

## **Controlling our thoughts**

**By Jim Taylor**

**The minds of small boys almost inevitably find humour in natural bodily functions. Farting, pooping, belching, pissing – all seem irresistibly hilarious.**

**When I was eight or nine, I remember, I attended a school for expatriate children in northern India. We boys lived in dormitories. About 30 slept in a large room, supervised by a matron. In those close quarters, childish humour spread like an epidemic.**

**Soon almost any casual comment took on “dirty” overtones.**

**The matron lectured us one evening about what she considered our bad habits. She offered an incentive for change – any boy who could go a whole week without thinking any dirty thoughts would get a treat. Ice cream. After everyone else had gone to bed.**

**Note, she challenged us not to have any “dirty thoughts.” Not just dirty words. In modern psychological parlance, she expected us to repress certain thoughts.**

**Repression should have resulted in lifelong damage. It didn't. At least, I don't think it did. Although my wife does sometimes wonder about my sense of humour....**

**I remember being furious with one friend, who twisted an innocent comment of mine into a sexual innuendo. “Now you've made me miss ice cream!” I raged.**

**No one in that dormitory got ice cream the first week. Or the second week. We couldn't cheat. If any boy falsely claimed mental purity for the week, a chorus of other boys would instantly denounce him.**

**But after a few weeks, one or two could claim the prize. Then half a dozen. Then most of the dormitory. I still remember how good it felt to be led downstairs to the darkened dining room, after all the other lights were out, to**

**sit around a table and slurp on delicious ice cream.**

**Amazingly, the matron's tactic had worked.**

## **Mind over mind**

**Words, thoughts, and actions are all connected. You can't say a racist word without first having had a racist thought. You can't commit a violent act without first having had a violent thought. That seems obvious.**

**What's perhaps less obvious is that what you say and do feeds back into your thought patterns. If you know you are not going to express your emotions physically – by your choice, not by external restrictions – there's not much point in wallowing in violent fantasies, is there? If you have to make an extra effort to translate harsh thoughts into socially acceptable language, you learn not to think those thoughts in the first place.**

**We humans are amazing creatures. We have minds. Our minds are, in many ways, indistinguishable from what we are. And yet we can tell our minds what to think. One part of us can say to itself, "That's an unacceptable thought."**

**Our minds can steer our minds.**

**It's almost as though each of us had two selves. There's the primitive self, the neural pathways that react unthinkingly, like a reptile's. And there's a transcendent self, that can observe our own reactions, as if from a distance, and apply some discretion.**

**I wonder if that's why almost every human society has believed there must be a God, somewhere out there, beyond ourselves.**

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## **YOUR TURN**

**Last week, I posed some moral/ethical questions around a highway incident near Montreal. The woman charged with criminal negligence for stopping to help a family of ducks across the road was found guilty. Your letters, generally, suggest that you would have reached a different verdict. (So would I.)**

**Debra Huron wrote about the verdict, “While I agree that it is tragic for the motorcyclist and his daughter to have perished, I harken back to a saying from Tibetan Buddhism, ‘Everything rests on the tip of your motivation.’ This woman was motivated by altruism. Shouldn’t that let her off the karmic hook? It seems that society does not deem her motivation strong enough to exonerate her. I do not know details of the case, but if she parked her car in a way that was confusing to other drivers, then her actions contributed to their deaths, and she is responsible for that. If the motorcyclist was simply zoned out and smashed into her car because he failed to distinguish that it was stopped, not moving, then his actions contributed to his death and his daughter’s.**

**“I am glad I wasn’t part of this jury.”**

**Beth Burgess lamented, “It’s a sad sign of our time that stopping to save any life could endanger your own life in some way. I lived for quite a while in an area where turtles were protected. We HAD to stop for them and let them cross if we saw them. I would do so whether we had to or not -- and would have stopped for those ducks, also. It is the responsibility of every driver to be prepared to stop or avoid something ahead. Unfortunately, those people died, but I think they were in the wrong. Had her car broken down, she might have been standing there trying to flag the people down and they still would have hit her and had the same consequences. Again, a sad sign of our times.”**

**Heather Richard has a similar – but not as tragic – incident: “A few years ago, my 10-year-old daughter and I were driving home from the video store. The highway leading home has a speed limit of 50km, but drivers consistently go 60km or more. On this day, the driver behind us was crawling up on my tail, so I consciously kept my speed at 50. When a dog ran out into the road, I slammed on my brakes, heard the screech of his brakes, and felt the car jerk forward as he rear-ended us. Fortunately, the dog was fine.**

