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*Wednesday October 22, 2014*

## **The ways we respond to stress**

**By Jim Taylor**

**When a number of researchers and theorists, working independently, come to similar conclusions, it's worth paying attention.**

**Recently, I've been reading Jared Diamond's latest book on social organizations. He suggests four levels of social groupings: the family, the tribe, the clan, and the state.**

**At the family level, everyone knows everyone else; everyone is involved in every significant decision. Conflicts call for compromise – because, after all, you have to live with that person for the rest of your life.**

**At the largest level, the state, most people are strangers. Decisions require leaders. And staff, who carry out the leaders' decisions. And whose protection allows ordinary citizens to go about their daily lives without fear of strangers.**

**Diamond's groupings reminded me of the four kinds of church congregations that the Alban Institute defined some 30 years ago: family, pastoral, program, and corporate.**

**The family church, as you might expect, is small, close, and informal. The pastoral church adds a pastor, a formal leader who connects people, and often provides ideas and incentives to move them forward. The program church has grown big enough to contain a variety of groups working independently, coordinated by paid staff. And finally, the corporate church has evolved into a kind of mini-state; it requires large staffs and budgets to keep it running.**

## **Parallel progressions**

**When I look at individual development, I see a similar agreement among experts. Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson, Abraham Maslow, Lawrence Kohlberg, Carol Gilligan – all identify stages of development that start with basic survival and move towards some kind of principled universal awareness.**

**That is, an infant knows only its own needs. Gradually it becomes more aware of the needs of others, of its dependence and interdependence. It learns to submit to rules, to accept responsibilities, and eventually to live by abstract principles.**

**Maslow calls this last stage self-actualization; Erikson calls it wisdom or integrity; Gilligan calls it post-conventional – a caring both for self and others.**

**But not everyone gets to that level. Some stall at lesser levels.**

**And most of the gurus agree that under stress, people may revert to a more primitive stage. I'd expect that to be happening in refugee camps in the Middle East, for example.**

**But not necessarily. Victor Frankl wrote about life in Nazi death camps. Some prisoners, he said, reverted to basic survival. Others rose above their own suffering, to a kind of sacrificial nobility.**

**James Fowler, a psychologist at the Candler School of Theology, studied stages of faith development.**

**They start, obviously, with no personal faith at all. One simply conforms to others' practices. Then the stages of faith move on, through passive acceptance, to reasoned acceptance, to personal choice -- often to personal commitment. Some stick there. Others learn to question former beliefs, acknowledge ambiguity and uncertainty, and finally reach something resembling universal enlightenment.**

**But I wonder what happens to religious faith, at times of stress. Does a crisis push people to reflect critically on what they've previously taken for granted? Do they rise to new levels of understanding, awareness?**

**Or do they prefer to regress to a more comfortable, less threatening, mindset? Do they grasp at certainty, even if it contradicts their experience?**

**Perhaps, like other patterns of human development, both are possible. As Frankl noted, it depends on the individual.**

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## **YOUR TURN**

**Last week's column had a lighter tone, as I mused about the lives of geese, but there were some serious elements in it.**

**Larry Smith is a first-time responder. He wrote, "You haven't heard from me before, but that certainly doesn't mean that I don't enjoy and look forward to your comments. You display great insight into life and our varied relationships with God, spiced with a liberal dash of humour."**

**Don Seaman considered some of my examples of volunteer work, and wondered if God's work is limited to the church: "I agree that many folks whom attend church regularly do not apparently participate directly in work in the church, but perhaps for many reasons:**

- Have they been asked? Once reliable workers have been found, there is sometimes reluctance to take a chance on 'breaking in new people'.**
- Some folks 'expect' to be constant leaders and get 'miffed' when others are appointed.**
- Perhaps, like me, while I am involved in church work, I also volunteer with several community agencies that are also 'doing God's work', sometimes better than churches.**
- Some members, especially those with young children, simply have neither the time nor the energy, but really would like to become more involved.**
- Older people do not drive at night and cannot attend nightly meetings which are held for the convenience of those who are at work during the daytime.**

**Don concluded, "My experience indicates that your 20% figure might be a bit high, but the practical aspect of your message, with which I agree, still remains."**

**Don Schau thought I had been unfair to geese: "I think your analogy of the geese fails. Unlike people who, intentionally or otherwise, find ways to be unhelpful, my understanding is that the geese at the end of the line do the most squawking as a form of encouragement to those at the front. It also seems to me that the ones at the front will have little energy to do so. Just because squawking is negative for us doesn't mean it is for geese. It probably just doesn't translate well.**

**"I would also like to extend the 80/20 rule and apply it to Paul's**

**discussion of gifts. Perhaps we focus 80% of our efforts on tasks that use the 20% that is our greatest gifts. We may not do our best everywhere.”**

**In further correspondence, Don added, “How do we build a world that lets people discern their gifts and then live them out, especially when their gifts don’t conform to our socio-economic system?”**

**My cousin in Newfoundland, Mike Parmenter, commented about the so-called Cretan paradox: “The ‘All Cretans are liars’ remark is well known as a paradox but actually it is not a proper paradox as stated. The problem is that the proper negation is not ‘All Cretans are not liars’ but rather ‘There is a Cretan who is not a liar’. There is a nice discussion of this in Wikipedia under ‘Epimenides paradox’.”**

**Shadra Shoffner actually used the previous week’s column, a variation on Exodus 16, in her church. “I only preach once a month here at the church where I’m visitation pastor, but your Exodus passage was a HUGE hit and I gave credit to you before and after reading it. LAUGHTER out loud in the Lutheran Church!!!”**

**And finally, Rafael Vallejo gets sporadic delivery of my columns. “Wondering why your email comes through on some weeks and not in others. Always look forward to receiving them. Thought I’d let you know that there could be a possible glitch somewhere.”**

**I’m not sure I can do anything about this, but if any of the rest of you are having a similar problem, I’d like to know about it. I can at least ask my tech gurus about possible causes. Rafael, by the way, lives in southern Ontario and uses a gmail.com address.**

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## **PSALM PARAPHRASES**

The lectionary calls for Psalm 90:1-6 and 13-17. I’m going to take an editorial liberty, and just send you verses 1-6, which derive from occasional experiences sitting around campfires, thinking deeply.

- 1 Lord, your lantern hangs before our tent.**
- 2 Its circle of light illuminates this brief stopping place.**

**We do not know where we are going;  
 We barely know where we have been.  
 We keep our hats handy, always ready to move on.  
 3 Perhaps the next campsite will be like this one;  
 perhaps it will not.  
 Only you have an overview of our journey.  
 4 We are here such a short time.  
 We arrive, we unpack, we explore...  
 And then we are gone again.  
 5 May the good earth be not harmed by our passage.  
 May we be no more dangerous to our planet than a dream  
 6 that flits across the mind and leaves no mark.  
 Like a firefly, bright and brief, we flicker against the darkness,  
 and then vanish into your warm and holy night.**

**For paraphrases of most of the psalms used by the Revised Common  
 Lectionary, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake  
 Publishing, [info@woodlake.com](mailto:info@woodlake.com).**

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YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- 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 "SeemslieGod" page, [www.seemsliegod.org](http://www.seemsliegod.org);
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [www.traditionaliconoclast.com](http://www.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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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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