

Wednesday September 12, 2012

## The breath of life

By Jim Taylor

I love this time of year. The days are still bright and warm. But when the sun slips behind the ridge across the lake, the air cools instantly. Peace settles on the land, the lake, the sky.

The wind drops. The placid lake reflects the pink sunset that spreads across the sky, but deeper. Water turns to wine.

I sit on my deck, and take a deep breath.

At a presentation I attended recently, Bob Sandford made a startling statement. “The atmosphere you breathe,” he said, “contains the exhalations of every creature that has ever lived on this planet.”

For several minutes I could not absorb anything else Bob had to say. And he had lots to say. Bob is EPCOR Chair of the Canadian Partnership Initiative for the U.N.’s “Water for Life” Decade.

As he explained – once I could digest ideas again – every creature, from the smallest bacteria to California redwoods, draws energy from the atmosphere, and exhales its waste back into the atmosphere.

## Input and output

Biologists divide all living creatures into two great groups – plants and animals. The division has nothing to do with whether those creatures are mobile or fixed in place. It’s how they breathe. Plants breathe in carbon dioxide, and breathe out oxygen. Which is a good thing for us animals. Because we breathe in the plants’ waste product, oxygen. And we exhale their raw material, carbon dioxide.

And we do this – plants and animals alike – whether we live on dry land or under water, on a mountain top or in a cave.

The very first living organism did it. And whatever that organism exhaled is still circulating in our atmosphere. A tiny tiny component to be sure. But it’s still there.

The concept gives me a new perspective on the biblical legend of creation. Because the same ancient Hebrew word *ruach* can mean wind, breath, or Spirit. So some Bibles say “the Spirit of God moved over the waters.” Others refer to a “mighty wind” or “a breath”. But it’s actually the same thing.

It’s the same again when God “breathed” life into a clay figure. And when Jesus spoke of “the wind that blows where it will.” And when something like a strong wind blew among the terrified disciples at Pentecost, 50 days after Easter.

*Ruach* – the universal breath.

## Global unity

Whenever life developed, however life developed, whether you believe in evolution or intelligent design, the mark of life is breath. Breath began us; breath sustains us; the absence of breath will be our end.

When I sit on my deck and breathe deeply, do I breathe the breath of God? Or do I merely share the breath of life with everything that has ever lived?

Does it matter?

By breathing, we become immortal. A thousand years from now, if humans still exist, the air they breathe will have been modified by the air that you and I breathe today. The air every other creature on earth breathes is

shaped, influenced, by the way I use that air. By my own exhalations. And by the exhalations of human creations – our cars, our industries, our landfill sites....

I take a deep breath. I am one with the world.

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## YOUR TURN

Several of you sent along birthday greetings after last week's column. Thank you all.

Cliff Gieseke, in San Antonio, Texas, wondered, "Why do good things happen to some people and bad things to others? That can be very perplexing. The only thing that helps me explain it is karma and reincarnation. For reincarnation, there seems to be quite a bit of evidence. We seem to go through a lot of life times... Some lives are very hard and others are relatively easy."

Carl Freeto identified with his own experiences: "You made me remember my dreams of becoming a pastor. As a young man I had a close family (bride, two sons and financial possibilities my parents never dreamed of). I remember my first job as a technician at a computer company when my paycheck was twice what my dad had ever made.

"What a wonderful picture I had of that respected, humble and valued pastor I was called to be. Then the running years... children, church, innovation, that same feeling of things just happening right in my life. Someone was watching over me.

"Somewhere in there I learned to be a cynic. Is this Jesus who says, "Take up your cross" really a part of the political body called the church? Is the task to save the institution or trust the God who told job to humble himself?

"Our son's sudden death in 2006 shook me to the bedrock of my life....I worked frantically to make it all right, but it is not.

"I just went through a minor surgery that laid me in ICU for nearly a week. Why did I survive? God only knows but I'm going to enjoy each of those moments given back to me. Maybe the One who watches over me doesn't miss anyone...even and especially the ones who suffer and die."

Jim Henderschedt commented, ".As an INFP I can identify with your awe-struck friends. The Maligne Canyon is absolutely breath-taking.

"Being in the same boat as you (more years behind than in front) I give thanks for what I have learned from meditation and contemplation...slow down, live the moment, don't try to fix what you can't, enjoy the journey....the destination will come soon enough, be patient, breathe and enjoy every breath you take.....go with the flow but be on the alert for unsuspected waterfalls!"

Charles Hill, I learned, is almost the same age as me: "Thank you for your honesty in confronting issues that are distressing for me but for which many have the 'right and forever' answer. A psychologist friend once observed that it is the rare personality that can tolerate uncertainty. Kierkegaard observed that there is a certain 'fear and trembling' to working out life and our relationship to God. As an INF(feeling)P, many of my decisions have been emotional blunders. I'd hate to give God the credit/blame for a lot of the outcomes. The older I become (I'm 75 now), the less I know for sure."

Unlike Charles and Jim, Randy Hall is an ENFP. "So you can guess how I'm celebrating my birthday, can't you?" he

asked. "Yes -- with about 40 friends this weekend! It's a big bash because it is one of those birthdays ending in a '0.' But there is no sorrow within me in reaching 60, just gratitude and standing in awe of the blessedness of my life.

"May the SOMEONE be with you...."

Paul James picked up on my line, "And yet... And yet..."

"I've had the exact same conversation with myself and others. I feel so blessed but I see a world where others seemed cursed. Good luck? Bad luck? God? And yet I am blessed. It feels like more than just good luck. Guess we won't know in this life. Hopefully more will be revealed in whatever comes next."

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## PSALM PARAPHRASES

I remember having to memorize Psalm 19 as a boy. It is still one of my favourites, although I must admit that in those days I thought of the laws of God as a straightjacket -- something that restricted freedom. I didn't believe they were "sweeter than honey" -- after all, I had also been told that Brussels sprouts were good for me.

But God's laws are not restricted to words, or to commandments. God's laws are also written in creation-- they keep the universe running.

These verses acknowledge and honor human curiosity. They celebrate the insight and understanding, the excitement and discovery, that grows as we explore the precepts and principles of God's amazing universe.

- 1 Quarks and electrons, crystals and cells;  
stems and trunks and limbs and bodies--
- 2 on the land, in the water, in the air--  
the elements of the universe wait to expand our understanding.
- 3 Rocks have no words, nor do cells have syllables,
- 4 yet their message can be read anywhere.  
Even the fiery stars,
- 5 racing at unimaginable speeds through space,
- 6 yield their secrets to those willing to probe the limits of God's universe.
- 7 And what do they find?  
An underlying harmony, a delicate equilibrium  
built on the value of every thing,  
living or inanimate, past, present, and future.
- 8 There are no exceptions.  
No one is above the law of interdependence.
- 9 Life dies and becomes new life;  
spirit and flesh are one.  
My fate is inextricably linked to yours,  
and our fate to the trees and insects.
- 10 This is the beginning of wisdom.  
It is better than wealth, more valuable than possessions.
- 11 Awareness of it will change you forever.
- 12 But we are too often blind;  
we close our ears to the voices of the winds and the waves, to the insights of the rocks and the plants.
- 13 God, keep us from thinking we know it all;  
human minds cannot encompass eternity;  
an assembly of facts does not equal truth.
- 14 Keep us always open to wonder, to beauty, to mystery,  
O greatest of mysteries.

For this and other paraphrases, you can order *Everyday Psalms* through Wood Lake Publications,

[info@woodlake.com](mailto:info@woodlake.com) or 1-800-663-2775.

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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 "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](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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#### TECHNICAL STUFF

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

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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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