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Wednesday August 6, 2014

Seeking alternate routes to truth

By Jim Taylor

I learned something last week. I am not a follower. At least, not a docile follower.

To put that discovery into context, I spent last week in my annual hiking trip into the Canadian Rockies. A volunteer organization, the Skyline Hikers of the Canadian Rockies, organizes five week-long hiking camps every summer. They provide the tents, the meals, and the horses that carry in most of the campers' personal gear. The hikers themselves carry day packs – cameras, binoculars, lunches, and emergency clothing for sudden mountain weather changes.

During their week in the back country, completely cut off from both vehicular and electronic traffic, hikers get a choice of up to six hikes every day, ranging in length from 10 to 20 kilometres, with a designated leader.

I discovered that no matter what route the leader chose, I tended to look for an alternate.

I didn't challenge the general direction of a hike. I had, after all, signed up to go to that particular place. But whenever the leader had to make a judgement – for example, finding a route through a swampy section – I rarely followed meekly in the leader's footsteps.

I found my own ways of sinking into deep mud.

Or I'd choose a different set of rocks for crossing a stream. Or perhaps a different path through a mountain meadow bright with alpine wildflowers. Even just seeking a different viewpoint for a spectacular cascade of waterfalls.

Sometimes my choices worked better than the leader's. Sometimes they didn't. But – if I may put this as a double negative – I was not content not

to know.

Other answers

I think I take a similar approach to religion.

About a year ago, an Australian correspondent argued that the difference between science and religion is that science constantly seeks to prove a theory wrong or inadequate, so that it can be superseded by a newer and more comprehensive theory. Thus traditional physics gives way to quantum physics; traditional measurement to relativity; traditional forecasting to chaos theory.

When science propounds a theory, other scientists immediately test it. In replicating the experiment or process, they explore details that might invalidate the original conclusions.

Granted, science can cling to former understandings just as vigorously as any other discipline. That tendency, in fact, led to Thomas Kuhn's landmark book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* – which coincidentally also describes any mental or social revolution.

Religion, the Australian writer contended, takes the opposite approach. Once organized religion establishes a doctrine, it will reject any development that might require it to reconsider that doctrine. It would rather defend its current understanding than seek newer understandings.

There's some historical validity to that claim. Witness Galileo, for example. The great Councils of the early Christian church were called to exclude schools of thought that threatened the established order..

If that Australian writer is correct, I suppose I take a scientific approach to religion. I'm not willing to follow blindly in the footsteps of Augustine or Alfred North Whitehead, or Martin Luther or Teilhard de Chardin. If their reasoning corresponds with my experience, so much the better.

But if it leads me into a mud hole, I will look for some alternate route that makes better sense of my experience.

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YOUR TURN

Last week's column was a kind of rant against vandalism.

John Schaffer agreed: "Vandalism is hard to understand.

"Some eco terrorists burned down a million dollar mansion in our area, even though the owner had gone to great lengths to do some environmentally friendly things with the construction process. Mystery unsolved to this day.

"Years ago two teenagers vandalized a school, our church, and the post office. Bad mistake to include the post office -- the legal system really went after them for that. They were ordered to pay restitution, and one actually did (the follower, not the leader). We saved the money he paid for the damage and when he was done we returned it to him in the form of a scholarship. That felt good."

Wayne Irwin had a vivid metaphor: "Vandalism, in my view is like vomiting -- it is a catharsis of a sort, an emotional dumping. There is no rational thought involved."

Wayne also paid tribute to my book, in which I had explored the concept of sin being a virtue taken to an extreme: "I have often referred to your book 'Sin'. I appreciated it so much. And this addendum is welcome."

Isabel Gibson looked for that core virtue that might lie at the root of vandalism: "Maybe vandalism is about making one's mark -- showing that we were there. I'd include graffiti in that, as well as more permanently destructive activities like cutting down trees or smashing windshields. (Mugging old ladies I put in the "theft and assault" column; turning over garbage cans in the "stupid mischief" column, since the damage can more readily be righted.

"If that's the case, then maybe the core of vandalism is a (poor) attempt to express uniqueness, or identity, or even just presence -- to push back against the abyss. Of course, I could wish they'd find the same satisfaction in weeding a public garden or picking up trash, instead of strewing it around."

Michael Dack mused, "Interesting that the 'seven deadly sins' don't include violence... war... murder... torture... That is, vandalism against human beings."

Unless, of course, you (or Pope Gregory) can treat war, etc., as the effect, with sins of pride or envy as the cause.

PSALM PARAPHRASES

So our representatives won the World Series or a Wimbledon title; our candidate won an election; our author wins the Pulitzer Prize... and we act as if we enabled their triumph.

- 1 Here they come!
 We rise to our feet--
 we give them a standing ovation.
 In the coffee shop, in the shopping mall, in the churches,
 we discuss their wonderful deeds.
- 2 We organize a parade down Main Street in their honor;
 we proclaim their greatness in every newspaper and broadcast.
- 3 They make us proud of ourselves.
- 4 We press close around them;
 we collect their autographs.
- 5 For they have performed miracles;
 they have done more than we dreamed they could.
- 6 We share in their fame--
 we bask in their glory
 for we come from the same roots.
- 16 We have waited a long time for this recognition;
 we deserve every delicious moment of it.

Roberta Bondar and Chris Hadfield and spent years in obscurity, training to be astronauts. After their mission, they became instant celebrities.

- 17 We have had our hopes raised before.
 We invested our faith in saviors.
 We put them on pedestals, but they let us down;
 they had clay feet.
 We turned on them;
- 18 like jackals, we tore their reputations apart.
- 19 But one of them became famous, after all.
- 20 We praised her to the heavens;
 at luncheons and dinners, we sat her in the place of honor.
- 21 We elected her to high office;
 she endorsed luxury cars on television.
- 22 She was invited to talk to students in school assemblies;
 in our eyes, she could do nothing wrong.
- 45 She brought us great honor.

**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.**

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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
