

Wednesday March 21, 2012

## The loneliness of the non-conformist

By Jim Taylor

Spring should be here. In the garden, rhubarb thrusts up through last year's rotting leaves. The first crocuses flash their white, mauve, and yellow exclamations at the sky.

But what's coming down from the sky as I write these words is not spring. Neither snow, nor rain – more like airborne slush.

At times like this, I tend to seek solace from the wise ones who have preceded me. By chance, I turn to futurist Harding Vowles's self-published booklet on the invisible icons that shape our society. By chance, I open to page 61.

I read: "How dependent we are on the support of the community around us is not very apparent to us, as long as we stay within the community of consensus and the community is supportive of us."

Like temple bells of Thailand, which make a hollow clunk when struck in the open air but which resonate deeply within the temple itself, Harding's insight echoes within my experience. Now and then, all of us have found ourselves outside that "community of consensus." Certainly I have. We thought we belonged; to our surprise, we discovered we didn't.

Somehow, we found ourselves outside, looking in, wondering what happened.

## Shaking our self-image

I remember seeing a cartoon once, of proud parents watching a military marchpast. "Oh, look," gushed the mom. "The whole army's out of step but our John!"

It's an uncomfortable experience, being out of step. Being right is nice but it doesn't keep anyone warm on a frosty night.

"For most of us," Harding continues, "the sturdiness of our inner personal icon is related to the positive assurances we receive from others. If we review our daily activities and interactions, we soon recognize how heavily we rely on the positive feedback we get from relatives, friends, fellow workers, the public, even from bosses.

"The flip side of this is noticing how severely our self-image is shaken up if these suddenly become non-supportive or hostile."

Every immigrant will understand Harding's image. Instead of a familiar environment where you know how your contemporaries think and react – even if you disagree with them – suddenly you struggle with new language, new values, new patterns of thinking.

"How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" asks Psalm 137.

Should exiles play Thai temple bells in a society devoted to heavy metal? Should expatriates speak English among people who understand only Swahili? Is it worth achieving Grade 8 piano if your contemporaries are content listening to iPods?

## Restrictive mindsets

You don't have to be an exile to understand the psalm's lament. It happens even if you merely move to a new neighbourhood.

And although we don't often recognize it, it happens when your faith evolves too.

How does one sing of cosmic holiness in a society that seems unable – or unwilling -- to imagine anything beyond a private and personal God?

As I ponder that question, I glance out the window again. The sun has come out. Buds are swelling on the forsythia. Spring is almost here, after all. A new consensus beckons the lonely ones...

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## **YOUR TURN**

No one protested my portrayal of St. Patrick in last week's column, But several of you responded to the pilgrimage images.

Isabel Gibson wrote, "Your story of Mary was fabulous. I believe that when we 'be with', 'stay with' or even just 'listen to' someone else, we give them a gift beyond measure -- freeing them to be all they can be in that moment. We don't need to 'cheer lead', or advocate, or recommend, or advise. We just need to be there. "

And then she adds, "Easier said than done."

Nancy Price in PEI got the point: "I look forward to Wednesday and your column. Today's has been extremely meaningful to me...We're all pilgrims."

John Clinton had a question: "Pardon my East Coast suburban protected upbringing --- but what are 'prickly gorse and sheep droppings'? We are moving to Nebraska in May. Is this something I need to know to fit in out there?"

Sheep droppings you may encounter in Nebraska, John, but probably not prickly gorse. Gorse – also called whins or furze – seems to grow mainly in Ireland and the U.K. It's a relative of the broom family, with bright yellow flowers, but broom's dark green foliage turns into vicious spikes 2-3 inches long. Tripping and falling into gorse is very painful, though rarely lethal.

Clare Neufeld kept thinking about the previous week's column, on various kinds of love, and on the correspondence it generated. 'I wonder if some forms of love are actually acts of the will. We choose/will to 'love your enemies, do good to those who hate [do not act willfully lovingly to] you.' If to hate is at its simplest, the withholding of [willful] love, then perhaps ambivalence is as 'bad' for us, as is outright venomous hatred?

"There are times when we choose to do what is in the best interest, long term, of the object of that act. It would seem to me to be agape, or the love of God, which is revealed in this instance.

"I have been known to suggest, and no one fainted, that agape is the love which both permeates and encompasses all forms of healthy love.

"It would not, implicitly of course, include the love of evil, whatever that might be."

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## **ABOUT MY BOOKS, ETC.**

Sorry, I have no more copies of "Seeing the Mystery" available any more. Please do not send any more cheques.

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## **QUESTION FOR YOU**

About half of you, maybe more, used to subscribe to Ralph Milton's "Rumors" e-zine. Each week, he published one of my psalm paraphrases, matched to the lectionary recommendation for the following week.

Would you like me to start including those psalm paraphrases in these weekly newsletters? And if so, how far in advance? Is one week enough?

If you would NOT want them (e.g., don't use them, too much to read already, etc.) please let me know that, too.

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## YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca). Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other web links worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, [www.seemslkegod.org](http://www.seemslkegod.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

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca).

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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](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca), or send a note to [sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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