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A word of explanation – I'm having trouble with the computer that handles the mailing lists for these columns. I've now tried four times to send out Sunday's Sharp Edges. If this column gets to you, my apologies for Sharp Edges non-arrival. If this column doesn't get through either, well, then I guess we have more work to do...

Wednesday August 13, 2014

All rivers flow down to the sea

By Jim Taylor

We sent Bob Little on his last journey at the beginning of this month.

My friendship with Bob goes back than a century, although I first met Bob in 1957, when he came to the University of B.C. But our fathers had been theology students together in Toronto, in the 1920s. And incredibly, we have an archival photo of our two grandfathers, friends during the late 1800s.

Bob died last winter. He wanted his ashes scattered in his home province of B.C. So his widow brought them to the town of Golden, where the Kicking Horse River joins the mighty Columbia.

We gathered at the confluence of the two rivers on a quiet Sunday afternoon. We all signed the cardboard box that contained his ashes. Bob's son Doug waded into the Columbia and pushed the little box out into the current. We watched it drift downstream, out of sight...

Deja vu

It occurred to me that I had done something like this before. At the Indian city of Haridwar, where the Ganges emerges from the Himalayan mountains, my wife and I had joined in a traditional evening celebration. We lit candles in little floral floats and set them free in the river. A flotilla of flickering lights drifted downstream into the darkness.

Similar rituals take place in China and Japan. Perhaps everywhere in the world. Because every culture, every religion, seems to have some sense that a river makes an appropriate metaphor for death.

Every year, millions of devout Hindus come to Benares or Varanasi, India's holiest city, to cremate their relatives' bodies on the city's burning

ghats, then to scatter their ashes into the sacred Ganges to be carried away.

Greek mythology visualized the river Styx as the boundary between life and death. Some cultures still place a coin in a deceased person's mouth, to cover the charges for ferrying that person across the river.

The Christian classic Pilgrim's Progress imagines a dying hero crossing a river, "and the trumpets sounded for him on the other side."

I like to think that these customs intuitively recognize that all rivers ultimately flow to the sea from which all living things originally came. Thus we return to our universal home, our oceanic womb.

The right kind of wake

But that's probably stretching credulity. Because many who float little boats down rivers have no idea where those rivers go. They have never seen the sea; they may not even know there is such a thing as an ocean. They just know that the river carries things away, and that those things are never seen again.

Like our friend Bob.

We didn't talk about all this on the riverbank, of course. But that evening at the lodge where we were staying, we told stories. It was the right kind of wake. No sermons, no rituals, no formal eulogies. Gently lubricated by beer and wine, we told stories. About Bob. About our various relationships with him.

As his son Doug commented, death may end a life, but it does not end a relationship. As long as we talk about those relationships, Bob has not left us.

Even if the last of his physical body has drifted down the river.

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YOUR TURN

Jim Henderschedt liked last week's column about not following too closely to any beaten paths.

"Amen to this," he wrote. "Recently I have come to the conclusion that I am not a follower of a Reformer, or a denomination, or even a man-made institution that ends in 'ity.' If I am a follower of anyone I want it to be a follower of the Teacher and even that depends on the gospel witnesses and my understanding and interpretation of them.

"A colleague recently made the following observation by offering it as an inscription for my tomb-stone: 'Here lies Jim....He thought, taught, preached, and lived outside the box.....and now he's in one!'"

Isabel Gibson sent a personal experience: "Your account of alternative routes

resonated this week. We've been for several walks with grandchildren (aged 8 and 10) in Yellowknife. For the first little while, as they bounded ahead, levitating up solid rock faces at about 60 degrees, I followed. After a while, I started looking ahead to where we were bound, and then looking around for a path more suited to my strength, balance, and wind.

"Regarding the difference between science and religion, the idealized view of the scientific process is (as you note) not always incarnated in our scientific institutions, any more than the idealized pursuit of the holy is always incarnated in our religious institutions.

"We've talked before about how good organizations go bad -- it's the seeming inevitability of it that gets me down. Maybe now I can take your hiking metaphor and trade depression for an active search for a different path, a different vantage point, than the one offered by any given institution."

James West had missed my book on Sin, but "I'm on your wavelength. Quoting myself, 'The pursuit of virtue can be as deadly as the pursuit of vice.'

"Re this week's epistle: I too tend toward the scientific view of doctrine. I learned much from observing the development of Marine Corp Warfighting Doctrine. It's evidence based. If it weren't, war would be even costlier to the bodies and souls of belligerents and bystanders."

PSALM PARAPHRASES

Does the idea of oil dribbling down Aaron's beard actually appeal to you? I didn't think so. So I amended Psalm 133 a little:

1 How good it feels to have the human family gathered together for this sumptuous feast.

2...Here we rejoice in the rich repast of fruit and tree and vine.

Apples and oranges, grapes and cherries, yield their joyous juices to our lusting mouths. Drops of surplus pleasure trickle down our chins.

We dab them at them un-selfconsciously with rumpled napkins.

3...This gathering refreshes like sweet morning in the mountains, like a prairie sky polished bright by gentle breezes.

Surely this is what God intended when God invented community.

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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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, or send a note to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca
