

Wednesday June 5, 2013

How do you define a community?

By Jim Taylor

Our community had a 99th birthday party, a week ago, for Anne Land. For more than two hours, a succession of people lined up to shake Anne's hand, to kiss her cheek, to give her a hug.

And she – bless her! – knew everyone by name, and responded brightly to the congratulations she received.

The community of Okanagan Centre didn't exist before 1906, when the Maddock brothers from England subdivided a small level stretch of land along the shore of Okanagan Lake. Eight years later, Anne was born to one of the pioneer farming families in the area.

In 1914, there were no roads to Okanagan Centre; no highway running up the Okanagan Valley, no railway connecting to the transcontinental CPR. Rather, the communities along the lake connected by water. By paddlewheel steamer, to Vernon or Kelowna. By rowboat, if they were visiting friends across the lake.

As the tributes noted, Anne is the living history of those days. Aside from attending high school in Vancouver, she has lived her entire life in this community. She still lives in a small, single-story house on a well-treed corner lot.

The only formal speech of the afternoon noted, "Her door is always open. If you stop by, she'll invite you into her kitchen for a cup of tea."

The speaker concluded, "Anne is the face of our community."

Shaping a community

In a sense, of course, we all are. The way we treat our property, the way we treat our neighbours, shapes the kind of community we live in. A community is not a collection of houses and streets, shops and sewers. The people embody the community.

A few years ago the municipality of Lake Country appointed a committee to develop something called a Sector Plan for Okanagan Centre. Our mandate was – I'm summarizing several pages of legalese – to identify the unique elements of our community that we wanted to preserve.

So we made zoning recommendations. We considered economic development. We consulted professional planners. We drafted policies and guidelines.

We wanted to see stars at night, so we opposed street lights all over the place. We also opposed wider roads; we didn't want increased traffic flow. We wanted life on a human scale – comfortable smaller houses, no high rises, no monster homes.

The municipal council received our report. Then filed it and forgot it.

In hindsight, I think what we were really hoping to define was the kind of people who would live in our community. Houses and roads, shops and sidewalks, streetlights and sewers, were merely a means to an end.

Everyone knows that run-down housing tends to fill with run-down dwellers. It's perhaps less obvious that big houses, set far apart, will attract people obsessed with individualism and self-sufficiency. Walled gardens and high fences encourage exclusiveness. As do soundproof apartments behind code-protected lobbies.

Small yards, conversely, move social interaction into public spaces Residents mingle, children play on the roads, visitors drop in for tea.

What we really wanted – and didn't know how to define – was a community of people like Anne Land.

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YOUR TURN

Last week's column, on living in a culture of fear, generated some fascinating letters.

Steve Lawson agreed "one hundred percent with your thoughts on fear. It is something I live with and struggle with all my life and yet don't know why when I really shouldn't be afraid, my faith tells me that, but I still do and don't know how to get over it. Some periods of my life have been worse than others... Through it all I find that being mindful and practicing mindfulness, living in the now, for the moment, really does help me. If I am truly aware of the moment and living in the moment (because that's all I really have) then fear has less hold on me. I believe Jesus was a prayerful, mindful person living each moment as it comes to the fullest possibility, which also helps me." Don Snedrud also agreed, but not as enthusiastically: "I can agree with you on most of what you had written about fear. However, my outlook or spirituality also recognizes the Love that our Creator has given to us. That love is manifested not only in mother nature with its beauty [Don lives in Canmore, Alberta, one of the most scenic places on earth], but also in your writings that the Holy One is in us and around us as sure as the air we breathe. So it is not only fear that is important but also the Creator's Love that draws me closer, to be more compassionate."

Lloyd Lovatt shared some experiences: "It has long seemed to me that effective leaders know when and how to speak to our fear or to our hunger for a vision. It's the vision part that is healthy over the longer run, though fear can enable us to save ourselves as long as it is used to guide our strength. Poor leaders count on us staying afraid and, as you say, build a culture around that."

