

Wednesday November 21, 2012

Seeing through another's eyes

By Jim Taylor

For a while, our grandson shared his school classroom with a couple of exceptional girls. The two girls are joined at the head – conjoined, technically craniopagus twins.

Tatiana and Krista Hogan turned six at the end of October. Long ago, their mother decided not to abort them, and not to risk separating them surgically. Whether her decisions were right or wrong, I cannot know. But as a result of those decisions, the rest of us are confronted with some new frontiers in our understanding of ourselves.

Anatomically, the two girls have separate brains, separate nervous systems, separate body organs....

But their brains are “zippered” together, writes Vancouver *Sun* writer Denise Ryan, by “a neural bridge between the thalami, the sensory processing hubs of their brains.”

So they can, when they choose to, see through each other's eyes, feel through each other's skin, and taste through each other's taste buds. When one is tickled, the other will laugh.

Ryan describes one example. The girls' grandmother “covers Tatiana's eyes. Their mother holds a small stuffed animal in front of Krista's open eyes. ‘What am I holding?’ she asks Tatiana.

“Tatiana, her eyes completely covered, hesitates.

“Her mother prompts her: ‘Tati, look through your sister's eyes.’

“There is a pause, a breath held.

“Then Tatiana, her eyes covered, somehow floats into her sister's brain: ‘The Lorax!’ she announces.

“In order to see through each other's eyes,” Ryan explains, “there is some internal shift, as if each sister's soul moves over and makes space for the other....”

It's a conscious connection, a deliberate entry into the other's senses. They don't normally live in each other's minds. They have their own food preferences, their own personalities. But some sensory inputs are strong enough to override their ability to maintain separation. Krista loves ketchup; Tatiana hates it. When Krista eats ketchup, Tatiana screams.

Can they read each other's thoughts? They're still too young to identify and name which one originated a thought. But that recognition may come, in time.

I'm almost envious.

Of one mind

Despite being a writer, I'm often clueless at picking up clues from oral language, let alone body language. I would love to be able to enter someone else's mind, to know what he or she is really thinking...

This is not about control or domination. I have enough trouble operating my own body, without taking over someone else's too.

Rather, it's about the ultimate intimacy -- shared consciousness, communicating without masks, without barriers.

Isn't that what it means “to love one's neighbor as oneself”? To set aside our egos, our presuppositions, our prejudices, so that we can learn to see the world through their eyes, walk in their shoes, experience their feelings?

I'm less comfortable with someone else rummaging through my mind, I admit. Some of my thoughts are probably not, umm, publishable.

But Krista and Tatiana show me that is possible for two minds to interact, while retaining their own identity. One mind need not totally infiltrate the other.

Perhaps, even without being physically conjoined, I could learn to trust others with more of what's really going on inside me.

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YOUR TURN

Most of those who wrote about last week's column seem to be people who have worked with words, and/or experienced the obfuscation that can accompany a committee's attempts to turn a meal into a buffet.

Robert Caughill suggested that a statement about the explosive Middle East situation developed by the United Church of Canada may have suffered from "editing by committee": "...probably what happened to the statement concerning the Israel/Palestine issue at the last General Council."

He offered a word of advice: "Unless you are defining technical specifications for something, everything else should be stated [in terms] as short and succinct as possible."

Isabel Gibson wrote, "This made me cringe! I've been at that table, holding the pen (or keyboard)....

"I have one client that (not 'who', it's a company, not a person -- when did we lose that distinction in English?) has a new style guide written for (and apparently by) engineers. It insists (insists!) on non-standard usage that would strike 90% of readers as wrong. What's an editor to do? Avoid the constructions altogether, if possible. But it's crazy-making to work like that.

"And that doesn't even go to the substance of your piece -- when and how can we benefit from the cumulative wisdom/knowledge of groups/crowds, and when are we better off with a single someone who knows this stuff? The Apollo 13 astronauts would have died in outer space if they had had to rely on just themselves, or even just on any one guy/guyette on the ground."

Cliff Boldt sent along a quotation from Martin Luther King Jr. that seemed to fit the theme of the column: "Nothing in all the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity."

Bob Warrick in Australia forwarded my earlier column about the words of hymns to several friends. Keith Elcock responded, "I can relate to this. It makes a good case for singing hymns in a foreign language -- that way it would be possible to sing and not be concerned with the words!"

PSALM PARAPHRASES

I am not an enthusiast for Christ the King Sunday, or Reign of Christ Sunday, or whatever you call it. Once upon a time, a fair and just monarchy was the best form of government people could imagine; today, it violates much of what we believe about individual responsibility and autonomy. Psalm 132 seems to me to be saying, "Lord, put us on your throne where we belong, so that we can claim your authority to enforce our will." When I started thinking about some of the abuses of power done in the name of a monarchical God, I thought about Canada's Indian Residential Schools....

Great Mystery, remember how your children suffered.
Torn from their homes,
Given new names,
Forbidden to speak their own language,
Fed the slops from the kitchen,
And ordered to be grateful.
They were taught to worship the great god Clock –
Expected to get up on time,
Attend classes on time,
Work in the fields on time,
Go to sleep on time.
Yet they retained their identity, they knew not how.

Rise up, Great Mystery, reclaim your people!
Give your people purpose;
Give your people pride.
Let them shake off the apathy and alcoholism,
The self-pity and suicide,
That drag them deep into despair.

Manifest yourself, Great Mystery;
Make your invisible spirit known.
Once you threaded yourself through everything;
Now you are known only in elders' memories.
Re-establish yourself
in our hearts and lives,
and in our children's lives.

For other paraphrases, you can order *Everyday Psalms* through Wood Lake Publications, info@woodlake.com or 1-800-663-2775.

HYMNSIGHT

My friend Ralph Milton, who published his Rumors newsletter for many years, has something special for you. It's called HYMNSIGHT, and it's for any church that currently projects the words of hymns and prayers, or plans to.

Ralph writes, Since retiring, I have rediscovered my old love of photography, and found creative use for my pictures in the life of First United where Bev and I worship. Our entire liturgy is projected, so that people read responses and sing hymns from screens. I use my photos to add color, vitality and depth to all the hymns and most of the liturgy.

In the course of this, I have developed slide sets to go with 600 hymns, plus about two thousand slides, in both the standard screen and the newer wide screen shape. You can use all of them, in any way you wish, without permission, and absolutely free, as long as it's non-profit and church related.

All you need to access the website is go to:

<http://www.hymnsight.ca> www.hymnsight.ca

In addition to all that visual material, there's a comprehensive "how-to" manual for those who are new to the idea of using projected visuals in church, and for those who have already begun.

HymnSight provides a set of suggested visuals to go with each hymn, but the words to the hymn are not there, mainly for copyright considerations.

Please take a look to see if this service scratches where you itch. If you think it's worthwhile, please let some of your colleagues in ministry know about it. And if you know of a website that could benefit from a link to HymnSight, why not add it?
Blessings,
Ralph Milton

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

- 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 "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

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