

Wednesday August 8, 2012

Reading the signals correctly

By Jim Taylor

In today's wireless world, my wife and I come close to being Luddites. We don't go around smashing cell phones, smart meters, and mobile apps. We just tend not to use them. Joan's cell phone is often turned off; mine stays on, but I forget to charge it.

When I got my phone, I asked for the simplest model possible. No camera, no music, no texting, no games – just voice.

"We don't have anything like that," shrugged the guy at the phone store.

In this deluge of instant wireless communication with everyone everywhere, I find it hard to remember that even land lines are a relatively recent innovation. My parents never had a phone of any kind until 1947. In the 1970s, I visited prairie homes that still connected to their neighbours using the ubiquitous barbed wire fences.

Communicating at a distance

But we humans devised ways of communicating at a distance, long before telephones.

Aboriginal peoples in North America sent smoke signals. African tribes pounded out messages on hollow logs.

As recently as my own childhood, Scouts learned semaphore and Morse code.

The telegraph transmitted Morse code messages. I've heard that some operators had a touch as recognizably individual as the human voice.

Morse Code could also be sent by flashing lanterns. Or beating drums. Or flapping flags.

We used flags for semaphore, a system of visual spelling. But you could just wave your arms in recognizable patterns. As a boy, I got so proficient at semaphore that I won prizes at Scout camps. I once used semaphore to decipher the coded message hidden in a drawing in *Missy Lee*, one of Arthur Ransome's children's books.

Ransome also introduced me to marine signal flags.

Even on an ultra-modern cruise ship, you may still see a flag with six vertical blue and yellow stripes when you approach port. It means "Pilot wanted." A plain yellow rectangle – the "Q" flag – stands for quarantine. Perhaps there are sick people on board, but more commonly it just means the ship has not yet been cleared by customs and health authorities.

Consensus required

Some signals become so universal that even warring nations honour them. Everyone agrees that SOS (di-di-dit dah-dah-dah di-di-dit) is a distress signal.

Such signals work only when everyone involved shares a common understanding of their meaning. Imagine the chaos if some airline arbitrarily decided that "Mayday! Mayday!" should mean "Oh, look at that pretty cloud!"

And then there are social signals. Where meanings are rarely as clearly defined. I'm quite capable, for example, of misreading a bubbly personality as flirtation, or a frown of concentration as disapproval. Fortunately, I've learned not to assume that my interpretation is the only possible one.

Many social conflicts, I suspect, result from misreading the signals of a larger society. Societies change. Norms change. On marriage, on sex, on employee loyalty, on debt, on punishment...

People assume that they're reading social signals correctly. But the signals that one generation considers obvious may be read quite differently by a younger population. If you're not looking for signals of changing standards, you won't see them.

At both the personal and societal levels, we need to be careful when reading signals. And not leap to premature conclusions.

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YOUR TURN

Last week's column about "closure" brought a number of interesting comments.

Isabel Gibson wrote, "A Venezuelan immigrant I know with a Master's in psychology, tells me that 'closure' is a North American concept -- unknown to her before coming to Canada. Maybe all people mean by it is that the loss no longer dominates their waking hours."

This from Carl Freeto: 'I really appreciate your comments on 'revenge' and 'closure'. I'm amazed at folks who drink the cup called revenge. They may call it justice, but there is no recovery of the lost through the inflicting of pain on another and usually it is the innocent (parents, siblings, spouses, children) who become the objects of so called 'justice.'

"You don't get over a childhood or marriage or college experience; instead you develop and change and (hopefully) become more human through the gains and losses involved. Or, you can throw away the experience (have 'closure') and then have nothing left except loss.

"I look at a 30 year old widow who bears the loss and sees others hurting because of similar loss and she extends a hand to them. Her loss is ugly and real and on-going, but her response is life affirming.

"Grief does not end -- it either informs, grows and reveals life, or it attacks, hates and promises death. We can choose."

Judyth Mermelstein lives in Montreal, and is much closer to news about Jun Lin and his parents. She writes, "From what Jun Lin's parents have said in public, one can't conclude that forgiveness is out of the question, but it does seem 'justice' is what they actually want. They are planning to stay here in Montreal for the year or so it will take until Luka Magnotta is tried. From a media interview with Mrs. Lin, I believe what they really want is to know what happened to their son and why. It's the 'why' that is likely to disappoint them, since there really is no acceptable explanation for why a friendly, trusting young man should be killed and dismembered, and have his body parts used to send some kind of demented 'message' across the country.

"I think we can infer that revenge is not the issue for the Lins. I wish I could say the same of the people who turned the crime into a media circus and the politicians who tried to capitalize on it. Frankly, I was disgusted by Public Safety Minister Vic Toews' blatantly false statement that the incident proves his so-called 'lawful access' Bill C-30 is needed to catch people like Magnotta (who was actually caught because he couldn't resist looking himself up in an Internet cafe).

"And then there are the many yahoos who enjoy the grisly details of the crime and then want to enjoy the grisliness of an execution, howling for revival of the death penalty... Many consider themselves Christians and espouse values that Jesus himself deemed obsolete 2000 years ago. Somehow, 'Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord' has as little impact now as it did millennia ago."

Carolyn Terry wondered, "Maybe the words 'forgive' and 'forget' have been put together too often. Perhaps, if you've learned something from a hurtful experience, and the person who hurt you has learned, it's enough. And you can all teach your grandchildren your newfound wisdom, and then think about the future."

Ruth Zenger: "I have used the word closure, despite the fact that I well know that having a funeral does not end the pain or loneliness of losing a loved one. It takes the mourners 'another step along the route' to a new normal. There might be a better word, but some recognition of the reality of the loved one's departure is needed... Different circumstances and different mourners means different events need to happen. When forgiveness is needed for the death, it may take a long time. Something is needed to start towards the 'new normal'; closure may not be the best word, but we do need some word."

Rachel Pritchard praised the Amish community I mentioned. "for showing compassion where many would think it misplaced, for risking ridicule for their faith."

On the subject of closure, Rachel continued, "My sister's 18-year-old son was taken from her -- from feeling unwell to death in 48 hours. It was peaceful and she was with him and allowed to stay as long as she liked. If we have to have such a sorrow, it happened in the best way it could have done. And yet...and yet... Six years later she still goes away to weep on her own at family reunions and weddings... When asked how she is (stupid question but we keep asking) she states that there is Ben-shaped hole inside her which will never be filled but it does get a little easier to bear as the years go inexorably on."

PSALM PARAPHRASES

Psalm 130 showed up in the lectionary just over a month ago. I didn't want to use the same paraphrase again. So I tried thinking, instead, what might "out of the depths" mean in Somalia or Syria today?

My baby just died, Lord of the Universe.
Is this your holy will?
That wars should rip us from our homes,
That drought should wither our crops,
That even my breasts should dry up?

Hear my cries, O Holy One.

Are you doing this because we displeased you?
Did we fail to say our prayers often enough?
Were we too concerned with sheer survival?

If we have wronged you, forgive us.
We will honour you even more for your compassion.

I shrivel in the scorching heat.
I huddle under a tattered tarp in a refugee camp.
I cower in the rubble of an apartment building.
I have no water, no food, no hope.

I wait.

Yet still I believe that you are powerful,
That your power is the power of love,
And that it can change the world.

So I wait...

This paraphrase is not in *Everyday Psalms*. For paraphrases, you can order *Everyday Psalms* through Wood Lake Publications, info@woodlake.com or 1-800-663-2775.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@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>](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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