Lloyd recounted an incident from Ernest Gann's book "Fate Is the Hunter," about an aircrew responding to a crisis. "Transient fear can save us, especially if we have trained responses to fall back on. But chronic fear (a culture of fear) can kill us ... In fact, if we live with chronic fear, we are no longer afraid of any particular thing, we are simply afraid."

"I guess it's why that Churchillian kind of leadership excels in fearful times. It can displace fear with vision and the determination and willingness to be prepared for a broad range of possibilities. Five years ago I was walking on a pilgrimage and reached a new slogan or vision statement for my own life: 'To lead, with others, in a church that is awake and unafraid.'"

Alan Reynold said simply, "The antithesis of faith is fear."

Dale Perkins wrote, "You have identified one of the huge problems -- the primary pathology of our current culture and society."

"It struck home recently when I attended a Block Watch meeting (made up of 55+ year old people -- all nice elderly types who were at their core kindly folks who would 'do anything for anyone'. A police officer and representative of the Block Watch organization were there -- and they took about an hour urging everyone to be paranoid ... We were warned to guard our identity from 'bad guys' by shredding anything with our name and address on it. And look out for predators who might steal our PIN at banking machines, at suspect businesses, or over the phone. Using the internet was extremely risky; never respond to any enquiries or appeals for help. Even family members were not to be trusted -- somebody could be impersonating a grandson or claiming a relationship which was distant. Certainly never let a stranger into our house -- even answering the door was discouraged."

"On and on it went for an hour with question period. Individuals in the audience would give accounts of being robbed or taken advantage of, and others would nod in agreement. We were being schooled in how to never risk friendship with anybody."

Jim McManus noted a difference between fear and caution: "I drive my car with great care, calculating the position of cars, what they say with little yellow lights, and what they might do without their due use. [In life] I am not driven by fear. But I do calculate how much I can achieve today, etc.

"I was once asked by a pupil, at the end of a school assembly, "Do you ever pray?" Never being faced with that question before, I replied, "The real question is "Do I ever stop praying?" I am always doing two things at once. Sometimes, I am mostly praying, and what else I might be doing is there in the background. At other times, I am doing other things, but in the background I pray." I probably never stop praying."

"Right on... again!" Wayne Irwin wrote. "And when we can decide to live in the trust (as Einstein put it) that the Universe is ultimately a friendly place whatever our religious metaphors be, we can be a blessing to the world, rather than a curse. Fearlessly."

James West recommended, "Read the first few pages of James Wallis' *"On God's Side."* He understands the cycle of fear that the cynics use to paralyze the population. His remedy is to go deeper."

And finally, Ivan Gamble sent me some breathing exercises he uses to consciously displace fear, etc. with love and other beneficial emotions.

PSALM PARAPHRASES

The Revised Common Lectionary offers two psalms for this Sunday – 146 with 30 as an alternate. When I looked at them both, I liked Psalm 30 better. It seemed to speak to me about people like Anne Land (see column above) who, tragically, didn't really flower until after her husband died.

1 My God, O my God, what a gift you have given me!
2 I thought I was born a loser;
you have given me self-esteem.
3 I let others speak for me; I let others think for me.
I felt I was nothing.
You have given me life.
4 I am not a faulty copy of anyone else, God.
I am me. Thank you.
5, 7 Once I thought God despised me.
But I have felt God's gentle hands lift me into the light.
8 I cried silently in the night, afraid to be heard.
I stifled my own suffering.
I thought I didn't matter.
9 I could have died--but I was afraid no one would notice.
10 "Can anyone hear me?" I cried. "Does anyone care?"
11 And you heard me, God.
You turned my rainclouds into rainbows; you stirred spices into the watery soup of my life.
12 I am done with self-abasement.
I will delight in me and in you forever.

You can buy this and other paraphrases in my book *Everyday Psalms*. Order through Wood Lake Publications, info@woodlake.com or 1-800-663-2775.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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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
