

Wednesday August 15, 2012

It was a very good year...

By Jim Taylor

“When I was 21,” Frank Sinatra crooned, “it was a very good year.”

Yes, indeed it was – when I was 21. I was a senior at university. I was abominably fit. I wore the university's “Big Block” sweater, awarded for outstanding athletic achievements. I had lead roles in the Players' Club; I wrote for the student newspaper. My courses allowed me to explore exciting new avenues of knowledge.

And to top it all, I had fallen in love.

Fifty-five years later, I think of that year as probably the best year of my life.

But would I want to go back to it? Go back to being an opinionated, brash, insecure, misogynistic, pimply, hormone-ridden, egocentric youth with no idea where he was headed or how he was going to get there?

Not a chance!

Joan and I have gotten along better in our later years than we ever did before. We're fairly secure financially. We no longer feel a need to compete. We have learned to tolerate, to respect, even to celebrate our differences.

But at the same time, our joints creak, our minds go blank unpredictably, our stamina has plummeted. Illness threatens our future. So, despite all that's good about these years, we would not call them the best of our lives.

No original paradise

I suspect that writer of the story of the Garden of Eden, whoever he was, may have had similar thoughts. He – almost certainly a he – had raised a family, laboured for food and shelter, became the patriarch of a clan...

Now he looks back at what seems, in retrospect, “a very good year.” He calls it The Garden of Eden. In the warm glow of nostalgia, everything was going right. Before it started going wrong...

If I don't read the story that way, I would have to conclude that it is wishful thinking at best, a lie at worst. Because we now know that life did not start in paradise. Not even human life.

This earth began as a most inhospitable place – lifeless, rent by volcanos and earthquakes, lashed by storms. Life, when it emerged, was more chaos than paradise, a vast anarchic soup of possibilities. But from those possibilities emerged – eventually – the biosphere we know today.

Which continues to evolve.

When we read the Eden story as fact, even as holy myth, we mislead ourselves. Because it invites us to return to a paradise that never was.

20/20 hindsight

The message of evolution is that we always move forward, never backward. From a planetary perspective, paradise lies somewhere ahead of us. And it always will – for merely by living we continue creating our collective future.

But for each of us –perhaps for every animate being – there comes a time as we age and decline when we remember our prime. And we say to ourselves, “That was a very good year.”

I doubt if the writer of Genesis chapters 2-4 intended to write a rationale for a theological doctrine of original sin. Or to justify centuries of stomping on women and snakes.

More likely, he looked back after a difficult life, and thought, “Yes, that was a very good year.”

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YOUR TURN

Lots of interesting mail about last week's column, on the various kinds of signals we use to communicate with each other.

Cliff Gieseke wrote from San Antonio, in Texas, to correct one impression I may have given: "Some may think More code is just an ancient form of communication, but it is very much alive with radio amateurs, though no longer required to get a license. I have been using it since 1952 since first licensed. (My call sign is W4ZFL) It works well when signals are weak. I sometimes check into a missionary traffic net with Morse code. They can hear me this way when voice could not be heard. Grammar is simplified too and those who don't have a good command of English can still communicate. There is a kind of magic in this wireless communication that still fascinates me after all these years -- extremely weak wireless signals traveling long distances through the ether."

"Thanks for the memories," wrote Steve Lawson. "You are one step ahead of me, I don't even own a cell phone, neither does my wife and we both work for the church -- just found no need to use it in ministry. Our daughters each have one and don't use landline phones at all.

"I remember very well Scouting days doing semaphore on the tops of the hills of Hockley Valley north of Toronto and winning awards for our team. You had to be pretty accurate in relaying the message -- not much room for interpretation..."

John Willems, back in Medicine Hat, Alberta, again, reminded me that the church also has its confusing signals. "As a Christ follower for many years, I've still to figure them out," John wrote. "And then there is Jesus with his disciples who spent years walking around trying to figure out both the signals and the words. Come to think about it, they had a hard time with change. As always, change is confusing, observation brings clarity."

Sally Stoddard offered a solution to my lament about complex cell-phones: "You can get a Jitterbug cell phone (see them at jitterbug.com) which doesn't do anything but dial out and receive."

Bill Peterson also had a suggestion: "I too have had enough of long contracts and extra bells and whistles. I discovered Consumer Cellular in a Consumer Report issue on cell phones and options. Consumer Cellular is based in Portland, OR. There are no contract times. Monthly payments only. For the first time, I have buttons large enough for one-hand use, without mistakes. No camera, phonebook, message (in or out), call log, alarm, calendar, calculator, FM radio with ear buds, settings, or games. Time & date on screen. Oh, yes, no keyboard. Numeric keypad with large numbers. There's also an emergency button on the back side."

Charles Hill drew on his counselling experience: "Communication is incredibly complex. From one man, 'I love you,' means a close emotional bonding. From another it means, 'I deserve sex.'

"In my college classes I see the modes of communication affecting writing -- text writing in conflict with the standard English needed for college and perhaps business world success. Subcultures within even a small cultural group can dictate acceptable communication. The penalty for not adapting can be severe. I once had a 8th-grade student beaten by his father for uttering a grammatically (that is, school acceptable) sentence.

"Communication styles affect thinking styles and emotions. The best way to promote a cause is to find a small group of 'enraged' individuals and have them rant into the TV. I think that Marshall McLuhan was right many decades ago: the medium is far more important than the message."

As a follow-up on Charles's comment, I saw a piece by a business owner who explained why he refuses to hire people who use poor grammar: http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2012/07/i_wont_hire_people_who_use_poo.html

Margaret Carr noted another set of symbols in communication that I had overlooked: "My grandchildren who live in Madison Wisc could ask for what they needed long before they could talk. Their mother would say, 'Do you want a banana or grapes?' They would sign and she would say 'OK ,I'll get you some grapes'. If they are noisy or misbehaving in church she [simply uses the sign] which means No or Stop. No one knows she has corrected them but they do as she tells them. Even though they talk well, they still sometimes sign as well -- especially 'Help' when she is on the phone with me, which tends to be lengthy!"

Finally, Isabel Gibson commented, "Interesting article today, but a phabulous paraphrase!"

PSALM PARAPHRASES

That NASA photograph of earth from space may have been one of the most prophetic statements of our time. I thought of it when doing this paraphrase of Psalm 111.

- 1 The bright blue planet spins in the vast darkness of space;
let all who live on earth rejoice.
- 2 Only on this one tiny orb do we know life exists;
let all who live on earth give thanks.
- 3 The vision takes our breath away;
let all who live on earth open their eyes.
- 4 This fragile ball bursting with life is a work of art;
let all who live on earth recognize God's goodness.
- 5 Foxes and fieldmice, humans and whales, eagles and ants--
all are woven together in a tapestry of relationships;
let all who live on earth recognize this reality.
- 6 And God has delegated responsibility to us;
let all who live on earth be mindful.
- 7 We must exercise care not to upset the delicate equilibrium of shared life;
let all who live on earth understand their responsibility.
- 8 A tapestry cannot be reduced to a single thread;
let all who live on earth accept their responsibility.
- 9 This egg floating in the dark womb of the universe is like God's own embryo;
let all who live on earth treat it as holy.
- 10 We share an awesome and terrible responsibility;
may God live forever.

For this and other paraphrases, you can order *Everyday Psalms* through Wood Lake Publications, info@woodlake.com or 1-800-663-2775.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@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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