

*Wednesday May 8, 2013*

## **Connections that bind us together**

By Jim Taylor

I don't know where I saw it. It might have been a Harry Potter movie. Perhaps I even dreamed it. But what I saw made visual the connections that unite us, one to the other.

In my vision, those connections turned into lines of light. Some people had only thin lines linking them, in pale colours. Other people had great pulsing umbilical cords, throbbing with vitality, binding them together as if they shared a single bloodstream...

The fact that we can't see these connections doesn't mean they aren't there.

There are lots of things we can't see. Radio waves, for example. But with the right equipment, we can pick up those invisible signals and listen to music or watch television. We can't see radioactivity, even though it can kill us. We can't see, smell, or taste oxygen – although we die without it. We can't see the gravity that keeps our planets from flying apart.

That notion of invisible connections between people helps me make sense of grief. Someone has died; part of me has died with them. If our connection is only a thin tendril of life, I won't feel much loss. If our connection is one of those pulsing umbilical cords, I will feel that loss as I would an amputation -- the phantom limb still hurts, even though it's no longer there. Those missing toes still itch; that arm still tries to reach for the doorknob.

We delude ourselves when we think that we stand alone. We are not separate entities, ships that pass in the night. We are a vast network of life and living.

Occasionally we glimpse this truth, through the metaphors of poetry. John Donne wrote, 400 years ago: "No man is an island entire unto itself... Each man's death diminishes me."

A friend, Marjorie Gibson, composed this poem as a lament for the death of her friend Elizabeth MacLeod:

I lost my friend  
did I tell you?  
She died.  
An ache gnaws my heart, persistent, sadly reminds.  
She walked early, loving  
morning light  
early walkers  
fresh crisp air.  
Late afternoon for me  
light warm golden  
from the setting sun  
late walkers with dogs.  
We spoke our minds  
bared our fears  
our joys  
our questions.  
In the end, no world problems solved  
no personal stances altered, just  
two souls lovingly understanding  
one another.  
For both, the end hovers in sight  
the final battle cannot be won  
in our hands only the skirmishes before the end  
our fight to make our last days good.

Our challenges?

Her failing heart  
my dementia  
trivial things like that.

Then we look into one another's eyes

laugh  
clasp hands  
sit close together  
and remember.

I lost a friend

did I tell you?  
She died.

No one can read that lament without the sense of a connection broken, severed, gone.

Marjorie wrote "A Lament" for her own loss. But it also speaks to me, and to Ray and Muriel, to Frances, Suzanne, Arlene...

The invisible umbilical cords of love and friendship that nourished us, fed us, sustained us, have been severed. We will continue, but we will never be as whole again.

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## YOUR TURN

Ralph Milton got in the first word about my column on how metaphors shape our thinking. "You might have extended your story to presumed heterosexuality," he wrote. "In the culture of my salad days, the love songs, the love plots in movies, etc., all presumed heterosexuality."

Ralph then referred to the news reports of an NBA player coming out: "What looks more 'masculine' (i.e. hetero) than a six-foot-something muscular black male sweating through a basketball game?"

Sally Stoddard commented, "On metaphors, have you read Lakoff and Johnson's METAPHORS WE LIVE BY? Worth looking up."

Jack Driedger picked up on my reference to having to do things more slowly: "Have you noticed? When paying for your groceries at the cash register, if you use the chip card, people have no problem waiting while the machine processes the purchase. They chat about the weather, the family, chuckle, etc. However, if grandma needs time to find the correct change in her purse, people roll their eyes, huff, etc. even if grandma is faster than the machine."

Judyth Mermelstein has also been slowed down: "The column this week reminded me all too well of how hard it was to get used to my arthritis back when it decided my knees weren't enough and started attacking my hands and wrists. After 30 years' practice, I'm still frustrated by how much it slows me down on the bad days and how quickly I tire when I try to keep up with a 'normal' pace. But one does adjust somehow to these limitations and it does raise awareness of the problems others face with their various incapacities.

"I'm very glad your difficulties are temporary, and I'm quite sure the awareness isn't."

Paul Harvie sympathized, from personal experience: "I had my right leg amputated two weeks before Easter. I am now in a wheel chair (electric). When I drop things I need help. I am still in hospital but I get passes to go to church and other places. I was waiting at the bus stop the other day and I dropped a bag, I had to ask someone to help me out."

So did Art Gans: “For much of my youth I was extremely limited in the use of my right arm. It took two major surgeries to correct a multiple compound fracture of both bones. So I have been there.”