**“The driver tried to blame me for the accident, saying stopping for a dog wasn’t necessary. I replied that I would always stop for a dog, especially with my young daughter in the car, and besides -- what if it had been a child instead of a dog? His insurance company agreed with me -- regardless of why I stopped, he had the responsibility to be able to avoid hitting me. I spent eight months in physiotherapy for whiplash, but it was worth saving the dog’s life and not traumatizing my daughter. I would do it again in a heartbeat.”**

**Christa Bedwin compared drivers in Canada with the drivers she experienced in Italy: “Driving in Italy was actually less scary than here, because everyone here is driving massive vehicles and not paying any attention at all. In Italy, it would be ludicrously whiny of the motorcycle driver's family to blame the woman who stopped. Because all drivers are expecting all the other drivers to act like maniacs, they treat each other with more respect. A lot more respect, I found, than here in Calgary, where people are smug and complacent and unhelpful to other drivers -- they do not feel that they HAVE to be kind or attentive, so they drive along smugly and stupidly.**

**That is why I genuinely believe Canadians are much, much more dangerous drivers than Italians. Italians might drive fast and may be crazy, but they pay attention.**

**The motorcyclist clearly wasn't paying attention. Open and shut case. Surely he could have gone BESIDE the car. It is ludicrous and upsetting that our system could blame an innocent person for the motorcyclist's inattention. He likely would have run the ducks down without a care too, and that also is criminal.”**

**“Wow! You pose some interesting problems,” wrote John Shaffer. He recalled an incident where “**

**I hit a car that pulled out in front of me on an icy road. Before it was over five vehicles were damaged. The policeman took mercy on me and only attributed three of the vehicles to my insurance.**

**“I was grateful no one died, though the fifth vehicle was a brand new Pontiac being driving for the first time by a teenager (with his car full of friends) way over the speed limit (remember the icy road?) and they came around a blind curve and hit the back of a truck that had missed the first 3 vehicles, so I didn't have to pay for the truck or the Pontiac. I don't know how the young man explained the car to his father.**

**“The person who was really at fault (but not legally) was so impressed that I didn't cuss him out that he started coming to my church. Alas, it didn't last. His wife had attended Peter Marshall's church in Georgia when she was a teenager. For 40 years she had been looking for someone as good as Peter Marshall and I doubt if she ever found such a pastor.”**

**Changing the subject to the Psalm paraphrases that I include on Wednesdays, Krista Markstrom wrote, “Thank you for the wonderful paraphrase [about God**

**as Granny]. I do not want to anthropomorphize God. We humans have taken and convoluted God far too much into making God in the image of man. In your paraphrase, though, I can see my grandmothers. I can recall their smells and the feel of their dresses (because women back then only wore dresses) and aprons (yes, aprons). Their bodies were rounded. Exercising and wearing a size 10 dress wasn't their goal. Loving their grandchildren, and accepting each one of us for the person we were, was the top of their 'to do' list. Hugging my grandmas was experiencing a little bit of heaven. The idea of a softer, loving, nurturing, and gentler image provides a more immediate deity. Yet, for me, the image of my grandmothers embodies immense strength, fortitude and rootedness."**

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## **PSALM PARAPHRASES**

**I don't follow the RCL's rationale for choosing Psalm 13 to accompany today's readings, but no matter. In 1990 my friend Mike Schwartzentruber had a double lung transplant. For six months, his body tried to reject the lungs that offered him new life. I imagined him saying this paraphrase.**

**How long, O Lord, must I lie here?  
Will you ignore me forever?  
How long must I struggle along on my own?  
My body aches all over;  
My own organs war against me.  
Will you let them win?  
How long can I keep up this battle?  
How long can I keep on fighting?**

**Listen to me, God!  
In the dead of night, answer me!  
Or let me die.  
Then my illness can rejoice,  
for it has triumphed over me;  
It has killed both of us.**

**Ah, but I trust you, Lord.  
Whatever happens, I know  
that I am safe in your love.  
There is nothing more I could ask, living or dead.  
So I will praise you, whatever happens.**

**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](mailto:info@woodlake.com).**

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#### 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](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [www.traditionaliconoclast.com](http://www.traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto: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](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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#### TECHNICAL STUFF

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca).

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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](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca), or send a note to [sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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