

*Wednesday April 24, 2013*

## **The case for moral mentoring**

By Jim Taylor

Whenever I travel, I tend to leave something important behind. One time, I forgot a comb.

So I bought one. On the back of the package, the manufacturer had printed directions for use: “Draw the comb from the roots of the hair out towards the ends.”

How else would you comb? From the ends towards the scalp? Crosswise?

It makes me think of those mandatory allergy warnings – like the one on an airline snack package of peanuts: “Caution. May contain peanuts.”

Our society delights in creating rules. Governments lay out legal codes, over which lawyers argue endlessly. Companies produce manuals and expect employees to operate accordingly. Churches split over moral rules; what one approves, another condemns.

## **Learning in community**

Yet most of what we learn, we do not learn from rules and regulations. We learn from experience. We learn from others.

Long ago, this was called apprenticeship. The novice worked with a more experienced mentor, absorbing skill or knowledge almost by osmosis. Nurses, teachers, blacksmiths, plumbers, electricians – all used to learn their skills by working with, and learning from, a more skilled mentor. Today, the bulk of training for most professions comes in lectures and lesson plans. Their knowledge of their specialty has improved. But I’m not always convinced that the quality of their work has. Or their commitment to the people they serve.

To my mind, congregations should be mentoring centers. Places where fallible humans can learn from each other, where they can absorb patterns of thinking, and doing, and being, that can’t be reduced to a manual of procedures.

Learning to relate to others, to have a conscience, calls for mentors, not for regulations.

## **The sincerest form of flattery**

If we had to rely on written instructions, walking and talking would be university level courses.

And can you imagine the directions needed on every package of shoelaces?

“Take the lace on the right side of your shoe in your right hand, and the lace on the left side of your shoe in your left hand. Cross the laces across the top of the shoe. Take the right hand lace, which is now on the left side of your shoe, in your left hand, and the left hand lace in your right hand. Cross the left lace which is now on the right hand side over the right lace which is on the left. Now pass that left lace under the right lace so that the left lace still comes out pointing to the right. Using both hands, pull the two laces tight...”

Now you have to explain the rest of the knot -- how to fold a lace back, wrap part of the other lace around it, pass it through its own loop, and draw both loops tight without tugging either end loose.

Yet somehow, most of us learn to tie our shoes in kindergarten, long before we could read such instructions, let alone comprehend them.

Because someone who knows how to do it guides our fingers, until tying shoe laces becomes second nature. We don’t even have to think about what we’re doing.

That’s how we need to learn morals and ethics, too.

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## YOUR TURN

Well, this was interesting – there were more responses to the letters that went out with last week’s column than to the column itself.

Frieda Hogg sent a thought about the Acts narrative of Paul’s conversion on the way to Damascus: “One biblical scholar I have read suggests that it likely didn’t happen, as Paul never mentions it in any of his own writings. If it did happen, one would expect Paul to have mentioned it somewhere. Any comments?”

Well, okay – I would say that there’s little doubt that

- a) there was someone named Saul/Paul, and
- b) that he did have some kind of conversion, to change him from a rabid persecutor of Jesus’ followers to their most vigorous advocate.

Beyond that, I have to suspect some fictionalizing, especially since Acts itself contains three different variants of the story.

Isabel Gibson commented on the notion of transformation underlying all of those experiences that we categorize as baptism, conversion, etc.: “Here’s to the transformations that free us to be fully ourselves -- like the caterpillar, maybe we had that butterfly inside us all along!

“Also -- a lovely paraphrase today. Thanks for going with the other hand, as it were.”

Wesley White sent me his own paraphrase of Psalm 23; you can read it at <http://kcmlection.blogspot.com/2013/04/psalm-23.html>

Nancy Kerr disagreed with Steve Roney’s assertion that the city of God, in Revelation 21, must have had walls to repel enemies: “Walls also keep out wild animals, and I suppose every man has a bow and arrow, a slingshot, and/or a spear..... Isaiah may have started out with war but only goes a few chapters before he envisions ‘the lion shall lie down with the lamb’.

“I shall continue to work and hope for peace here and after.”

And David Percy took issue with Charles Hill: “Charles Hill’s thoughts on all religions being identified with disembodiment of the person caught my thoughts. It strikes me that Christianity is painfully incarnational, in contrast to Hall’s category of ‘nearly every religion’ -- not only in the person of Jesus but our persistent insistence in ‘a new heaven and a new earth’ Most of what drives Christian social ministry, like food for the hungry, is built on the belief that the body part of people is not an extra cling-on like Gnosticism tried to assert. People only come as whole packages --- a gnawing inconvenience, perhaps, even while allowing for losses and gains around the edge.”

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## PSALM PARAPHRASES

Here we are at the fifth Sunday of Easter, and Psalm 148. I gave you one paraphrase of this psalm last December, so here’s a different one for spring (which I hope is finally reaching the central and northern parts of North America).

- 1 Jubilation, exaltation, celebration, one and all!
- 2 Within the womb of the heavens, the orb of earth leaps to praise its Creator.
- 3, 4 As the pearl necklace of the planets swings around the sun,  
as the shining oceans embrace the continents,  
so do all living things praise the giver of life.
- 5 For God expressed a thought, and the thought took life.
- 6 God wanted to speak, and the Word became flesh and lived among us.

7 In that Word was holiness,  
the spirit that makes every life more than the sum of its chemicals.  
From the tiniest plankton in the sea to the great whales,  
from the ants that burrow in the dust to the eagle that soars in the heavens--  
all owe their existence to God.

8 Fire and hail, snow and frost, sun and drought, wind and rain--  
in God, all things work together for good.  
9 The mighty mountains compost into rich soil;  
fruit trees and cedars aerate the atmosphere.  
10 The dung beetle depends on the wastes of wild cattle;  
birds and currents carry seeds to new orchards.  
11 No one is cut off from the energy of God,  
neither presidents throned in offices nor derelicts huddled under bridges.  
12 For in God there is neither male nor female, old nor young, black nor white.  
13 All have been equally created by God;  
their lives all witness to God's grace.  
14 With profligate generosity, God scatters new life among weeds and thistles.  
And all of creation responds with rejoicing.

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...

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 "SeemslikeGod" page, [www.seemslikegod.org](http://www.seemslikegod.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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#### TECHNICAL STUFF

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If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca).

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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](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca), or send a note to [sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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