

Wednesday February 6, 2013

“Critical mass” for social movements

By Jim Taylor

“If more than 15 per cent of the population disobey a law,” a Quebec policemen once told me, “it’s unenforceable.”

I don’t know where he got that 15 per cent figure. Perhaps it was an educated guess; perhaps there have been serious studies.

Details aside, though, his point is correct. Once a certain critical mass is achieved, the effects become unstoppable.

The term “critical mass” comes from nuclear physics.. At the Manhattan Project, scientists discovered that when a certain mass of fissionable material is brought together, a chain reaction starts. Up to that mass, the reaction will fizzle out; beyond it, the reaction proceeds explosively.

The principle is also true socially.

We commonly assume that social change requires a majority – 50 per cent plus one. Or more.

But the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia had nowhere near a majority of citizens involved. I don’t know what proportion of Egyptians rallied in Tahrir Square. I’m sure it wasn’t 50 per cent. But it was enough to topple Hosni Mubarak. It may be enough to force current president Mohamed Morsi to bend.

Small changes, huge effects

When I look at history, I see even smaller factions having huge effects.

The biggest upheaval in history started with one radical from Galilee. He gathered 12 men and an unknown number of women. They told a few others. They formed a tiny fragment of the Jewish population, an even smaller proportion of the almighty Roman empire. But they generated enough critical mass to become the empire’s official religion, 300 years later.

Has the Idle No More movement in Canada, the Occupy movement in the U.S., achieved critical mass yet? I doubt it. But who knows?

One thing is clear – a critical mass always favours some new development. It never goes into reverse. The heel-dragging majority may crush a radical movement before it achieves a critical mass, just as nuclear engineers can prevent blobs of enriched uranium to building enough mass to start a chain reaction.

But once the reaction starts, nothing can stuff the genie back into the bottle.

Ideas can’ t be undone

Bruce Sanguin, in his book *Darwin, Divinity, and the Dance of the Cosmos*, uses the example of feminism. Feminism has always been around. It existed in ancient cultures. It threads through the Bible. But feminism achieved critical mass in the 1970s. Now, says Sanguin, “the feminist revolution has meant that the treatment of women in all cultures will inevitably be measured against the [new] standard of equality. There is no going back. Patriarchal regimes and institutions may resist feminism, but now that it has emerged into human consciousness, it can never be ‘undone’.”

He could equally well have used slavery as an example. Or literacy. Or mobile computing devices – which now outnumber the world’s human population.

Or nuclear technology, for that matter.

No one can predict exactly when a nascent movement becomes a critical mass. It may require as little as one more participant.

Confronted by a new movement, it seems to me, we can try to ignore it. We can resist it. Or we can join it – and perhaps add the infinitesimal extra that turns mere potential into critical mass.

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YOUR TURN

Last week's column suggested that the only people who talk about miracles are those for whom it worked. Charles Hill wrote, "You have just identified the elephant in the room. If we live in a truly random universe, the hedonists are right. Having grown up in the Oral Roberts era, I am reluctant to deny 'miracles.' If all of us who prayed for survival had our prayers answered, there wouldn't be enough food to feed us. Perhaps the creator is truly ineffable. Perhaps some are reincarnated. Perhaps those who die have fulfilled their purpose. Perhaps death isn't as terrible as we believe. Perhaps God engineers history for a greater purpose."

Charles concluded, "I'm looking forward to the responses to this piece."

Indeed, there were lots of responses.

Tom Watson wrote about his own painful experience: "I still remember the day, going on 15 years ago now. Our oldest daughter, Maureen, stood holding her youngest child -- then less than 2 years old -- and told us that the next day she was going to see a specialist about a substantial pain in her right hip. At the same time the specialist was going to examine a lump that had been discovered on her breast. She said to me, 'Dad, if you have any *connections* now would be a good time to use them.'

"Both she and I knew, without further words, what she meant by *connections*.

"Here was a girl who was, for whatever reason, generally stoic in demeanor, took life in its stride, didn't complain, didn't express difficult feelings of any kind. Yet here she was, in seemingly jocular fashion, but with a seriousness that cut the air with her words, saying, 'This might be the time to pull out all the stops.'

"But I guess the stops I pulled out, and the stops that countless others pulled out on her behalf, weren't good enough. She died before the child she held on her side that day had turned four. He doesn't remember his mother.

"Were my prayers, and those of others, not strong enough, not expressed in the right way? Was my belief system not sufficiently strong to bring about the *miracle* Maureen and I wanted? Was that the reason God decided not to grant our most heartfelt desire? Was that the reason her husband had to be left with three children under the age of 10?

"By this summer I will have spent 40 years as a United Church minister. If I had to believe that God was so arbitrary as to decide among the millions of prayers that are issued daily, granting these and not those, I would quit on the spot and run as far away as I could.

"Jim, like you, I don't wish to claim that miracles don't happen. I just don't know of any personally. Unless you count the ways in which some people find themselves able to rise above the adverse circumstances that befall their lives and continue to live with faith and hope and, while they are at it, continue to bring much joy to those around them.

"Perhaps rather than going around looking for miracles we should spend more time thinking about how we might go out there and be a miracle ourselves."

Vern Ratzlaff in Saskatoon, Sask.: found the column "especially relevant after the car 'accident' that took the life of a good friend a few days ago. Well developed--many thanks."

Isabel Gibson wrote, "I seem to remember Rabbi Kushner (*When Bad Things Happen to Good People*) saying that when we encounter someone who has had a bad thing happen to them, we should just say we're sorry, and shut up (perhaps I paraphrase). Bad things are bad enough -- we don't also need to feel inadequate that we didn't rate the miracle cure."

Isabel referred to Margaret Carr's letter, wondering why more clergy feel inhibited about sharing their academic learning with their congregations: "I too, wonder why clergy haven't talked openly about biblical scholarship that dates to the early 1900s, or their views on the afterlife for that matter. I [also] wonder why high school physics teachers in my day taught us Rutherford's model of the atom as a fact, rather than a useful model (in some application; not so useful in others). Learning to think critically takes practice, and we don't need our school system hampering that growth."

There were, of course, a number of rebuttals to letters from people defending their denominations.

Mac McGrew wrote, "I was surprised by the number of folks that took exception to your 'park your brains at the door' comment a week ago. While I am now a clergy member of the United Methodist Church, I believe that you made only one error with your comment. You mentioned denominations and not specific churches. While I do not believe that denominations have this attitude, I believe that there are within every denomination individual churches that do have that very attitude. I do not as clergy expect my congregants to park their brains, in fact I encourage and learn from their life's experiences with the scriptures.

"To those who took exception to your 'park your brains' comments I would say that you may have not experienced that attitude in your life or your churches, but it does exist even within your denomination."

Similarly, this from David Gilchrist: "Having been taken aback by the responder who reacted to your comment about 'parking your brains at the door', I reread that bit again. I don't read that as all Baptists and all Mennonites being asked to do so; you seem to me to be referring to specific refugees who had this reason for relocating. Having attended many different denominations in my travels, I know that it is sometimes true. I have even known United Church pastors who seemed to be asking their congregations to do just that.

"There are many different 'Baptists', and also several different 'Mennonite' denominations. I don't know if any of them as a denomination would expect their members to stop thinking; but I do know that in almost every denomination there have been pastors who would answer any 'Why?' with a remark like, 'Because I say so; and I know, because God told me so'. A case in point is the pastor who ignored the direction in which his denomination was heading, insisting that we must not tolerate those who tolerate homosexuals - -quoting chapter and verse to prove his 'Christian' point -- although there is not a single word from Jesus on this subject. He subsequently got on the internet and found (and left with) a woman much younger than the wife who had borne six children for him. It seems to me that Jesus, several Old Testament prophets, and Paul all condemned THAT behaviour.

To me, that is asking parishioners to park their brains at the door. Sadly, several did, and followed him to start a new congregation! I think your remark was right on, and very descriptive."

Gwynne Harries might have been anticipating today's column: "A well-known Appalachian dowser and healer made this statement. 'If you do nothing, nothing will happen -- If you do something, something might happen.' It's not a bad way to look at life."

Finally, Joan Fanshawe sent along an experience with the paraphrases I did, some time ago, as rather irreverent little playlets: "We used your Jeremiah 1:4-10 readers theatre in our service this morning and it was well received and caught people's attention."

PSALM PARAPHRASES

I think I'm correct in saying that the Revised Common Lectionary calls for Psalm 138 this week. (Things will be much easier once we get into Lent!)

In biblical times, I gather, worshipers prostrated themselves on the ground before the Holy of Holies, while reciting Psalm 138. For us, it's a strange position from which to express gratitude. So what might we say with our faces pressed into the soil?

1 This is your turf, your home, your territory.
I am so glad to be here, God, that I kiss the earth you walk on.
2 I fling myself into your soil, I inhale the sweet moistness of humus,
I extend my arms to embrace your earth.

But you lift me up from my humble position.
You take me in as your guest.
You have made me one of your family;
you have even given me your name!

3 You have taken me under your wing.
 When I cry out, you cover me;
 I benefit from your strength.

4 Foxes may lord it over the chicken coop,
 and squirrels over the sparrow's nest,
 But no creatures challenge the eagle's rule;
 They cower before the eagle's eye and ruthless claws.

5 As the eagle soars above field mice,
 so do you, Lord, rise above us mortals.

6 Daily duties keep us scurrying close to the earth.
 But you watch over us;
 you can see danger long before it draws near.

7 Troubles grow around us like tall grass
 But in the shadow of your outspread wings, predators scatter
 Like leaves before an autumn wind.

8 There is a place for me in your plans.
 You will never abandon me.
 You will work out your purpose for me, no matter how long it takes.

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

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

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

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, 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
