

Wednesday October 10, 2012

Seeing the bigger picture in a tiny fragment

By Jim Taylor

Everyone knows that Isaac Newton discovered the theory of gravity when an apple fell on his head.

Whether the story is factually true or largely mythical, the event caused him to wonder why that apple should fall down, not up. From his wondering about a relatively minor event emerged a fuller understanding of how the universe hangs together.

Physicist Frithof Capra looked at a beach, and saw the Dance of Shiva – the cycle of creation and destruction – taking place.

English mystic Julian of Norwich looked at a humble hazelnut, and realized that it encapsulated her theology of God's relationship with humans.

Poet William Blake wrote,

*To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.*

All these people had one thing in common – an ability to look at the part and see the whole.

The skill of capsulizing

Not everyone can do it.

At a men's breakfast recently, the program organizer asked participants to describe a single significant event that had influenced the rest of their lives. Several in the group – I wasn't keeping count – couldn't do it.

They had certainly had significant events in their lives. But they didn't seem able to isolate one part that revealed the whole. They had to tell their whole life story – abbreviated, of course, but still starting from "I was born in...."

They were like tourists who have to include the full spread of a city, the prairies, the mountains, into a single photograph.

And yet a close-up of dew on a single rose may document the beauty of a garden better than a picture of the whole spread. Stiletto heels clicking on a sidewalk may say as much about a city as a panorama of soaring office towers.

Scientific advances

The concept of part and whole has been popularized recently by holographic images and fractals.

If you cut an ordinary photograph into smaller bits, all you have is fragments, like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. No single piece contains the entire image.

But if you break the carrier of a holographic image into pieces, you will still have the whole image in each piece – not as sharp as the original, but recognizably complete.

Fractals do the same, but mathematically. No matter how finely you zoom in on the output of the formula, the pattern recurs. It doesn't necessarily repeat. Each iteration is not identical. But each is recognizably part of a coherent whole.

Fractals have is no beginning. And no end point. They just are.

Newton and Capra, Julian and Blake, created the equivalent of fractals and holographs with words and ideas, long before such things were technically possible.

So did Jesus of Nazareth, in his parables. Scholars and preachers have developed infinite interpretations of each parable. But perhaps, like fractals or holographs, they are all small representations of the same theme: "This is the way you should live."

Early Christians were known as people of The Way.

But if Blake makes no sense to you, Jesus probably won't either.

Copyright © 2012 by Jim Taylor. Non-profit use in congregations and study groups 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, send an e-mail with Soft Edges in the subject line to jimt@quixotic.ca

YOUR TURN

Jane Bennett wrote about last week's column, "I love your last line ... 'I am now confident that God is, whether or not I can define her.'"

"I have felt that God could be equally male AND female for years. I have voiced this openly on occasion, only to be surprised at the vehement response from many friends who deny God could be anything but male. If 'we' are created in God's image, how can we be male and female, if God isn't both. I do actually have a psychic friend who believes emphatically in both Mother God and Father God, and prays to both. She identifies with each, as we must have a balance ... a yin and yang, a positive and a negative, a male and a female. [This attitude] resonates deeply within me, as there are attributes of both genders that children require to grow and develop, and is God not our ultimate parent?"

"I confess I am more than a little curious to see what kind of response your column receives this week!"

Well, here are those comments, in all their diversity.

Heather Richard took a different viewpoint from Jane: "I often wonder why we spend so much time debating God's sex. To my understanding, the separate sexes exist primarily for reproduction. Who does God reproduce with? If he/she doesn't reproduce, why does he/she have to be one sex or the other? While I agree that we are created in God's image, I don't necessary believe that every aspect of our being is modeled identically to God. After all, we're not perfect. Instead of spending our time worrying about his/her sex, we should be spending more time considering how he/she wants us to behave."

Steve Roney wrote, "You would have had no doubts over your experience on the road to LaGuardia had you been Catholic. It was, of course, the Blessed Virgin, the Theotokos. But no, she is not God. God has no gender. For that matter, neither do you or I. Only nouns and other parts of speech have genders.

Steve thought I was being unfair to multinational corporations: "The original 'sweat shops' were small businesses where people worked for themselves as independent contractors, not factories, and the folks in them were probably pretty happy with their lots. I assume what you mean here are really factories where people earn wages. But in the Third World, that job in the multinational's factory is almost always the best-paying job around, and with the best working conditions. Shut them down, and you throw the workers back into starvation and oppression."

