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Wednesday July 9, 2014

Yes, we believe in yesterday

My high school graduation class held its 60th anniversary reunion a month ago.

Listening to the animated chatter about the old days, one might assume we grew up in the best possible times, in the best possible environment. No drugs. No gangs. No guns. No racial tensions – if only because our school had no other races to discriminate against. Some alcohol abuse, of course. And rampant hormones, even if we were rather naive about sex itself.

Perhaps everyone has this feeling about their childhood.

Unless, of course, you grew up in a refugee camp in Lebanon or Somalia, a death camp in Germany, a gulag in Siberia.

Yet even Siberia can look good in hindsight. A friend describes how the Russians uprooted his relatives from the temperate Ukraine, herded them into cattle cars, dumped them some 40 miles outside of Novosibirsk in central Siberia. The people dug pits in the ground, thatched with birch branches, to survive the bitter winters. Many didn't survive.

One of their descendants now owns a summer place on the Black Sea, back in Ukraine. But he goes home to Novosibirsk.

Looking back

Paul McCartney wrote, “Oh, I believe in yesterday.” It's not commonly considered a religious song. But it voices a recurring theme of religions.

When Moses led the Hebrew slaves into the desert, they wanted to go back to the lush fields of the Nile.

When foreign powers conquered Israel, the biblical prophets re-visioned David as the ideal ruler.

Christians look back to Jesus, Muslims to Mohammed, Buddhists to Siddhartha Gautama, Sikhs to Guru Nanak.

Somehow we persuade ourselves that those who came before us must have had a better handle on truth than we do.

Granted, the early Christian “fathers” lived closer to biblical events than we do. But none of them were actually there. They depended on stories several generations old – essentially gossip, passed along.

Older is not necessarily better

Oral narratives can be surprisingly accurate. But only if the people passing along the story consider it important enough to memorize. The disciples who bummed around with Jesus didn’t recognize, at the time, that their experiences would eventually be considered world-changing -- let alone endlessly interpreted and re-interpreted. Not until later did they say to themselves, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he spoke?”

Remember, no one took shorthand in those days. No one had a video camera or a digital audio recorder.

So early theologians viciously argued their own interpretations of oral traditions that they had no way of checking.

Yet today their invective is considered more authoritative about Christian doctrine than later, better researched and better informed, opinions. Simply because it’s older.

We forget that contrary views written off as heresies were equally old.

Ancient writers had only one advantage over us -- they still lived in the imperial culture that Paul and Jesus knew. If they’d had another 1900 years to learn and reflect, they might have reconsidered their doctrines.

They didn’t have that opportunity. We do.

Yes, in some ways, my student years were the best years of my life. But I wouldn’t want to go back to that time. Older is not always better.

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YOUR TURN

Last week I suggested that the organizations we humans form might qualify as

a separate life form. The column started with some information about the campaign to save the rail right-of-way as a recreation corridor. The same day I posted the column, Isabel Gibson noted, “I see that a First Nations band has just asked the federal government to buy the land for them, roughly a day before the deadline for the federal ye/nay on the acquisition. This just got a whole lot more complicated.”

Christine Leigh-Taylor also offered a news update: “The U.S. Supreme Court this week granted corporations the right to restrict health care coverage offered to employees if some elements of coverage violate the corporation’s religious views. Although the ruling applied only to closely-held corporations, that will never hold. So, I found your statement that “the law recognizes corporations as persons” very interesting.

“Further, your discussion of organizations (you didn’t say corporations) as a new ‘life-form’ intrigues me. I expect that the next legal step by some [bigger] U.S. corporations will be to claim the same rights as individuals, and assert that their religious views can trump an employee’s ‘right’ to access to reasonably comprehensive health care. In the U.S. we still do not have such a universal right.”

Currently, I expect to be writing something about the religious rights of corporations for this coming Sunday’s Sharp Edges column.

Brooks Henderson reminded me that “all known evidence points to our ancestry in pack animals--later, in tribes, clans, etc. We are natural joiners who have always been more effective in groups.”

The reference to trains took Charles Hill back to his youth: “When I was 4-6 years old, we lived about 20 yards from a heavily traveled railroad; my father worked for the Union Pacific RR. I can remember getting to ride in the cab of a steam locomotive. Until I was 18, I could travel for free anyplace a railroad could take me. I did! It was wonderful for an adolescent growing up in a small isolated town in the State of Washington. All of this before diesel engines. So, I have the same passion as yourself to be near a track. Even here in desolate Central Texas, I can hear the whistle of one freight train that passes about a mile away at about 6:45 a.m.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

I'll dedicate this excerpt from Psalm 119 (verses 105-112) to the mentors we have all had, at one time or another.

**105 For years, you have been like a parent to me;
I have followed your advice faithfully.**

106 I listen to your word.

I try to do your will.

107 But right now, my life is a mess.

I need your help.

108 Who else could I turn to?

Who else can I trust?

**109 Like a billiard ball, I bounce from crisis to confrontation,
But still I try to measure up.**

110 The world tests me with temptations.

They attract me, I cannot deny it;

But I do not give in.

**111 I have learned well your precepts and principles;
they matter more to me than passing pleasures;
they are the foundation of my life.**

**112 I only yield to one temptation,
the temptation to do your will.**

For paraphrases of most of the psalms used by the RCL, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publishing, info@woodlake.com.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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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;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.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>

- 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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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, or send a note to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca
