ways of relating to the divine."

Finally, Mary Elford asked about a little newsletter I used to do, for about ten years, similar to these columns but distributed by mail, called Currents. "I was rooting around in papers, and found my small stack of Currents magazines. Is there any chance they could be re-issued, or put in a book? Do you still have old issues for sale?"

No, sadly, Currents is dead. The Archives of B.C. Conference has a full set in print, and I have a full set on my computer, but that's all that exists now.

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## **PSALM PARAPHRASES**

The RCL suggests Zechariah's song from Luke in place of the psalm this Sunday. Unfortunately, I have never done a paraphrase of that passage, and this week doesn't seem like the best time to try one. Fortunately, the RCL offers an alternative reading of Psalm 48 – and I have done a paraphrase of that one.

1 Wars and rumors of wars swirl around us;  
corporate strife and struggle engulf us.  
Only God stands firm in these shifting sands.  
God is our shelter from them;  
God gives us strength to go out into the stresses of each day.

2 We have nothing to fear.  
Though the social order is shaken,  
though our leaders come crashing down,  
3 Though long-honored standards fly at half-mast  
and the values we inherited are scorned--  
even then, we have nothing to fear.

4 The comforting presence of God pours over us  
like sunshine on a frosty morning;  
it makes us glad.  
5 God is with us;  
God is an oasis of peace upon a darkened plain  
6 where ignorant armies clash by night.  
The ambitious leap over each other;  
The emperor stands naked in the cold clear light of innocence.  
They are frozen in their folly.  
7 But God is with us;  
God is our sanctuary.

8 See how wonderfully the Lord works!  
Those who would beat others have beaten themselves;

9 Those obsessed with winning wind up as losers;  
Those who think only of themselves find that no one thinks of them at all.  
All their struggles add up to nothing.  
10 This is God's word to the warring: "Be still!  
Be still, and know that I -- and only I -- am God!"

11 In the tumult of the nations,  
in the torment of the earth,  
God is with us.  
God is our sanctuary.  
Thanks be to God.

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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If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca).

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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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