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Wednesday July 16, 2014

Truth as a moving target

By Jim Taylor

When you drive from Regina to Moose Jaw across the flatlands of central Saskatchewan, the TransCanada Highway unrolls endlessly before you. One after another, telephone poles rise over the horizon. The kilometres click by. But the horizon never gets any closer.

Bruce Sanguin must have been driving over a road something like that when he penned a prayer for his book, *If Darwin Prayed*. “This search for truth and its infinitely receding horizon,” Bruce wrote, “frustrates our need to nail it down. Humour us, will you? Freeze the horizon, and fix a point that assures us of truth’s location.

“Or convince us, once and for all, that we wouldn’t know what to do with truth if we held it in our hands, and remind us that whenever we try to nail you down, you always rise up and go ahead of us – luring us toward the mystery beyond our intellect.”

Too much for mere mortals

My friend and publishing partner Ralph Milton scorned men who need to pursue every woman. “They’re like a dog chasing a car,” Ralph would say. “If they ever caught it, they wouldn’t know what to do with it.”

That’s what Bruce is talking about, slightly less graphically. If we were ever granted comprehension of absolute truth, it would probably destroy us.

One of my favourite chapters from the children’s classic, *The Wind in*

***the Willows*, describes Moley and Ratty looking for a lost infant. On an island in the river, they encounter Pan, the mythical god of nature. They are stunned, overwhelmed, crushed.**

And then the vision fades away. Moley and Ratty can look around again, see their own familiar world once more. Author Kenneth Grahame explained, “For this is the last best gift that the kindly demi-god is careful to bestow: the gift of forgetfulness, lest the awful remembrance should remain and grow, and the great haunting memory should overshadow the lives of little animals...”

That’s why, with the wisdom of infinity, truth is always somewhere on the horizon, something towards which we travel, but never quite get there.

Narrowed vision

The horizon didn’t roll up as quickly when settlers lumbered across empty grasslands in ox carts. Today, we hurtle towards horizons much faster in modern cars on paved highways, and faster still when we fly in airplanes. The last century has given us a virtual blizzard of information, facts whirling at us like leaves in a hurricane.

But information is not truth – it is merely a means of seeking truth.

Sometimes – perhaps often – we think we have reached the horizon. We think we have found truth, grasped truth with both hands, nailed it down for all time. My experience suggests that whenever this happens, the holders of this fragment of truth become so fixated on what they are absolutely sure of that they lose sight of the horizon.

Truth narrows down to the spot their feet occupy.

If they’d look up, they’d see that the horizon is still out there ahead of them.

Truth that can be nailed down is like the butterfly collection in our local museum – beautiful, but no longer a mystery that can fly to the horizon.

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YOUR TURN

Yogi Berra is reputed to have declared, “Nostalgia ain’t what it used to be.” Well maybe. Most of you seemed to agree with Yogi, and me, that we

sometimes over-value the past, and ignore how much we may have learned since then.

The sole dissenting voice (at least, among those who wrote to me) came from John Clinton. He noted, “I got two very important things from my college days (Drew U, Madison, NJ --1957-61): #1: a darn good education; #2 an exceptionally fine wife. I’d say that’s a pretty good return on the investment of those four years.”

I picked up a theme from Paul McCartney’s song Yesterday. Ted Wilson suggested a song that might be equally relevant: “Another song those who look back on the days of our youth might want to remember is Barry McGuire’s Eve of Destruction. It paints a rather grim, but accurate, picture of the mid-50s through the mid-70s.”

Isabel Gibson expanded a bit on my thoughts: “Always good to see people looking at Holy Writ as something writ by humans, with all their strengths, foibles, lapses, and agendas. Those folks back then were folks just like us, not cartoon, one-dimensional figures.

“As for older being better, yes, we do tend to see only the mountaintops (and all in a warm sunset glow, at that) as we look back, rather than the valleys we trudged from peak to peak (to paraphrase M.M. Kaye). An illusion, but a damnably seductive one that we need to push back against. Thanks for the reminder.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

The lectionary calls for one of what I consider the really great psalms, Psalm 139, for this coming Sunday. I’m tempted to tell you to stick with the scriptural versions, but just for consistency, I’ll include a paraphrase anyway (even if I no longer fully accept the omniscience that this paraphrase presumes).

1 You know everything, God.

You know me inside and out.

**2 You know when I sit down, you know when I stand up;
you can read my mind.**

3 Before I take a step, you know where my foot will fall.

4 You know what I will say before I say it.

5 I cannot get away from you.

Wherever I turn, whatever I do, you are there.

**Sometimes your constant presence makes me feel fenced in;
you are larger than life, and I am next to nothing.**

6 I cannot possibly match wits with you;

I might as well try to fly like an eagle, or swim like a seal.

7 If I could, I would rebel against you;

I would assert my independence.

But how can I do that, when we are so hopelessly unequal?

8 You live in the nooks and crannies of the mind;

you live in the biosphere of our planet.

I cannot escape your presence anywhere.

9 If I travelled with the speed of light

to the farthest reaches of the universe,

you would be there, too.

10 Wherever I go, whatever I do, you will be part of my life.

I will feel your hand in the small of my back, pushing me along.

11 I would hide in the darkness

12 But what is darkness to you?

You see right through it, as you see right through me.

I might as well accept it -- you are my permanent partner in life.

**For paraphrases of most of the psalms used by the RCL, you can order my book
Everyday Psalms from Wood Lake Publishing, info@woodlake.com.**

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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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
