

Wednesday January 4, 2012

## Mixed blessings

By Jim Taylor

Many years ago, when I still thought life had nice, clear answers, someone told me to write a year-end summary. "If you can identify five things worth celebrating that year," he said, "then it has been a good year."

Five didn't seem like a lot.

Still, other people seem to have lower expectations. A writer, whose name I have long lost, made this comment about books: "As a reader... I look for a single gem in a 300-page book. Two gems make me happy; three make me ecstatic...."

Maybe having even one thing to celebrate in a year would still make it worthwhile.

Anyway, I took that person's advice. As it turned out, I've almost always had more than five things to be thankful for.

Of course, I couldn't pull a Pollyanna and limit myself to just good things. So I made two lists – the good things, and the not-so-good things. And I have to admit, there have been years when the less-happy items outnumbered the good ones. An irascible boss never satisfied with my performance. Our bank account running perilously low. Our son's death. Living in a city that I had come to loathe...

Nevertheless, I was always able to find at least five things in that year that I felt like celebrating. They weren't always big things. A winter camping trip. Making a new friend. Getting an article accepted by a prestigious magazine....

## Balancing pros and cons

As the years roll by, though, I've noticed a subtle shift in the kinds of things that I include in my year-end lists.

I'm retired now, so there are no references to difficult bosses – or, for that matter, to difficult employees. And unless the world goes into financial meltdown, income is no longer a worry.

What I notice is that the list of good things and the list of not-so-good things have started to overlap. Blessings become mixed blessings.

Health, for example. My wife and I are not as healthy as we used to be. Age affects our stamina, our joints, our minds. That's bad. But it hasn't stopped us from travelling, from appreciating each other's company, from enjoying the grandchildren. And we've had some remarkable recoveries this year. So that's good.

Or our daughter's move to Vernon, just half an hour north of us is another blessing. Having her 10 hours closer, seeing the grandchildren more often – that's very good. On the other hand, they're high energy grandchildren. They leave us exhausted. That's not so good. And subsidizing her new house hurt our retirement savings -- bad.

The trend suggests that life has fewer black-and-white distinctions these days. I recognize shades of grey. Perhaps, like Picasso, I'm learning to see more than one aspect of a situation at a time, peeking around corners, recognizing that coins have two sides. That's good, I think.

But if everything blends into a uniform grey mush, that's not.

Perhaps I need to make a New Year's Resolution – when there's something worth celebrating, celebrate it enthusiastically.

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## YOUR TURN

Only a couple of letters about last week's column.

Steve Roney, who taught English for several years in South Korea, gave me the correct title for Kim Jong-Un's country: Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

I had commented that although North Korea's grief seemed somewhat exaggerated, I didn't see how it could have been staged, given the suddenness of the announcement of Kim's death. Steve replied, "I have difficulty believing it was anything but staged. Real people do not express real grief in that cartoonish way. It was almost self-evidently for show."

Steve also took issue with the letter from Kebede F. Dibaba, an Ethiopian pastor now in northern B.C., "who had written, "Christianity was in Ethiopia before there was a Roman Catholic or any other church."

"That may be true by the traditional Ethiopian dating of the Catholic Church," Steve wrote, "but is certainly not true by the Catholic dating. The Catholic Church began in Jesus's lifetime: with his appointment of the Twelve as the first bishops and Peter as the first pope. According to the Ethiopians, the Church in Ethiopia was founded by Frumentius and Aedissius in the fourth century. Indeed, the Ethiopian church is traditionally subject to the see of Alexandria, implicitly acknowledging that Alexandria is older."

Clare Neufeld challenged me on an apparent contradiction. In the "Your Turn" section, I had said

a) there was no mail last week. And

b) lots of letters came in, especially about the column on Jesus as an adopted child.

I failed to edit my own text sufficiently. I meant that because of my temporary e-mail blackout, I had received no letters while I was away. But when I got back to cyber-reality again, all the letters that I hadn't received were waiting for me.

I hope that's clearer.

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## ABOUT MY BOOKS, ETC.

I have a few copies of a book my father wrote exploring Christian theology through Christian art.

The problem with art, of course, is that it cannot put an abstract concept on canvas. An artist cannot paint an Incarnation or a Resurrection without putting real humans, in real situations, into the picture. The expression, therefore, has to be grounded in a particular culture and society; the infinite and universal has to be represented in finite terms.

My father – who once took art lessons from members of Canada's Group of Seven – spent much of his life after retiring as principal of the Vancouver School of Theology, seeking out the ways artists through the centuries had attempted to deal with this dilemma. I'm probably biased, but I think that in examining the ways art portrays theological concepts, he explained those concepts better than most theological texts.

The book is "Seeing the Mystery: Exploring Christian Faith through the Eyes of Artists," by William S. Taylor, 94 pages. There are only about 20 copies left in the world. Most of the illustrations are in full colour.

If you would like a copy, write to me – Jim Taylor, 1300 6<sup>th</sup> Street, Lake Country, BC, Canada, V4V 2H7.

Unfortunately, I can't send these out on the honour system, as I do with my biblical paraphrases. I will have to charge \$30 Canadian to include postage, paid in advance.

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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

- 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 "Model T Websites." a simple (and cheap) seven-page website for congregations who want to develop a web presence <<http://www.modeltwebsites.com>>
- 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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