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What we know, and don't know, yet

By Jim Taylor

An acquaintance declared, recently, “I’m proud that our Canadian money says, ‘In God we trust!’”

Except that it doesn’t. American currency does; Canadian doesn’t.

No one challenged his remark, because the rules of the session precluded setting people straight. Every viewpoint was accepted, as that person’s perspective. But I’m sure, if anyone had challenged his assertion, he would have replied, “When did they change it? I know it was there!”

As American humorist Josh Billings once said, “It ain’t what we don’t know that gives us trouble, it’s what we know that ain’t so.”

You thought Mark Twain said that, didn’t you? Nope. As Billings might say, “‘T’ain’t so.”

I’m no fan of Donald Rumsfeld. But I think Rumsfeld unintentionally scored a bullseye when he pontificated, “There are known knowns; there are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns; that is to say, there are things that we now know we don’t know. But there are also unknown unknowns – there are things we do not know we don’t know.”

Sources of knowledge

How, in fact, do we know anything?

Three centuries ago, Bishop George Berkeley theorized that we can only know things through our physical senses – sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. Therefore, he reasoned, there is no objective reality. Reality exists only in our perceptions.

Dictionary writer Samuel Johnson derided Berkeley’s idealism by launching a mighty kick at a rock. “Thus do I refute Berkeley,” he is supposed to have declared as he hopped around clutching his sore foot.

And yet there are times when I know I know something. I know that my memory of a particular event is accurate. I know that a word overheard in someone’s conversation has special meaning for me. I know that in an insight, all the pieces click into place, like the tumblers in a combination lock.

And yet I also know that almost everything I know will probably turn out to be wrong. Medicine keeps developing new health guidelines that replace previous guidelines. Quantum physics tells me that the chair I sit on isn't a solid object but a collection of energy fields. Mathematics may already have proved that two and two isn't always four.

Once, everyone knew the world was flat, and the centre of the universe. The Bible was the infallible word of God. The earth was created to serve human needs.

Things change. So do we.

Open minds

Philosophically, the encyclopedia tells me, I subscribe to something called "fallibilism". It assumes that we could be wrong about what we know and/or believe, even if current evidence justifies us in holding those convictions.

It doesn't mean abandoning the knowledge we have. Or believing, like Bishop Berkeley, that we can never know anything beyond our own senses. Or even denying the value of pursuing truth or meaning, because whatever we learn will be superseded anyway.

It certainly doesn't mean that there are no truths.

It simply means being open to new evidence that might cause us to change our minds.

I like a couple of wry lines from poet Hilaire Belloc:

***"Oh! let us never, never doubt
What nobody is sure about!"***

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YOUR TURN

It has often been noted that the left side of the brain controls the right side of the body and vice versa. David Evans capitalized on that understanding: "My cousin, about five years younger than I am, is a south paw. Many years ago I took great delight in informing her she was the only one in the family in her

right mind.”

Tom Watson shared his experience of being left-handed: “I was, from what I was told, born left-handed. Back in my first grade at school, the teacher had me switch. I wonder what the reason was for that? There wasn't, to the best of my knowledge, an ounce of prejudice in that teacher because I knew her well, and knew her for many years after I left elementary school, so I can't account for it as prejudice. I certainly never had my knuckles whacked for it, so wasn't punished for trying to use my left hand.

“Was it a matter of pressure to conform? I'm not at all certain of that either.

“I think, to put the best face on it I can, was that teachers in those days, some 70 years ago now, believed that one would fare better in the world if you were able to do things the way ‘most’ people did. It may have been wrong to force me to change...and from my vantage point now, I do believe it was wrong. But, from the teacher's perspective, it was no more wrong than making sure I knew how to do mathematics, and could spell, because I was able to manage these disciplines it would bode better for my future.

“Of my four daughters, I have one who is left-handed. She, like you, curls her hand above the line when she writes. I have four grandchildren who are left-handed, but they all write with their wrist below the line, same as right-handed people do. And, happy I am to say this, they have all fared well in this world.”

