

Wednesday October 9, 2013

## The dangers of getting too comfortable

By Jim Taylor

Sometimes a sermon stops me in my tracks.

For a regular church-goer, church can feel very comfortable. Regular routines unfold as I watch. Familiar music wraps me like a security blanket. Smile s greet me. Words wash over me like warm waves on a seashore ...

And then I hear the minister's voice saying, "Maybe we are a little too comfortable here in church."

Whoa...!

He wasn't talking about physical comfort, of course. He wasn't suggesting we give up our upholstered chairs and go back to sitting on stiff wooden pews. Or that we turn off the heating system and shiver through the coming winter. Or even that we should feel uneasy among the other worshippers.

No, what we've grown "too comfortable" with is the culture that our church lives in.

We tend not to be aware of that culture. The same way the fish probably aren't aware of the medium they swim in. I doubt if trout have philosophical epiphanies about water.

### A critical eye

But unlike trout, we can consider the culture we live in with a critical eye.

Don't get me wrong –I much prefer this culture to most of the alternatives. I don't want to live where a week in hospital can wipe out my savings. Nor do I want to live where there are no hospitals at all. I don't want to live where a ruthless dictator keeps any kind of dissent under his thumb, nor where equally ruthless ideologists turn government into anarchy.

Still, it's not perfect. As Winston Churchill once described democracy, "the worst form of government, except for all those other forms..."

John Kenneth Galbraith popularized the term, "conventional wisdom," in his book *The Affluent Society*, back in 1958. He used it to refer to commonly accepted notions that are rarely scrutinized for their accuracy.

### Getting off the track

In our culture, conventional wisdom uncritically endorses competition. Also economic growth, lines of command, having power, and climbing the ladder.

I went through most of my life convinced that if someone offered me a promotion, I had to take it. Even if I wasn't suited for the job. The whole point of working was to move onward and upward, wasn't it?

I went through most of my life believing that I should eat everything put on my plate. It never occurred to me that I could ask for smaller helpings.

I went through most of my life believing that winning mattered. I told myself I wasn't competitive, but who wants to be a loser? Whether in a game or an argument, I wanted to come out on top.

But maybe losing matters just as much as winning. Only when I realize I made a mistake, in hindsight, can I re-examine what I might have done and learn from it.

Perhaps life is a constant succession of course corrections.

Conventional wisdom always contains some truth. That makes it comfortable. Which, as economist Galbraith noted, enhances its ability to resist any serious consideration of alternatives.

Whenever we treat our culture's conventional wisdom as holy writ, we should feel uncomfortable.

\*\*\*\*\*

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](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca)

\*\*\*\*\*

## YOUR TURN

Most of the responses to last week's column dealt with crows, rather than with the failure of our imaginations.

David Gilchrist offered a pun: "The best word I've heard for a group of crows is a 'caucus' of crows. (And I wonder if maybe that should be a 'caw-cuss' sometimes!)"

Ralph Milton was interested to hear that all the crows had gathered near us: "I was wondering why all of a sudden we don't have any crows around our place, and that explains it.

"Someday I want to discuss the intelligent design idea with you. We use the term 'creating God' and talk about God continually creating. And yet I hear the intelligent design theory resoundingly put down."

But Isabel Gibson did pick up the idea of our shortage of vision: "Your piece this week reminded me of the last book in the Narnia series by C.S. Lewis. There's an end-of-the-world scene where the dwarves (or some other nasty folk) are trapped inside their nasty hut, eating nasty bits off the floor, because they cannot (or will not) see the glory all around them.

"It gave me the creeps when I first read it. Now it just makes me sad. For those dwarves and for all of us, when we are dwarfish in our own ways."

John Willems wrote, "Now if the religious authorities would stick to why, and the scientists would stick to how, then talk and listen to each other, perhaps they would colour with redefined lines."

\*\*\*\*\*

## PSALM PARAPHRASES

Psalm 66:1-12 made me think of the pioneer settlers of the west – and, by extension, of all who have had to search for, struggle for, and risk finding new horizons in their lives.

- 1 On the other side of the mountains, a new world spreads before us.
- 2 The rocky ridges give way to spreading grasslands;  
the shadows of our past to endless sunshine.
- 4 The far horizon shimmers in holy celebration.  
In sacred silence we stand, speechless before the rebirth of possibility.
- 3 You tested us terribly, God.  
At times, we thought we would die, adrift, alone.
- 5 You scorched us on the deserts;  
you froze us on the glaciers.  
We could not help ourselves.
- 6 But you gave us shade against the sun, and fire against the cold.  
With your help, we survived every obstacle.
- 7 Through our trials you taught us that you alone are almighty, and not we ourselves.
- 8 We could have perished.  
We could have fallen into shadowed chasms;
- 9 we could have been cornered by wild animals  
or incinerated by forest fires.
- 10 We lost loved ones;  
we still mourn their passing.
- 11 We suffered.

12 But in passing through our suffering,  
we discovered grace.

For paraphrases of other psalms, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publications,  
[info@woodlake.com](mailto:info@woodlake.com).

\*\*\*\*\*

## OLD BOOKS AVAILABLE

I have a couple of boxes of old books that belonged to my father and grandfather. As near as I can tell, the oldest is a Shorter Catechism from 1863, the newest a 1994 text by John Polkinghorne. If you're interested in any of them, please let me know and I will send you an Excel spreadsheet with the full list of books – all I ask is that you pay for shipping.

\*\*\*\*\*

### 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

- 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](http://www.seemslkegod.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.

\*\*\*\*\*

### 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](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca).

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

\*\*\*\*\*