

Wednesday February 22, 2012

## Slaves to our obsessions

By Jim Taylor

Joey the cat stands on his hind legs, raking his claws against the glass of our deck window, demanding to come in out of the wind and snow.

I'm headed for the garage with a bag of garbage. Obediently, though, I detour to his door to let him in.

"Murrouw," he grunts. I think it means "Thank you." He shakes snowflakes off his fur onto the hardwood floor as I continue to the garage door. As I open it, I hear a "thump-thump-thump" behind me. Carl Sandburg, who described "fog that creeps in on little cat feet," obviously never lived with a 20-pound cat!

As I open the door to the garage, Joey scoots through, headed for the outdoors he had just clamoured to come in from.

Doors are Joey's obsession. If a door opens, any door, he has to go through it. Even if it only leads into a storage room. He has, on occasion, spent most of a day trapped in a closet, because we didn't notice that had dashed through a momentarily open door.

Phoebe the dog has a different obsession – food. (She's a Chesapeake Bay Retriever; it's in her genes.) One day we left her alone in our daughter's house. By the time humans returned, she had gobbled two pounds of butter and the entire chicken intended for supper.

## Hidden impulses

Obsessions are fascinating things. Senator Joe McCarthy had an obsession about finding Reds under every bed; Republican candidate Ron Paul sees Feds under every bed; and bad-boy actor Charlie Sheen (if media reports can be trusted) simply expects to find someone in every bed.

I'm not going to comment on my friends' obsessions – they might find my comments un-flattering. But they all have obsessions that drive them, for better or for worse.

My obsession is words. I cannot read a magazine or newspaper without seeing errors. I talk back to sloppy radio announcers. I squirm when cliché-ridden speakers flog dead horses to a lather. I know it does no good – for me, or for them. But I cannot sit quietly and ignore malapropisms as if they were acceptable.

Obsessions reveal something irrational deep within us that defies discipline. It's an urge we can't tell just to go away and leave us alone.

## Magnificent, or otherwise

Almost 90 years ago, Lloyd C. Douglas wrote *Magnificent Obsession* – a novel twice turned into a movie. Would that my obsessions were magnificent! Language abuse feels petty, insignificant, compared to abuse of children, workers, animals, the environment....

I feel that I ought to have the kind of magnificent obsessions that motivated Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, and Jesus. The kind of obsession that would not let them be satisfied with anything less than changing their world.

And then I remember that every one of them was killed by people equally obsessed with keeping their world unchanged.

Our obsessions say much about what each of us considers vitally important. The tragedy is that – like Joey and Phoebe -- so few of us recognize our obsessions. And therefore we cannot keep them from getting out of control, and thus controlling us.

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## YOUR TURN

Well, it seems that you liked the column relating my experience of God to hoarfrost. Diane Robinson wrote, "Jim, that was truly beautiful! (Maybe I think so because it's so close to how I see it!)" And Nan Erbaugh wrote, "Hoarfrost--what a lovely way to express God's presence."

Similarly, Gwen Hayes wrote, "What a lovely, lovely metaphor for experiencing God. I've felt this myself, and you captured that feeling exquisitely. I get a similar feeling when I look up at a star-filled sky. God is there in the spaces, the sky is filled with the spirits of all who have gone before. Makes no logical sense, but the idea of his spirit -- our spirits -- filling up the 'infinite and universal' imbues me with peace."

Richard Glover caught me on my implied references: "Surely you are not suggesting God cares who wins the Super Bowl. I cringe when I see a team in any sport in prayer and raising their hands in thanks to God when they score. Ugh."

Just for clarification, no, I don't think God cares who won the Super Bowl -- but I believe God did care about each of the players on that field, and how each one performed.

Art Gans offered this: "I have been reading John Dominic Crossan's 'The Greatest Prayer'. Some of what you wrote today seems to me to line up with some of what he writes in his analysis of The Lord's Prayer. I thought you might enjoy it, if you haven't already read it.

"I find myself fitting more and more into what has been called 'The Emerging Church' rather than the traditional forms of church with which I have grown up and old."

William Ball wanted to clarify the difference between pantheism and panentheism: "Wikipedia tells us: Panentheism ... is a belief system which posits that God exists, interpenetrates every part of nature and timelessly extends beyond it. Panentheism is differentiated from pantheism, which holds that God is not a distinct being but is synonymous with the universe.

"I'm trying to gauge your comments according to the distinctions above. Perhaps you don't want to be tied down to even these descriptions. Your hoarfrost analogy is a helpful one, as I read it, and speaks to me greatly; but I don't consider myself to be one who is beyond 'God as a supernatural being' thinking. Are thinking of God as both an individual being and as being present, invisibly, necessarily irreconcilable? Is it not our developing perspective which is changing rather than God's being, ontologically speaking?"

John Hatchard shared his own story of presence: "You have gained the freedom to know God that the mystics have talked about. An experience akin to yours, but in a warmer climate, happened for me when I was travelling in India. On the boat from Bombay to Goa I met a young Dutch girl... She told me [her story] one evening as we were sitting on the beach. It was a soft balmy evening and the sun set promised to be wondrous."

She was, John says, struggling with religious questions. He told her, "God is here, right now, in the sand we are sitting on, in the waves crashing up on the beach over there, in these other people here around us and in the glory of this sunset we are witnessing. God is literally everywhere. Everything is God. It is all his Creation. If we can appreciate the incredible beauty of this scene, this sunset we are watching, are able to accept that it is a gift from God, one that raises us above being merely human, then there is nothing else to find. Animals do not experience the glory of a sunset like this but any human being has the possibility to know God in this way, to be touched by God's Creation. That sense of wonder and love is godlike. It is the gateway through which we can connect with God personally. Appreciation of any expression of beauty is as much a way to God as any other.

"No path of self-denial, or psychological self-flagellation is required to have this experience, to know God's presence. It is there for the taking, right before us all the time. It is right here before us now. It is in us right now. It is in you telling me your story, in my listening, and in what I am saying to you now. Just be open to the God in you and in everything around."

John finished his letter, "Just thought I would like to share that with you in return for some of the profound things you share with us."

Now for a couple of letters reflecting on previous columns.

Ruth Zenger wrote, "Pedestrians and cyclists in Victoria also tend to wear dark clothes and wear no reflective paraphernalia! Not even bicycle helmets sometimes! They often do not realize how easy it is not to see them, or else they think that because it is not 'black dark', but gray, dimly lit or rainy, and because they can see the cars, that therefore the drivers can see them! I sometimes wonder if some of them really do not care whether a vehicle hits them or not.

Ivan Gamble sent along some further thoughts about the Jonah column, which I borrowed from Alan Reynolds: "Enjoyed your column on Jonah. I was reminded of the expression 'Jehovah Jireh' ('the Lord will provide.') that I learned from my youth. In the book of Jonah, it is used 4 times. God 'provided' (1) a big fish; (2) a large plant; (3) a worm; and (4) a scorching desert wind. God provides also in situations of disobedience and lack of love, even when we don't want it. To me, the OT is often wrongly characterized as picturing a wrathful, angry God in contrast to the NT picture of the loving Jesus. I find the OT full of God's mercy, love, compassion and grace."

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## 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 6<sup>th</sup> 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.

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## YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslikeGod" page, [www.seemslikegod.org](http://www.seemslikegod.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 "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](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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## TECHNICAL STUFF

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