So did Lyle Phillips: “I write with my left hand but do most other things with my right hand, which results in me not being very adept at most activities. I'm sure that if my grade one teacher had suggested I try using my right hand for printing I would be writing with my right hand now. When I first began my teaching career I decided to try writing on the board with my right hand -- because it was not a fine motor skill, I was able to do it but it was too slow and I eventually gave up and used my left hand. Mine is one case where I think the teacher should have suggested I try right handed printing - I'm sure a suggestion was all that was necessary. However, at that time people were starting to recognize the dangers of forcing lefties to write right handed and my teacher, parents, and grandparents were too accepting when I picked up my pencil with my left hand.”

Beth Richardson wrote, “I, too, am a leftie though I don't curl my wrist when

writing cursive because I angle the paper the other way -- to the right, not the left as right-handed people do. Thus I can keep my wrist straight. So, it can be corrected, without losing your leftie-ness.

John Clinton mused, "Being left-handed doesn't mean that you are right. And being right-handed doesn't mean you are left out. This may be a good example of the importance of one's core values. That is, sometime it is better to see things from the middle rather from the extremes or extremities."

"Sounds like Darwin to me," wrote Sam Strauss.

Laurna Tallman writes long letters, from which I can only excerpt bits. On left-handedness, she wrote, "The neurological reason for shifting of handedness is a result of the shorter pathways between the right ear, left brain, and larynx as compared with the left ear, left brain, and larynx. Those are the pathways of hearing and spoken communication related to the language centre in the left brain, which is the seat of rationality and of self-control. About 80 per cent of humans are right lateralized, which establishes norms not only in behaviour but in other types of body function.

"Being born with a condition is not an adequate defense for not interfering with that condition, as I am sure you will agree if you think about other congenital disorders that are known to interfere with health and behaviour, such as 'crossed' eyes. The ignorance of medical science at present does not alter the disabling nature of a condition. People famous and infamous and unknown survived without glasses for millennia, which does not in any way negate the importance of corrected vision.

"Getting through life with a disability -- even becoming famous with a disability or holding high public office with a disability -- does not alter the disabling nature of the condition. Each of the famous people you mention can be described as demonstrating aberrant and/or undesirable behaviour, despite their elevated positions in the society and their having a social following. At least two of them (Alexander the Great and Picasso) were monsters, the former notably for massacres and for thousands of crucifixions, and the latter for his abusive treatment of women."

Laurna then went on to examine the negative effects of the other left-handed people I mentioned, and concluded, "Just how harmful lefties have been to social trends and structures remains to be seen, but the data so far are disturbing."

Now to follow-up letters on older columns.

Gayle Simonson continued the theme of the many languages we use for communication: “Your discussion of language reminded me of my daughter's favourite quote when she was in high school. I believe it was attributed to a dancer named Pamela Brown: ‘Dance gives the inarticulate a voice.’ Dance can be an amazing means of expression. Certainly for her it helped cope with the grief after her dad died suddenly. For me it was classical music that calmed me and helped me through.”

Pat Jones continues to be fascinated by the process of naming: “My husband pointed out today that the president of Nigeria is named Goodluck Jonathan and his wife is Patience Jonathan. Goodluck isn't having much right now.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

Did you know that Psalm 23 shows up six times in the three-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary? Fortunately, I've done about that many paraphrases of it, so I don't have to keep repeating myself. Since this Sunday is Mothers' Day, this version seems appropriate:

**My Mommy holds my hand; I'm not afraid.
She takes me to school in the mornings;
She lets me play in the playgrounds and the parks;
She makes me feel good.
She shows me how to cross the streets,
because she loves me.
Even when we walk among the crowds and the cars, I am not afraid.
If I can reach her hand or her coat, I know she's with me,
And I'm all right.
When I fall down and I'm all covered with mud
and I come home crying,
she picks me up in her arms.
She wipes my hands, and dries my tears,**

**and I have to cry again,
'cause she loves me so much.
How can anything go wrong with that kind of Mommy near me?
I want to live the rest of my life with Mommy,
in my Mommy's home for ever'n'ever.**

**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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