

Wednesday January 25, 2012

Making the best of it

By Jim Taylor

I had expected a hard-boiled egg for breakfast that morning. But when I cracked the top off the shell, the white inside was still runny, semi-transparent.

I was probably six or seven years old, and spending the weekend with my grandparents. I was also quite sure of what I liked and didn't like. And I certainly did not like this partly cooked egg.

"It's disgusting," I protested. "I can't eat that!"

Grandpa Taylor sat at the table having breakfast with me. "Well," he said cheerfully, "let me show you what to do with a situation like that."

He took a piece of toast, and buttered it. He tore it into little pieces. He dropped the bits of toast into a bowl. Then he scooped the runny egg out of its shell onto the toast, and stirred the whole sticky mess until the egg thoroughly coated the toast. He shook some salt and pepper onto the glutinous mix.

"There," he said. "That's called a styuchie. Try it."

I did. It was delicious.

A new word

I've no idea where the word "styuchie" came from. I don't even know how to spell it – which also means I can't find the word in any of my dictionaries. Google fails to provide even a single reference.

I've been told that it's a Northern Irish colloquialism, apparently meaning "disgusting mess."

I do remember how to pronounce the word, though. The "st" part is easy. The "yu" is like "eeeeuuuw...!" And the "ch" is like the Scottish "loch."

Steeeyucchhhh-eee...

But more important than just remembering the word, I remember the message that came with it. Unpalatable experiences can become more acceptable if you change your perspective.

And not just about food.

It's like the familiar saying, "If life hands you a lemon, make lemonade!"

Seeing things differently

Sometimes simply amending one's vocabulary makes a difference. From "nigger" to "black" or "African American." From "broad" to "woman." From "faggot" or "queer," to "gay"....

Sometimes the personal context also has to change.

In the days when I was young and single, I felt nauseated watching married friends change their infants' diapers.

Then I had children of my own. Amazing, the difference that love makes. Suddenly, I could wipe bums. Mop up vomit. Bandage bleeding wounds. Blow snotty noses.

Because someone you love turns to you, depends on you, needs you. A task, a role, a function that you once despised becomes something you do willingly, if not gladly.

When I was young, my political views tended towards the libertarian. Leave people alone, I argued, and let the cream rise to the top. Then I encountered people who had been penalized through no fault of their own – simply because or where, or when, they happened to be born. Their egg cometh out runny. Even empty. Now I can see that they need something more than their own bootstraps.

Once upon a time, I thought I was destined for fame and fortune. But life didn't work out that way. I'm discovering the less-stressful satisfactions of being a relatively small frog in a relatively small puddle.

Grandpa was right. Life sometimes comes up soft-boiled and runny. Don't reject it. Make a styuchie out of it instead.

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YOUR TURN

Responses to last week's column, about the ways we envision life after death, brought responses ranging from the facetious (at least, I think they were intended to be facetious) to the deadly serious (umm, bad pun there).

Dave Buckna wondered, "If heaven is perfect, won't it be perfectly boring?"

And Wayne Irwin wrote: "Right on! Sittibg on a cloud playing a harp ... forever. How hellish is that!"

Cliff Boldt asked, "Who started sanitizing our language? Death, dead, dying," he suggested, are "words to live by."

Diane Robinson, in Saskatchewan, shared my distaste for the euphemisms of obituaries: 'As in BC, very few people 'die' here in Saskatchewan. They 'go to be with the Lord'; or, 'there's one more angel in heaven' I've told my husband that, if I predecease him, he's to say that I 'died!' (with the exclamation mark, included!).

"Our society's use of euphemisms in regards to death doesn't really surprise me, however. It seems to me that North American society seems to have an abhorrence of everything age-related and death-related. We idolize everything that is youth-full; we buy everything that is sags-and-wrinkles-defying; we warehouse our declining elders away from the public eye; we employ death 'professionals' to manage our death....etc. A couple of weeks ago there was a story on the evening news about scientists who are looking for ways to 'cure' (yes, that's the word the reporter used) age. Have we come to that? Has age become a 'disease' that requires a 'cure'? God help us all."

Jack Driedger defended the euphemisms: "It is true that we all die. There is no denying that fact. The question is, what dies? The physical body dies and continues to die as it disintegrates and becomes part of our physical earth. People who use such terms as 'passed on' or 'has gone to the arms of the Lord' are not necessarily denying the physical death of the human body. They are not necessarily afraid of death. They are convinced that only the physical body has died. They believe there is more to dying than the demise of the physical body. They are so convinced of the rest of their being entering a new life that they actually look forward to it. Why should we deny them that faith that makes them unafraid to die?"

.John McTavish and James West both wanted to correct me on one point.

John wrote, "Jesus did say one thing about life beyond the tomb. He said that we would be like the angels (Luke 20:36). But then who knows what an angel is like?"

"We see through a glass darkly, and the glass is never darker than when we are trying to imagine the unimaginable conditions of eternity. To say anything at all here risks making the whole thing appear -- even to ourselves let alone others -- laughably improbable."

James West sent a similar note: "Actually Jesus did say something about life beyond the tomb, but it was reported before his death and resurrection. 'In heaven they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like the angels...' (Matt. 22: 30, Mk. 12: 25, Lk 20: 24 f.) One can [also] infer that there will be wine, fruit of the vine, in heaven because Luke reports Jesus declaring that he will not again drink the fruit of the vine with his disciples until he drinks it again in the kingdom of heaven. (Lk. 22:18) There may be another reference to what heaven will be like in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus.

"You are correct, though, in that Jesus doesn't dwell on what heaven will be like, other than that relationships will be set right between God and neighbor. That's more than enough for me."

Finally, Chaplain Ralph Ludwig thanked me "for an insightful consideration of death, dying, retirement and heaven -- all words that we use so easily without asking what do they mean to us, to others. We assume that others think as

we do, when in fact there are such wide differences in our thoughts and imaginations. You have helped to start conversations in the retirement community in which I work.”

Wonderful! That’s the kind of discussion that I was hoping would get started.

ABOUT MY BOOKS, ETC.

I still have a few copies of a book my father wrote exploring Christian theology through Christian art.

The problem with art, of course, is that it cannot put an abstract concept on canvas. An artist cannot paint an Incarnation or a Resurrection without putting real humans, in real situations, into the picture. The expression, therefore, has to be grounded in a particular culture and society; the infinite and universal has to be represented in finite terms.

My father – who once took art lessons from members of Canada’s Group of Seven – spent much of his life after retiring as principal of the Vancouver School of Theology, seeking out the ways artists through the centuries had attempted to deal with this dilemma. I’m probably biased, but I think that in examining the ways art portrays theological concepts, he explained those concepts better than most theological texts.

The book is “Seeing the Mystery: Exploring Christian Faith through the Eyes of Artists,” by William S. Taylor, 94 pages. There are only about 20 copies left in the world. Most of the illustrations are in full colour.

If you would like a copy, write to me – Jim Taylor, 1300 6th Street, Lake Country, BC, Canada, V4V 2H7.

Unfortunately, I can’t send these out on the honour system, as I do with my biblical paraphrases. I will have to charge \$30 Canadian to include postage, paid in advance.

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 “Model T Websites.” a simple (and cheap) seven-page website for congregations who want to develop a web presence <<http://www.modeltwebsites.com>>
- 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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