

*Wednesday November 28, 2012*

## **Making something out of nothing**

By Jim Taylor

Sometimes, in my editing workshops, I instruct participants, “Don’t think about a horse.”

They snicker. Because the first thing that pops to mind is a horse, of course. We humans can’t NOT think of something; we can only think of something else.

The same holds when someone asks, “What are you thinking about?”

You reply, “Oh, nothing...”

But you’re not really thinking of nothing – you’re thinking about things that don’t seem worth mentioning.

If you really want to try thinking about nothing, imagine what’s out there beyond the end of the universe.

That’s right – nothing.

How far does that nothing extend? Nowhere. Because there’s nothing there to extend to anywhere.

In nothing, there’s no length or space. No mass or volume. No time. So there’s no way of measuring how long what isn’t there hasn’t been there.

You find that confusing? Of course. Because we can’t imagine nothing.

So when we ponder the beginnings of the universe we live in, we can’t help wondering what was there before the beginning. But before the beginning, there was no before. Because there was no time.

## **Time has no future**

That’s equally hard to get our heads around – no time? We can, with some effort, imagine a vacuum -- provided it’s inside a container. But we can’t imagine the absence of time. Even in a coma, we age. It’s the one inexorable dimension we all deal with. Nothing that we can do stops it, or delays it, or reverses it. Time always flows in one direction, onward.

But time is not a thing, an object. It’s not like a road, which exists over the horizon even if we haven’t gotten there yet.

Time has a past. Time has a present. But it has no future, because the future hasn’t happened yet. By the time the future happens, it will be the present. Or the past.

The future doesn’t exist -- yet.

We create the future, by everything we do. Each breath I take affects, however infinitesimally, the atmospheric composition my grandchildren will inhale 50 years from now. If I dump toxic chemicals down the drain, I affect the water they will drink some someday. If I start a war, I remove certain people and their descendants from everybody’s future.

Everything we do, everything we say -- perhaps even everything we think -- shapes the future our successors will live in.

Does that make sense?

## **Accidents waiting to happen**

If it does, you should recognize that it conflicts with the notion that a Great Engineer In The Sky designed everything in advance.

By that understanding, God wound up the universe and set it ticking, long ago, with every eventuality laid out in its gears. That road over the horizon already has its accidents in place, just waiting for you to get there.

I don't believe that concept any more. If living creatures have free will – however that free will was provided – then whatever they/we do creates the future. The future has no form, until we form it as we move onward through life.

That's why it matters so much what we do here and now.

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## **YOUR TURN**

Last week's column, about the amazing ability of two conjoined girls, Krista and Tatania, to experience each other's senses, seemed to bemuse some of you, and almost frighten some others.

Isabel Gibson caught both aspects: "I must admit that the thought of two people looking out of one set of eyes puts a cold shudder down my back. Although I'm not as sure where I draw the line - how many people live inside what I call 'me'?"

"But your metaphorical point is valid. I find it easy to slip into wanting to do things 'by my own self', forgetting that that self has been formed largely through interactions with others."

Eduard Hiebert saw in my column a universal truth, "where we in bits and pieces go naked only to zipper up again." Then he wondered, "Is there something I do which contributes to the zipping up again?"

Ralph Gardner asked: "I would be interested in your grandson's reaction to the interaction with the Hogan girls. Children so often are much more adaptable at accepting differences -- was there any reaction in the community as a whole, by the children themselves?"

Our grandson took the two girls for granted. He didn't call them weird or abnormal. The first we heard about it was this: "There are two girls in my class. They walk funny, like this." He tried to walk tilted to one side, and promptly fell over.

Laurina Tallman and Janie Wallbrown both questioned my apparent desire to get into someone else's mind, and vice versa. Both wrote long and carefully thought out letters – which I will not quote, because it would be unfair to tear a small portion out of context. If I understood them properly, both argued that there is a need for privacy as well as for mutuality, that there is both something laudable and something dangerous in opening oneself up too much to others. Part of being a mature and responsible human is learning where to draw the lines.

That's a wholly inadequate summary of what they said – diversely and independently – but it's the best I can do in limited space to pass along their wisdom.

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## **PSALM PARAPHRASES**

Abraham bargained with God to try to save the people of Sodom. Moses talked God out of destroying the Israelites, by persuading God that the Egyptians would consider God a failure if the Israelites died in the desert. Obviously, it's okay to argue with God. Like a skilled negotiator or a lawyer, we must be ready to use all the tactics available to us.

Given that understanding, Psalm 25:1-10 comes out this way:

1 To you, Great One, I plead my case.

2 I trust you; don't let me down.

You won't let me make a fool of myself.

Lord, don't let others lord it over me.

3 You wouldn't humiliate your loyal helpers, would you?

Save your heavy hand for those who don't care about you.

4 I want to be your friend, Holy One.

I want to do things your way.

5 So take my hand;

lead me through life's potholes and pitfalls.

You are the only one who can save me;

You are what I have been looking for, all my life.

6 Don't do it for my sake.

Do it for your own reputation as a loving deity.

7 Don't count my past mistakes against me.

Be true to yourself -- you are a loving God,

So show me love.

8 Perfect One, because you are perfect,  
you can take pity on less perfect people;

9 You can train the fumble-footed to follow your footsteps.

10 Your ways all lead to love and faithfulness,

And those who keep faith with you will not forget it.

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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## HYMNSIGHT

My friend Ralph Milton, who published his Rumors newsletter for many years, has something special for you. It's called HYMNSIGHT, and it's for any church that currently projects the words of hymns and prayers, or plans to.

Ralph writes, Since retiring, I have rediscovered my old love of photography, and found creative use for my pictures in the life of First United where Bev and I worship. Our entire liturgy is projected, so that people read responses and sing hymns from screens. I use my photos to add color, vitality and depth to all the hymns and most of the liturgy.

In the course of this, I have developed slide sets to go with 600 hymns, plus about two thousand slides, in both the standard screen and the newer wide screen shape. You can use all of them, in any way you wish, without permission, and absolutely free, as long as it's non-profit and church related.

All you need to access the website is go to:

<http://www.hymnsight.ca> [www.hymnsight.ca](http://www.hymnsight.ca)

In addition to all that visual material, there's a comprehensive "how-to" manual for those who are new to the idea of using projected visuals in church, and for those who have already begun.

HymnSight provides a set of suggested visuals to go with each hymn, but the words to the hymn are not there, mainly for copyright considerations.

Please take a look to see if this service scratches where you itch. If you think it's worthwhile, please let some of your colleagues in ministry know about it. And if you know of a website that could benefit from a link to HymnSight, why not add it?  
Blessings,  
Ralph Milton

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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 "SeemslkeGod" page, [www.seemslkegod.org](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com](mailto:isabel@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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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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