"Other than that," Steve ended, " nice uplifting column."

Wayne Irwin and Judith Fetter shared their experiences of "presence".

“When I separated from my first wife after 28 years together, and was living on my own,” Wayne wrote, “I was amazed that I never felt alone. I had the sensation that there was a constant Presence in my apartment with me. That is a memory that I, too, find very reassuring.”

Judith Fetter had a similar experience: “My experience of the “everlasting arms’ was while I was caring for my husband as he was dying with Alzheimer's. It was not a short, one-time experience, but lasted months, and was especially close and powerful when I had to make the decision to put him into the nursing home. I think that for me those arms were masculine, because I needed masculine strength for decision-making etc. But I can certainly imagine times when it would be feminine arms that would be right. I had never really understood that phrase before, but the sense of being held, and upheld, was so real that I have totally understood it since. And I knew at the time that God was not only holding me, but also holding Lawrie, and that, somehow, although I couldn't see it, Lawrie was still a whole person and that God would look after him even when I couldn't.”

Charles Hill mused on the attachment some people have to a masculine image of God: “My wife's father unexpectedly died at home of a heart attack when she was 9. It has had life-long effects on her. Abandonment. She staunchly defines God as a male and has difficulty believing he/God is there for her in tough times. Men not only die but they abuse and abandon. Many work such long hours that their children rarely see them. The word ‘He’ can have a chilling impact on the abused and abandoned. Not to say that mothers do not sometimes abuse and abandon. Maybe using the word ‘God’ suffices, rejoicing the in nurturing and compassionate God displayed by Jesus.”

Suzanne Edgar noted: “As a young mother of three daughters who regularly complained to me about all the All-mens in church -- it did no good to say ‘amen’ simply means 'so be it!' -- I recall exactly where I was sitting in church when the full weight of all the male content of the liturgy, the readings, the hymns, and the resistance to any other point of view other than patriarchy fell upon my very sore heart, and I sat and wept silently. It took me a long time to come home to myself without feeling a terrible sense of loss and hopelessness. We need voices like yours, so that the fear-mongering that resists understanding who we are as human beings stops in wonder, all over the world!”

Margaret Carr suggested that our views of the gender of God reflect our own gender-related feelings: “I have no trouble thinking of a Mother God. I do not believe in a theistic God, but I believe God is inside all of us. I suspect the God inside me is a Mother God because I think as a woman and act as a woman, because I am a woman.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

Is there a more despairing psalm than Psalm 22 (the lectionary's choice for Sunday October 14)? It starts with that tragic wail from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And although the psalm ends with a ringing affirmation, the selection recommended for this Sunday only includes verses of lament.

1 My God, my God--are you deaf and blind?
I expected you to help me, to ease my anguish!
2 For God's sake, God! Do something!
All day long, I pour out my pain.
All night long, I cower from the dark.
Alone, God, all alone.

3 My parents told me I could trust you.
4 Their parents trusted you, they said,
and you came through for them.

5 They cried out to you in the old days, and they were saved.
They trusted you, and you didn't let them down.

6 But not me. You've forgotten me.
I am a cockroach, crawling in the corners, waiting to be stepped on.
Some people scorn me, others try to stomp on me.

7 Everyone makes fun of me.
They crack jokes at my expense;
They suck their teeth, they shake their heads.
8 "If God is really on your side," they scoff, " why doesn't God rescue you?
Why doesn't your deity make good on its promises?"

9 And yet I cannot forget--you shaped me in my mother's womb;
You rocked me in my mother's arms,
10 You taught me how to crawl.
Since I was a child, you have been as close to me as the air I breathe.
11 Do not let me suffocate now for lack of air.
Lord, there is no one else to help me.
For God's sake, help me!

12 I am sealed inside a plastic bag;
It clings to my face; I cannot breathe.
13 It distorts my vision.
I see my tormenters dancing around me,
14 like looking at them through running water.
I feel as weak as water;
My bones cannot support me; they deflate like a ruptured airbag;
My spirits sag.
15 My mouth chokes with dust;
Dryness glues my tongue to the roof of my mouth.
I might as well be dead.

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

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

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 unsubscribe 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
