

Wednesday May 29, 2013

Living in a culture of fear

By Jim Taylor

I'm almost afraid to say this -- we live in a culture of fear.

The recent B.C. election was won on fear – fear that socialist hordes would do irresponsible things. Like throw money at schools. Raise minimum wages. Or even investigate the B.C. Rail cover-up.

The entire United States seems to run on fear. Homeland Security, FBI, CIA, Pentagon, Customs and Immigration, border patrols, Drug Enforcement, and a punitive prison industry – America spends more on protecting itself against what might happen than on anything that is happening. Like health. Or education.

Fear underlies international relations – fear of wars, fear of rebellions, fear of reprisals.

And that's just the political world.

Consider how much of advertising focuses on fear. Fear of looking old. Fear of failure. Fear of looking poor. Fear of boredom. Fear of loneliness.

And ultimately, fear of dying. In a whole page of newspaper obituaries recently, not one person died. They passed away. They went to be with their Lord. They had an appointment with St. Peter. They were taken home.

Exceptional examples

Fear is so endemic that we cannot imagine living without our fears.

But a few people have done just that. Not surprisingly, religions formed around them – Krishna, the Buddha, Jesus of Nazareth....

I call myself a Christian, whether or not others would agree. Jesus lived without fear. He consorted with his bitterest critics. He broke religious taboos. He ate and drank with social outcasts. He went to Jerusalem, knowing his presence would inflame local authorities. He didn't want to die, but he wasn't afraid of death.

His disciples, by contrast, ran and hid. They denied they knew him. They met behind locked doors, in upper rooms isolated from the street.

And then, one day, something changed. Suddenly those same fearful disciples became fearless. They spoke boldly to crowds. According to the Bible, they even demonstrated in the Temple, confronting the authorities who had crucified their leader.

The real miracle of what Christian churches call Pentecost wasn't some supernatural phenomenon that people could only describe later as tongues of fire, a mighty wind. The miracle was that a bunch of cowards lost their fear.

Misusing the model

Tragically, their successors often exploited fear as a means of exercising power. People were taught to fear eternal punishment in hell, to fear a judgemental God, to fear exclusion from the community.

And sometimes, to fear torture and/or burning for daring to think outside a doctrinal box.

Today, in a time of greater intellectual freedom, we can explore ideas that would have been unthinkable before. But I don't think many of us can imagine what it might be like to live without fear.

We can imagine being reckless. We can imagine being brave. But not of living in such a way that we no longer fear dying. Or being robbed. Or swindled. Or raped. Or injured in an accident.

So we buy insurance. We lock doors. We hire lawyers to read the fine print on contracts. We choose our friends carefully.

We can't imagine being totally open -- emotionally, physically, socially, and economically -- to anyone at all, to anything that happens.

We're so immersed in fear that we're afraid of living without fear.

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YOUR TURN

Jim Henderschedt recalled also being part of the Faith at Work organization: "Good memories and very influential on my Spiritual Journey. I believe I am where I am and believe what I believe because of the freedom to think differently Faith at Work afforded."

Isabel Gibson makes connections: "Interesting analogy between the 'learnings' that I associate with muscle memory -- playing the violin in your life, doing tai chi in mine -- and spiritual learnings.

"Some things we learn from books, or from hearing/seeing them; others, we have to actually do to 'incorporate' them, to bring them into our bodies, into our selves. I remember learning in business school that it was relatively easy to learn the principles of a discipline like accounting or marketing, but hard to apply them with any skill; just as it was relatively easy to learn the vocabulary and grammar of another language, but hard to learn to speak it and harder yet to learn to actually converse.

"How right it would seem, then, that we need to exercise our emotional/spiritual muscles -- whether the big one in our chests, or the stubborn one between our ears..."

Dale Perkins admitted to sharing my attitudes: "I identified with your musings this morning. They apply very definitely to my tendencies and patterns -- once I think of something I believe I've done it! However, realizing that practicing that thought or repeating those words or ideas or actions can incarnate them into my being more deeply -- that's excellent."

Mary Elford sympathized about the exercises: "I know how hard it is. I had 9 months of physio on my shoulder, and each time, the physiotherapist asked me how often I did my exercises. I said daily, and she replied that most people stop when they feel better. I am continuing, now, in hopes I will keep my shoulder strong enough that it never screams again. My set of exercises takes only five minutes, once a day, and yet I sometimes procrastinate with doing them. I do miss the occasional day, but most days, I invest five minutes in pain avoidance and greater mobility.

"And now, if you will excuse me, I have exercises to do!"

Paul Harvie wrote earlier about having a leg amputated: "I too have to do physiotherapy to build my upper body.... The physiotherapy is working because I am now standing on the bars and pivoting on my one remaining leg. Last Thursday I did my first transfer from bed to wheel chair, standing with a walker on the edge of the bed and doing a four point pivot to sit myself down. I was absolutely petrified. The physiotherapist told me [he knew] I was nervous. I asked him how he knew. He said I turned back to look at my wheel chair as I stood up."

Ray Shaver commented, "I remember our swimming team coach in high school responding to a wisecrack from a know-it-all swimming team member who interrupted the coach's pep talk at a practice by calling out 'Sir, practice makes perfect!' 'Not necessarily,' the coach replied. 'You have to practice the right way.'"

Ray's comment reminds me of a former boss of mine, who also objected to the "Practice makes perfect" mantra. He would retort, "Nonsense! Only perfect practice makes perfect."

Stephanie Keer picked up on the question of whether Jesus is still physically present. “Several years ago, a prominent Anglican archbishop was asked to deliver a guest homily. His subject was the [continuing] humanity of Jesus...He graphically described Jesus in physical terms -- he has hands, he has feet, he has lips, etc. Then he leaned forward and said, ‘And yes, he had a penis.’

“A man midway down the church stood up and said: ‘Now you’ve gone too far.’ Into the absolute silence, the protestor said: ‘Jesus *HAS* a penis.’ Then he left.

“The person who told me the story was the archbishop who preached the sermon.”

I said something in an earlier column about everything taking more time when one has a disability. Bev Morash recalled, “I’d had an operation and when I was well enough to be out and about again, I had to walk quite slowly for a while. Crossing a street and holding people up became an issue, as I did not look as if I had a disability, I did not need a cane, and I was of an age where I should not need to take baby steps.

“Now I always wait patiently for slow people in the crosswalks as I do not know what pain may be affecting them. I try to always assume that there is something which keeps them from moving faster and that they would if they could.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

According to my lectionary text, the psalm for this coming Sunday is Psalm 96:1-9. I wasn’t happy with any of my previous paraphrases of this psalm, so here’s a new version.

Strike up the band! Cue the cheerleaders!
Bring on the seventy-six trombones!
We need something special to show our appreciation.
Birthday cakes and flowery speeches are not enough.
This is not about an old man with a white beard
sitting on a cloud in the sky idly strumming his harp.
This is about the presence that surrounds us,
that fills us,
that shapes every fibre of our being.
We call it “God,” but it is not
an image generated by our fertile imaginations.
The presence is around us, in us, through us.
Nothing that exists,
that has ever existed,
that will ever exist,
lives outside this universal presence.
How then do we praise this presence?
What can we offer up
that is not already incarnate in this holy unity?
We can only present ourselves,
all races, all faiths, all genders,
trembling in anticipation –
even when we miss an occasional note.
even when we miss an occasional note.

Obviously, you won’t find this paraphrase in the book *Everyday Psalms* which you can order through Wood Lake Publications, info@woodlake.com or 1-800-663-2775.

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 "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write 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 to get onto her mailing list.

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