

Wednesday August 7, 2013

Getting our priorities straight

My first full-time job was at a struggling radio station in downtown Vancouver, BC. In a desperate search for audiences, our programming bounced from British music hall, to contemporary jazz, to easy listening, to country....

But one audience remained constant. Sunday mornings, we turned the transmitter over to religion. Any kind of religion. Ernest Manning's *Back to the Bible*. The Christian Reformed Church's *Back to God Hour*, on the air for over 70 years now.

I recall programs from the Rosicrucians and the Theosophical Society. If you have no idea what these groups are, look 'em up.

And two versions of British Israel.

British Israelism struck me as straddling fascism and racism. It claimed that the peoples of the British Isles constituted the Lost Ten Tribes of Israel, and that the English monarch was directly descended from King David of Jerusalem. Somehow, a belief in Anglo-Saxon superiority morphed into virulent anti-Semitism, along with contempt for all non-fair-skinned peoples.

At least, that's what I heard, as an involuntary listener.

Primary principles

"Why do we put this crap on the air?" I asked the program director.

"Because they're willing to pay for the air time," he shrugged.

I have trouble with that philosophy. It seems to me that publishers – of newspapers, magazines, books, or broadcasting stations – have an obligation to stand behind what they distribute to a credulous public.

That doesn't mean censorship. Recently, some pressure groups wanted Rolling Stone to censor its cover story on accused Boston bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev; they didn't want to hear what might have caused an apparently intelligent young man to turn to terrorism.

Rather, it means ensuring that published material has been adequately researched, logically argued, and presented with some acknowledgement of differing viewpoints. While I was editor of Wood Lake Books, we published more than 100 titles. I didn't agree with all of them – but I recall none that I couldn't defend.

Simply because someone was willing to pay didn't obligate me to publish ill-founded rants.

What we pass along

I don't consider corporations to be "persons" -- not until I hear of an entire corporation going to jail for fraud! But I believe that the same ethical principles that apply to individuals also apply to corporate bodies.

If I, as an individual, must accept responsibility for incorrect information I convey to others, so must a publisher, a broadcaster, an advertiser. Simply passing along misleading or erroneous material is no excuse.

A group of editors once debated being hired (hypothetically, of course) to edit *Mein Kampf*, Hitler's magnum opus. Should we refuse the job? Take it and sabotage the project? Or take it and make the argument as clear and persuasive as possible?

Which comes first – the client or the public?

I know the usual mantra: "If I don't do it, someone else will." Perhaps so. Perhaps some other firm will publish the book, broadcast the program, promote the product. My refusal won't prevent it from happening.

But I still believe all of us must take responsibility for what we say, for what we help others say, and for what we repeat that others have said.

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YOUR TURN

There's an accumulation of letters for two columns, one about how we relate to pictures (photographic or verbal), and one about anniversaries.

Nancy Price had a comment about word pictures: "Your words do indeed evoke pictures of situations I know or have known which you have never seen.... You do good work with your word pictures. Keep it up."

Isabel Gibson wrote, "The creative writing instructor at my mother's lodge says that the more particular we are in our writing (as in, specific, detailed), the more universal our writing becomes. Within some relevant range, I believe that's true -- certainly my tendency is to go general, and that just leaves the event or experience 'unimaginable' and 'unconnectable'.

"Of course, you have to describe the parts that matter to you and (you hope) to others. There are no physical descriptions of Jesus in the Bible...

"As a long-time literalist in my use of language, I find it helpful to hear what modern storytellers do with Bible stories -- in part because they make it obvious which parts can meaningfully be heard as metaphor."

Pat Feidner shared her own experience: "This article, on word pictures, really hit home. As a storyteller, I have learned that too much description, too many adjectives, don't do it. If you specify certain characteristics, you remove that from the imagination. Let the listener decide what a character looks like -- even while listening to the action. It helps them relate and makes the story theirs. I have had parents thank me for telling about children like theirs when actually I didn't -- the child saw in his mind a child like him thus the story was about him. Mental images seem to last longer than any other kind."

And then there were letters on the theme of anniversaries, and remembering. Lots of them.

Steve Lawson agreed, "as one who celebrates an anniversary tomorrow -- 15 years of marriage. I think we remember to remind us how time really does go by fast and how short life really is."

Charles Hill admitted, "After 15 years of marriage, I confessed to my wife that I had forgotten the exact day of our marriage and could not locate a copy of our marriage license. My excuse was age-related memory loss. She did, after a couple weeks of letting me suffer, tell me. You are accurate, however, in your assessment of what really needs to be remembered. I can remember in graphic detail the events of that day, the emotions that were experienced. As I ponder who I have become, the when of events is not important -- it is the what and how that empowers us to rectify or heal the negative outcomes or rejoice in the positive outcomes."