But, Art noted, disabilities can lead to unexpected skills: “In 1977, when I was in process of enlisting in the air force, Padre Cunningham was the Chaplain General. He had lost his arm in the Italian campaign in WWII, then come back in as a chaplain. ... My two children as well as several of the neighbourhood kids were fascinated by his ability to tie his shoes with just one hand. He had to demonstrate this several times during the time with us as it seemed each kid would go find another to come and see this marvel.”

The notion of disabilities brought back memories to Ruth Shaver: “Your message today resonates for two reasons: a current parishioner whose broken shoulder socket has caused her the same revelations — though add women's undergarments to the mix for an even deeper appreciation of what it means to have the use of both arms! — and something my college roommate, who is blind, once said. My brother was visiting us ... One night after we were all in bed, roommate Rachel said, ‘Oh, drat, I have to go to the bathroom.’ Howard replied, ‘Hang on, let me turn the light on for you.’ Then he realized what he'd said and started to apologize. Rachel replied, ‘That's the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me — you forgot that I'm blind!’ It was a lesson to both of us that I have tried to teach in my ministry ever since.”

Ginny Adams reminded me that a disability is not just about me: “My spouse had ankle surgery and is only now, eight weeks later, able to put weight on that foot. Plus, it's been three months since he could drive... But I hope you also include your spouse, your caretaker, in your thoughts. It's equally difficult for us to learn this new way of moving as it is for you. Caretaking is about the most difficult task I've ever done -- I'm ready for this ‘siege’ to end even more than my husband. Sigh ... just a couple more months...”

Stephani Keer recalled this hilarious misuse of metaphor from her career as a journalist: “A man with only one leg had followed his hero Terry Fox and Terry's run across Canada to raise money for cancer. He had encountered a problem with a Calgary TV station, and the inevitable shyster had suggested a law suit. He asked our publisher whether it sounded like a good idea. Our publisher replied: ‘Frankly, I don't think you have a leg to stand on.’

“Our editor-in-chief and I hit the exit at the same time. There are moments to flee.”

James Russell shared an experience with masculine/feminine pronouns: “About thirty or forty years ago, I remember being told that things were equal under the law because ‘wherever the masculine pronoun is used, the feminine is equally meant’. So I tried to read aloud some texts, legal and otherwise, ‘automatically’ substituting ‘she’ for ‘he’, ‘her’ for ‘his’, ‘Jane’ for ‘Jack’, etc. Nothing automatic about it, actually. Everyone should try the exercise.”

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## **PSALM PARAPHRASES**

The news is so full of wars and disasters, we become inured to it. When we see a building collapsed into a pile of rubble, we don't know whether it's in Syria or Bangladesh; drones target suspected terrorists in Pakistan and Yemen; children shoot other children with “children's guns”.... When I first wrote this paraphrase of Psalm 97, I had in mind conflicts in Somalia and Sarajevo. The locations have changed; the tragedies have not.

1 There is more here than mere chaos.  
We cannot understand this misery--  
but it would be worse if there was no cause, no purpose.  
It cannot be just random chance.  
2 The shells rain down upon our cities;  
boiling clouds of destruction rise into the sky.  
Our enemies have power, and they use it.

3 The onslaught darkens the day with smoke;  
it makes the night flicker with fire.

4 The rocket's red glare slashes open the tomb of darkness;  
the ground beneath us trembles to the impact of the mortars.

5 Buildings collapse, as if the earth had been pulled out from beneath them;  
windows shatter into a thousand lances;  
no place is safe anymore.

6 In the midst of this devastation, we still believe in a God of justice and fairness;  
we believe in the God who brought order out of chaos.

7 We need to believe that somehow, someone is in control;  
the God we worship is not a graven image carved out of our own egos.

8 If we are right, our children have a future;  
we can rejoice for them.

9 If God were our creation, we would have no hope but in ourselves;  
then we would have no hope at all.  
But we are God's creation.  
We can trust that God is greater than our present pain.

10 God has plans for those who cause others to suffer,  
for those who advance their own cause through violence.  
But the innocent will inherit a peace that surpasses understanding.

11 In that confidence, we can go out into our shattered streets.  
We can share what little we have with each other.

12 We are most favored of the Lord,  
for we have learned what God is like.

For this and other paraphrases, you can order *Everyday Psalms* through Wood Lake Publications,  
[info@woodlake.com](mailto:info@woodlake.com) or 1-800-663-2775.

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#### 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](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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