

Wednesday May 23, 2012

## When words are never enough

By Jim Taylor

Arnie Schreder died about two weeks ago. Arnie was a legend throughout northern Canada – a bush pilot, an instructor, a mentor... Two memorial services, one here and one in Yellowknife, were packed with pilots mourning his death.

I never met Arnie. But his wife sings in our choir.

I live with words the way Arnie lived aircraft. But I had trouble finding words to say to her.

Perhaps it's the "rescuer" archetype that psychologist Carl Jung claimed is so strong in us – we want to find words that will make a difference, offer comfort, or convey some wisdom. But words alone can never do that.

Arnie's family chose Sarah McLachlan's song "I will remember you" for his memorial service. Sarah got it right: "It's funny how we feel so much, yet cannot say a word. We are screaming inside but we can't be heard."

In those circumstances, it's so easy to blurt out the wrong words.

## Saying the wrong thing

The last thing a cancer sufferer wants to hear about is your cousin Mabel's miracle cure in Mexico. The guy who barely survived a highway crash doesn't need to hear how you got rear-ended in a parking lot.

And it offers no consolation at all to be told that this was God's will.

- "God must have loved him very much..." By implication, you didn't love him enough.
- "She's in a better place now..." Clearly, your home doesn't measure up.
- Or, worst of all, "You must have done something to deserve this..." Job's comforters could not stab the knife of moral judgment any deeper.

So we struggle to formulate kindly words on sympathy cards. We rehearse messages of caring, and then stammer awkwardly into silence as we gaze into eyes devoid of sparkle.

Instead, we rely on tears. And hugs. And casseroles.

Casseroles are thoughtful gifts, especially when one has lost any desire to prepare meals. But even casseroles can be too much, when your soul has been flayed raw by emotions.

After her son's death, a friend lost her tolerance for good intentions as yet another tearful well-wisher came to her door. "Just gimme the casserole and shut up!" she snapped.

## Try a little tenderness...

Perhaps it's not what you do after the event that matters as much as what you did before it.

To put this bluntly, if you don't know that I care about you when things are going well, nothing that I do or say when things go badly will penetrate your shell of pain. Conversely, if you know I care when things are going well, you will know I care when things fall apart, even if I can't find any inspired words of comfort.

Just be there. Just stand by. Just be patient. Survivors have to work through shock, anger, depression... On their own. No one else can do it for them.

A hospital chaplain once told me, "You wouldn't do a patient's physical exercises for them. You shouldn't attempt to do their spiritual exercises for them either."

The time to be a true friend begins before they realize they need one.

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## YOUR TURN

Diana Cabott loved my description of hummingbirds at play. “I have been unlucky in having any come to our patio here in South Surrey last year and this spring although my feeder is the same type that I used in Carrs Landing and we have lots of flowers in the garden and on the patio here. I do feed the crows though and have two favourites, I feed them unsalted saltines (oxymoron?) [The male] is smarter than his wife -- he can pile up as many as three, (quite slowly and with much precision and very careful not to break even a corner) and then fly away. If I forget to put out the crackers he will come to my glass door and sit and look at me working on my computer until I see him and dutifully put out the food. In the winter we stay in California and have two types of hummingbirds on our deck, one is Anna's and is brown and beige, and the other is the iridescent greeny type...both of which don't seem to migrate but are there all year according to our neighbours.”

Dru Tyler felt that Genghis Khan needed some defence: “A year or so ago I picked up a book at my local (sadly underfunded) library. The title is 'The Secret History of the Mongol Queens: how the daughters of Genghis Khan rescued his empire', by Jack Weatherford. Who knew Genghis Khan had daughters?! The book is worth locating and reading. Weatherford gives us a whole new window that takes Khan and the Mongols beyond stereotypes and, certainly for me, reminds that there is way more than meets the eye for most of what we assume.”

Steve Roney agreed with my description of evolution as a one-way street, but added, “Are you aware that this simple observation is unaccountable by Darwin's theory? There is, if you think about it, no clear reason why evolution, if random, should move broadly and seemingly unidirectionally towards greater complexity or towards greater consciousness. These do not obviously affect survivability one way or the other; and certainly not enough to, as you rightly say, make the movement seem to be only in one direction in all cases.”

Steve then digressed into the subject of the previous week's column, on weeds. Jean Hamilton had referred to goutweed. “Ah,” Steve exclaimed, “here's an ideal opportunity to test my theory—that the fault is not in our weeds, but in our selves. Is goutweed noxious? No—there is an obvious reason why it is called goutweed. Applied externally, it apparently soothes the pains of gout or arthritis. Taken internally, useful as a laxative. It also tastes like spinach. The Romans considered it an important food crop.”

And still on the subject of weeds, Dorothy Haug wrote, “I think it's interesting to note that the abhorred dandelion has now been shown to provide a medicinal tea when its root or leaves are brewed (cancer has even been cited as being fouled by this hardy plant tea). However, I am not anxious to try it as my neighbours seem quite liberal with the RoundUp and I fear it may be lurking in my yard as well. Yes, I get sore and the task [of weeding] never seems to end -- but there is something about being down near the ground smelling all that growing that this task reminds me to do.”

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## **PSALM PARAPHRASES**

The suggested reading for Pentecost Sunday is Psalm 104:24-34 (and 35b). Here's my take on updating it.

24      Abundant and plentiful are your creations, O Lord;  
you imagined them, and they came into being.  
The world is full of your vision.

25, 26    You fill the abyss with the ocean, the seamless womb of life.  
Upon its surface, you support tankers and freighters and cruise ships;  
in its depths dwell creatures beyond counting--  
sleek and gaudy, strange and deadly,  
anchored like rocks and faster than fear.  
From invisible plankton to playful whales,  
the Lord God made them all.

27      All these owe their existence to you;  
you set each in an environment where it can survive.

29      But if you turned your thoughts away from them, they would vanish,  
a fleeting figment of your imagination.

Your spirit gives them life, as your spirit put breath in our clay;  
without it, we return to the dust from which we came,  
the dead elements of bygone stars.

30 Blow your breath through our being, Lord.  
Create us afresh;  
renew the life of your creation.

31 Then your glory will continue forever;  
all living things will rejoice in your gift of life.  
The imagination of the Lord will be evident  
in all creatures great and small,

32 from coral cells to the continents themselves.  
God strokes the earth and it trembles in ecstasy;  
The Lord excites the mountains and they erupt in lava.

33 Is it any wonder I sing the praises of God?  
As long as I live, my life itself attests God's glory.

34 So may my imagination synchronize with yours, O God,  
and may you fill all of my thoughts.

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YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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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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