

Wednesday June 12, 2013

In search of the Great Whatever

By Jim Taylor

Here's the scenario. I have a really interesting conversation with a chap who's deep into quantum physics. We talk about the way the CERN Large Hadron Collider underneath the Alps has identified previously unknown atomic particles.

He explains how, the further you delve into the internals of an atom, the less it looks like a mechanical arrangement, the more it looks like someone's thought.

I say something like, "Amazing, isn't it, that it takes \$10 billion for physicists to come up with the same metaphor that theologians hypothesized centuries ago."

"I don't buy that religious crap," he snaps, and stomps away.

Over many years, I've had the same outcome in conversations with environmentalists, biologists, psychologists, mathematicians, geologists.... As soon as I connect their science to anything religious, they're sure I must believe in an old man sitting on a cloud, strumming a harp, occasionally firing thunderbolts at miscreants below.

They discarded that notion long ago. They don't stick around long enough to discover that I don't believe in that kind of God either.

Things I don't believe anymore

For the record, I believe wholeheartedly, whole-bodiedly, that *Something* exists – something which I happen to call God. I don't know what it is. I can't define it. Occasionally, I get a glimpse of that Great Whatever. I spend the rest of my thinking moments trying to fit those glimpses into a coherent pattern.

I'm a lot clearer about what I *don't* believe anymore.

I don't believe that Something meddles in natural affairs. It doesn't cause tsunamis and tornadoes. It doesn't make buildings fall and factories explode. And it certainly doesn't save one or two favoured souls because they happen to recite the right passwords.

I don't believe that Something keeps an accounting ledger, recording every word and deed in plus and minus columns. It does not dispense cancer and famine as punishment; it does not dole out megadollars as rewards. It follows, then, that a Great Accountant does not dispatch us to eternal bliss or eternal punishment after a final audit.

I do not believe that the Great Whatever lives outside the natural world. It is vested – nay, invested -- in everything around us. Including us.

And yet Whatever it is, it loves me. As the old gospel song says, "Even me."

I don't believe that Whatever wound up the universe in 4004 B.C. and set it ticking on a predetermined path. Even earthworms make choices. They are not mindless robots. Neither are we. If we genuinely have free will, then not even God can know in advance what we will choose, and what effects the spreading ripples of our choices will have.

I do not believe that this universal presence can be defined by a single text. Not even if you call it the Holy Bible. The Bible itself is not holy. It is the record of one people's fumbling encounters with The Holy. It reflects the cultural understandings (or misunderstandings) of the time when each part was written.

I have not stopped believing. I have simply shed some accretions that once got in the way of truly sensing the presence of God.

Whatever God is, that Whatever is now the ultimate constant in my life.

Copyright © 2013 by Jim Taylor. Non-profit use in congregations and study groups, and links from other blogs, welcomed; all other rights reserved.

Please encourage your friends to subscribe to these columns. But if you forward a column, please identify yourself as the sender, so that I don't get accused of sending out spam!

To send comments on this column, to subscribe or to unsubscribe, write jimt@quixotic.ca

YOUR TURN

Not many letters about last week's column, in which I suggested that each of us, by our presence and our lifestyle, defines the nature of the community we live in.

Jim Henderschedt agreed: "Betty and I walk our neighborhood twice a day to exercise and pick up trash. You are correct in observing that we all define our communities. We have observed that those who do not 'police' the surroundings of their properties are also most likely unconcerned about the height of the grass on their lawns. Each one of us defines our community."

Mary-Margaret Boone applied the message to church community: "I was not a church person for much of my life, and yes I was a proponent of being spiritual and not religious. When I embraced the United Church in a small village I realized that to experience spirituality meant to be part of community and that meant the church and it also meant the Scouting and Guiding groups, the Seniors groups, and anything else going on in the village. Church aka religion finally made sense to me. I went from reluctant parishioner to Sunday School teacher to someone experiencing a call and then a UCC minister! My journey was a great surprise to me and probably also to others who knew me."

Jack Dreidger consulted a friend of his with considerable experience in municipal governance. About the Sector Plan that got filed and forgotten, the friend wrote, "the input and concept is good. They may have to push to have it taken off the shelf, and the provincial Ministry is the ultimate authority they should go to if the municipality fails them."

PSALM PARAPHRASES

After writing a column about what I do not believe, or no longer believe, a paraphrase that addresses God as a "person" might seem incongruous. So I put together a new paraphrase of Psalm 5:1-8.

Sometimes I fear that my grandchildren may have no earth to inherit.

Climate change, corporate crime, and species extinction

promote a strong sense of pessimism.

Overpopulation, addiction to fossil fuels,

and industrial chemicals that never existed before

do not give me cause for hope.

But I have faith in the healing power

of your universal presence.

I cannot measure, I cannot explain,

I cannot define, how you work.

But I know that you do not hold grudges.
You do not demand a pound of flesh from those who do wrong;
you do not seek revenge.
You seek healing, only healing:
your trees cleanse the air;
your rivers cleanse themselves;
your creatures live in a delicate equilibrium
of life and renewal.
Such complex co-ordination is beyond human imagination;
no computer can control it.
It can only be the self-regulation of a living body.
I am in awe.
Let me live so as to further your well-being,
for in you I live and breathe and have my being.

Obviously this particular paraphrase is not in my book *Everyday Psalms*. But you can order the book with other paraphrases through Wood Lake Publications, info@woodlake.com or 1-800-663-2775 in Canada.

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. 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

- 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.

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.

To subscribe or unsubscribe, send me an e-mail message at jimt@quixotic.ca. Or you can subscribe electronically by sending a blank e-mail (no message) to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca. Similarly, you can un-subscribe at softedges-unsubscribe@quixotic.ca.

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, or send a note to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca
