

Wednesday April 11, 2012

Figuring it out for yourself

By Jim Taylor

The dog we got after we moved to our present home almost didn't survive his first months with us. We didn't know, at the time we got Brick from the SPCA, that he wasn't housebroken.

And I don't mean just being trained to go outside for his personal emergencies. He knew nothing about living in a house, period. He ripped holes in my good leather jacket. He tore the back off my Bible. He scattered through the house the contents of the compost pail, the bucket of fireplace ashes, and the pages of a whole box of loose-leaf binders for a workshop I had to teach.

One day we came home to find that he had torn open a 12 kg bag of flour and dragged it all through the house. He left a trail of flour two inches deep on our carpets. Then he was so happy to see us, he rolled in it, ecstatically wagging his long plumed tail, spraying flour everywhere...

Murder occurred to us. Instead, we laughed hysterically.

I have to say, in Brick's favour, that he never made the same mistake twice. Once he realized he should not chew a ruler, he never touched it again. He chewed my socks instead.

It took him several months to learn that "No" didn't refer only to the fireplace matches, Joan's pantyhose, or the TV remote control. "No" meant "None of the Above." Ever.

That's a big step for a dog. Specially for a scatterbrained Irish Setter. He had to induce general principles from specific instances.

Inductive reasoning

It's a big step for humans, too, though we're supposedly blessed with much more reasoning power. There are humans – lots of them – who treat individual incidents just as literally as Brick did. So they pick up litter off their front yards, but chuck litter out their car windows. They demonstrate against industrial pollution, while smoking. Businesses count on customer loyalty, but don't reciprocate with loyalty to their employees. The values people profess for home and family don't make it to the car lot or the boardroom.

The Hebrew rabbis – including Jesus – expected their hearers to use inductive reasoning. So they told stories. Perhaps from what we now call the Old Testament. Just as likely, from the vast repertoire of tales in an oral culture.

If their hearer didn't get the point, they told another story. And another...

Eventually, the point got through. Even if some stories differed in detail, perhaps even contradicted themselves in some ways.

Jesus parable of the wealth entrusted to three servants, for example, portrays a dramatically different "master" from the one who insists on giving all workers the same wage. The vineyard owner who kills his rebellious tenants differs from the loving father who welcomes back the son who disgraced him.

Why didn't the rabbis just tell people what they meant? Because then people wouldn't have worked out the principle for themselves.

We could have continued defining Brick's life forever with endless rules and restrictions. But once he figured it out for himself, his behaviour changed. And he found freedom instead of frustration.

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YOUR TURN

Kathleen Russell added something new to my perceptions of Easter symbols. “When I was a child,” she wrote, “my British parents taught me that the egg symbolized the stone placed in front of Jesus' tomb. On Easter Sunday morning we went to church, and in the afternoon we took our painted hard-boiled eggs to the local park or the back yard and rolled them on the ground, just as the angel had rolled away the stone from the tomb.”

My cousin Michael Parmenter, in St. John's, Newfoundland, added a possible new symbol: “I'm not sure how this fits with your column but I thought you might find it interesting. For the past two weeks a pure white adult Snowy Owl has been seen perching on top of the cross at Mary Queen of Peace Roman Catholic church in St. John's. It was first reported by the priest and has been seen by only a few people since---my sighting was at 3:40 a.m. and that seems to be typical, only coming when all traffic is gone and all lights are off. The bird was last seen on Palm Sunday but may still be around. Only with binoculars can you see what it is---otherwise it looks like a white haze in the dark.”

Elwyn Hunt (from New Zealand) challenged my claim that we know the bread and wine are not the real flesh and blood of a particular Jew, 20 centuries ago: “I have found over the years that some people try to do without symbolism in their lives, but I have always enjoyed the richness that symbols give us. The communion wine, for me, *is* the blood of God. In the human/animal body, blood means life. Without our own blood, we have no life. Christ died on the cross, he shed his blood, to give me (the chance at) eternal life. So when I kneel at the altar on a Sunday morning, it *is* the blood of Christ that I am sharing with other believers. And it's always a holy and life-giving moment.”

Isabel Gibson decided to be somewhat heretical in her comments: “Easter just gets tied up with all those spring images -- and after a while, we forget what they're supposed to be symbolizing. That's where chocolate enters the scene (not altogether a bad thing!).

“Death is such an integral part of the human condition that you'd think we don't need any reminding of it. Yet, somehow, our best intentions to live in and for the moment -- enjoying every one of them -- is unsustainable in the face of the everyday-ness of our lives. Maybe that's part of what those symbols and rites are about -- not so much coming to terms with death, but trying to remind us to hang onto life while we have it. If that's what they're for, maybe sun worship with its daily reminders would serve us better than the (merely) yearly celebration of Easter.”

Clare Neufeld wanted to say thanks for last week's psalm paraphrase. Having received some valued advice from an acquaintance, he felt that “His counsel resonates so well with your rendition of the psalm that I sense divine ‘intervention’, for both myself, and a 43-yr-old friend, who lies dying of cancer, in his bed, at home, in Newton, KS.

Clare went on to describe how his daughter had “voluntarily suspended her employment in palliative care, in the Okanagan” to care for his and her friend.

Clare requested permission to “borrow your version of v19-24, and share them appropriately with him.”
For such uses, I'm always glad to grant permission.

PSALM PARAPHRASES

Psalms 133 (the RCL selection for Sunday April 15) is one of the shorter psalms. And celebrating olive oil dribbling down one's beard strikes me as both uncouth and patriarchal. So I re-did the psalm to celebrate the togetherness of all couples whose marriages have survived the traumas of adults growing up. (Joan and I will celebrate 52 years this summer.)

1 You have grown from my lover to my best friend, my closest companion.
2 You know me better than I know myself;
your company is as comforting as a deep warm bath.
The sweet oil of your presence softens the knots of my tangled emotions.

3 Every morning I wake, wondering what I did to deserve you;
every night, I fall asleep with the blessing of your breath beside me.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Model T Websites." a simple (and cheap) seven-page website for congregations who want to develop a web presence <<http://www.modeltwebsites.com>>
- 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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