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Ebola virus fascinates and terrifies

By Jim Taylor

According to the World Health Organization, the Ebola death toll has risen to over 4500 persons, including 236 health workers.

We're fascinated. And terrified.

Yet when I compare fatality statistics worldwide, we're 300 times more likely to die in a car accident – 1.24 million deaths a year – than by contracting Ebola.

Respiratory diseases like influenza and pneumonia will cause about 3.5 million deaths a year. (The “Spanish flu” following World War I killed 75 million people.) Tobacco-related illnesses cause more than 5 million deaths every year. Even good old measles will end 155,000 lives.

In fact, you're about five times more likely to be struck by lightning than to catch Ebola.

So what is it about Ebola that so terrifies us?

Probably the fatality rate, currently around 50 per cent – about the same survival rate at getting a bullet in the brain. But even that is better than ALS, Huntington's, and some cancers.

The survival rate is improving – four of the five North Americans who have contracted Ebola are still alive as I write this.

Two of them, however, are nurses. Who caught the virus while caring for the sole American fatality, Thomas Duncan, in Dallas. In spite of American pride in having the most advanced medical care system in the world (admittedly, at a price that many cannot afford).

Means of transmission

Unlike respiratory diseases, Ebola does not spread through the air. You can't get it from breathing the same air as a patient.

Ebola is spread only by contact with bodily fluids -- everything from

sperm and urine to spit, sweat, and snot. Sex will certainly transmit it. So will any skin to skin contact, like kissing, hugging, or shaking hands.

The two nurses, according to news reports, wore full protective covering. They had no skin exposed to the patient. But it seems likely that one of them, while disposing of her protective mask, may have brushed her face with a rubber-gloved hand. The other may have contacted the virus from rolling up her hazmat suit as she peeled it off.

I realized how easy it would be to get contaminated this week, during a visit to my optometrist.

A technician ran me through a series of automated tests before my appointment. After I left the chair, she wiped every place my forehead, my chin, my fingers had touched, with a disinfectant swap. Without that precaution, I realized, a mere drop of perspiration left by a previous client could infect me.

It could be on a doorknob. Or on coins I get in change.

Not that I'm paranoid about Ebola. B.C health authorities claim they're ready to deal with any cases of Ebola, based on procedures developed for the 2003 SARS outbreak, and the 2009 flu. They've asked provincial health officer Dr. Perry Kendall to confirm that hospitals are equipped to handle Ebola cases, and that protocols are in place to protect staff.

Faith in systems

Ah, yes, protocols. Texas Health Presbyterian Hospital in Dallas blamed a "breach of protocol" for the two nurses getting infected. They promised to set up new systems to eliminate the possibility of similar accidents in future

Forgive my skepticism, but they have far more faith in systems than I do. No system can ever anticipate everything that could go wrong. Remember Murphy's Law? "Anything that can go wrong, will." And its corollary, "And it will choose the worst possible time to do it!"

For the Dallas hospital, the worst possible time was when nurses were coming off an emotionally draining shift. Those nurses had to work in a situation most of us would avoid like the plague (a disease we do know how to deal with, incidentally). They were tired. Apparently no one had considered that the gear that protected them could also infect them.

The B.C. nurses' union has joined other nursing organizations in protesting that its members have not been adequately trained to protect themselves from the Ebola virus.

Unquestionably, it helps to have a system. A private pilot I know goes

through his checklist rigorously, saying each item out loud, to make sure he doesn't overlook anything before takeoff.

As I grow older and more forgetful, I go through my own checklist whenever I leave the house: wallet, glasses, car keys, house keys, zipper...

It's worth rehearsing what to do in case of disaster. After the last forest fire, my wife and I made a list of valuables to rescue if we ever had to evacuate. In California, Thursday morning, some 10 million Californians registered for a "Stop, Drop, and Cover" exercise, to prepare for a possible earthquake.

A system is certainly better than being unprepared.

But no exercise, no rehearsal, no system, no protocol can anticipate exactly what will happen when the earth heaves. When an airplane crashes. When a flood rips down a valley.

Or when someone develops a deadly virus.

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YOUR TURN

Before I get to your letters, a word or two of thanks for your votes. Last week I asked you if you would vote for the local Food Bank project that seeks a share of the \$1 million given out each year by Aviva Insurance to worthy local projects. I don't know how many of you voted. I know some of you tried to vote, and ran into difficulties with the Aviva website; I've had some problems with it myself. Despite those difficulties, though, your votes helped to lift the project at the last minute into the top 15. We have now made it into the semi-finals, which will call for a further round of voting, and eliminations, in December.

Now for the letters, responding to the column about the Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong.

Cliff Boldt admitted that he doesn't attend protest rallies much anymore. But he did forward a great quotation, from Rosa Luxemburg, that supports the essay by Etienne de La Boetie to which I referred: "Those who do not move, do not notice their chains."

Isabel Gibson noted "an interesting juxtaposition. In Hong Kong under Beijing

we have street protests for self-determination, against military dictatorship; in the 'Arab spring' we had the same. In Occupy Wall Street we had street protests against... what, exactly? For more even distribution of wealth, against a society with a marked degree of self-determination? I think that was it.

"At any rate, the argument that freedom starts in our heads has some resonance. It just doesn't end there -- and how tiring it is to fight without seeming result. No wonder people end up acquiescing."

James Russell wrote, "There's a link between last week's column and this one: to keep mass protests going somewhere useful, you need organization that makes workable units out of the masses. That's what long-term politics is really about. But there seems to be something that keeps most leaders of 'people's' movements from seeing that long-run organization is key. Perhaps it's just that the incentives for continuing benevolence are small. The greed factor seems to be enough to keep the top echelons of at least some established parties on the job full time!"

Steve Roney both agreed with me, and disagreed with me: "Agree with you that protest demonstrations are fundamentally undemocratic. They are justifiable only where there is no democracy. Also agree that the Hong Kong protests can't win. China will not grant Hong Kong self-government for the same reason Britain didn't: self-government automatically means independence. It is incompatible with being a colony.

"Disagree that Vietnam was lost by U.S. militarily rather than politically. I think the reverse is plainly true. The U.S. just pulled out, due to dissent back home. Perhaps for South Vietnam, its defeat was military, not political. But I doubt that too. The U.S. Senate cutting all financial aid was the main issue."

Laurna Tallman saw a broader perspective: "I think you have chosen too narrow a yardstick for your assessment of the success and failure of popular protest movements. A major goal of such protests is to publicize the reasons for the protests. The Hong Kong crowds drew our attention to a situation we knew would arise when the British withdrew.

"The protests you view as failures each have generated tens of thousands of personal, thoughtful exchanges that alter the mind sets and voting priorities of people across the globe. You cannot view any of those protests as failures because they have generated so much enlightenment -- light that eventually will overcome the darkness."

TECHNICAL STUFF

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I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

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Other sources worth pursuing:

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- 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.