Cliff Boldt connected anniversaries, not so much to the act of remembering, but "I think it is because we need to celebrate. Celebration is a lost art. We need to celebrate successes: personal, private, family, work related. Celebration does not need to entail a party, cake, drinks, cards. Often one word, a smile, a look in the eye of a loved one will do the trick. Celebration doesn't have to be pompous and it certainly should be personal, community-based, and on rare occasions national."

Rachel Prichard also picked up on the theme of celebration, “Henri Nouwen has a bit to say about birthdays: <http://helenl.wordpress.com/2007/02/13/celebrating-being-alive-by-henri-nouwen/>

“We just had a special Grade 8 graduation for our two granddaughters who were home-schooled for the last 18 months. We were surprised when we got the invitation, but on reflection not surprised that our daughter-in-law did this for them - she is one of a kind who celebrates those around her with love at any excuse. Not an anniversary, I know, but a celebration of two young people's achievements with their mother's support.”

Isabel Gibson liked the focus on “remembering in general.

“I guess to some extent we get to choose the things we remember – certainly we do that with the things whose memory we celebrate or mark: births, deaths, weddings.

“In this vein, I enjoy Google's use of their home page to mark births or deaths of momentous people. I kind of especially like it when it's not someone I know of, a reminder that the world is broader than my small corner; that there is more to us collectively than the things that matter just to me.”

John Shaffer had thoughts about how we associate events with experiences: “It was said that many would remember what they were doing when such and such happened. I was first aware of such sentiment when Kennedy was assassinated. Many persons said they would not forget what they were doing when they first became aware of that event. I remember that it was a significant event, but I have forgotten what I was doing at the time: November 22, 1963.

“Even more profound was experiencing and living through The Great Alaskan Earthquake on May 27, 1964, at 5:26 p.m. on Good Friday. Although I remember it as 5:27 p.m. Maybe it took a minute for the shock waves to get to where I lived, more than 150 miles away from the epicenter. My wife and I were preparing for the evening meal when it hit. So this I remember.

“But I have already forgotten what I was doing on September 11th.”

Ivan Gamble described why May 18 is special in his life: “On that date in 1950, Gwen and I were married in Winnipeg, the day the flood was the highest. We went to nearby Portage La Prairie where I was assigned a Student Missions Appointment.

“In 1955, on that date, I was ordained to the Christian Ministry in Immanuel Presbyterian Church, Aultsville, Ont., part of a 3-point charge. My mandate was to unite the three congregations into one in a brand new town, as all three communities were later flooded by the St. Lawrence Seaway.

“And 30 years after our wedding, when I was working as a Social Worker with the B.C. Government, living in Oliver, B.C., Mount St. Helens blew. Some of the ash fell on our deck.”

John Clinton wrote, “In addition to all the ‘anniversaries’ you mentioned (and that we also remember and observe), there is another date that my wife and I remember -- October 7 -- because on that date in 1945, my wife (then 6 years old) was stricken with polio. Strange, some would say; but I always bring flowers and/or a special gift. What happened to her that day is remembered and honored by us as a reminder of how far she has come. It is a reminder of our 56 years together [and] a reminder that when we get ‘lemons,’ we can make ‘lemonade.’ God is not finished with us -- yet.”

Don Snazrude wrote about my psalm paraphrases: “I often wonder as I read your paraphrases of the Psalms if you have read any of Mathew Fox's books or met the man?. Your last translation of Psalms reminds me of the *Negativita* which Fox so aptly has written. At Naramata I was able to pick up your Psalms book. My old one got misplaced. It is such refreshing and contemporary read of the Psalms We have used it at St David's United in Calgary and here in Canmore, but I feel not enough.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

The RCL calls for this psalm of judgement (Psalm 50:1-8, 22-23) for Sunday August 11. Treating God as a severe judge is not popular today, but it is a recurring theme in the Writings and Prophets.

- 1 As an alarm drags us out of deep slumber,
- 2 so God rouses us from our lethargy.
- 3 God does not sneak into our consciousness on soft-soled slippers.

God enters like a roaring lion,
a tornado rampaging across the prairie,
a parent who has already warned us three times.

- 4 God rattles our excuses.
Feeble rationalizations cannot defend us.
- 5 At baptism, at confirmation, at communion, we make promises.
God judges how well we live up to our commitments.

- 6 How can we challenge God's verdict?
We know how often we have failed.
- 7 God knows everything;
God is the chief witness against us.
- 8 "You have continually sacrificed yourself to other gods," says God.
"You have chased after power and popularity, after success and selfish pleasures.
- 22 Now I will make an example of you."

- 23 So God says to all, "If you have ears to hear, listen.
Unless you want to share the same fate, smarten up.
Do not discredit God by your behavior;
in all your lives, make God visible for others."

For this and other paraphrases, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publications, info@woodlake.com or 1-800-663-2775 in Canada.

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. 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;
- 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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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
