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Sunday August 17, 2014

When life slides out of control

By Jim Taylor

Computers are wonderful. Computers are infuriating.

I have a mailing list of about 1500 subscribers for my writings. I don't send out spam – the only way these people get onto my mailing list is by request.

And the mailing process is absurdly easy. I write a column, I e-mail it to a program that lives on another computer somewhere, and it automatically forwards my words to the entire mailing list.

Simple, right?

Except that for some unknown reason, the mailing list program decided about a week ago to ignore me. I send my e-mail, my computer assures me it has been sent successfully, but the message just vanishes. Into limbo. The ether. Cyberspace – pick any description you want.

My technology guy can make the mailing list send his messages to my subscribers. But I can't. As far as that anonymous computer is concerned, I no longer exist.

Which means, also, that I can't argue with it. I can't challenge its programming. I can't change its mind. It doesn't recognize that I'm there.

The website for the mailing list program tells me that the program is written "in Python, with a little C+ thrown in." I don't even know what that means. Obviously, I can't fix the problem. Nor, it seems, can anyone else.

Out of our hands

I'm discovering how upsetting it is to have situations slide out of control. I don't think of myself as a control freak – my friends might disagree! – but this situation shows me how much I depend on the universe to unfold as it should.

And if a mere computer glitch leaves me in turmoil, I can begin to understand – perhaps, just a little – what life must be like for millions of others around the world:

- The Yazidi and Christian refugees hiding on that mountain in northern Iraq, trapped between Kurdish and ISIS forces.
- The Palestinians of Gaza, looking at the ruins of their city.
- People living in the Quesnel River watershed, finding their pristine waters polluted by tons of effluent flooding out of a mine's tailings pond.
- The people of Sierra Leona and Liberia, victims by a deadly virus they can't see or taste or feel, but that infects them when they care for the bodies of dead relatives.
- Ukrainians, pawns in a deadly game played by pro-Russian and pro-European factions.

Outside forces suddenly turn their lives upside down. They feel helpless.

Bounced like billiard balls

I suppose that there must be people who never expect to have any control over their own lives. They expect to be pushed around by unseen forces. They see their role as simply submitting meekly to whatever comes along.

It's probably the attitude held by most of the living creatures of the earth. I'm fairly sure that salmon migrating up the Fraser River to spawn don't expect to have any control over dissolved chemicals that may come drifting downstream. Trees don't organize to fight forest fires. Trilobites didn't protest when sediments sealed them into what's now known as the Burgess Shale fossil beds in Yoho National Park, 500 million years ago.

But most humans do want to have some degree of control over their lives. Or at least to live in situations where invisible players do not bounce them around like billiard balls.

Unfortunately, a great many people have been treated as billiard balls.

Recently, I've been reading 1919 Versailles: the End of the War to End All Wars. Author Charles Mee Jr. documents exhaustively how a small group of men, each with his own personal agenda, carved up the planet. Partly to punish Germany. Partly to reward allies. Most often, to enhance their own country's ambitions.

They ignored the people who were already there. Arbitrarily, they lumped together distinctly different ethnic populations to form Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. They established boundaries in Africa that slashed across traditional tribal territories. They sliced up the Middle East according to the European languages spoken by expatriate bureaucrats.

Not just them

But let's not point fingers at others. Here in Canada, we treated our aboriginal peoples the same way. Remote mandarins in government and church offices made decisions about their lives, gave them reserves to live on, took their children, and gave those children new names and a new language. For their own good, of course.

The same way that men have made decisions for women. And white people, for black and Asian people. And everyone knew what was best for children.

Helplessness generates feelings of depression. Or anger. Or both.

Anger over the Treaty of Versailles has played out for almost a century as European nations split, African tribes slaughtered other tribes, and Asian colonies like Vietnam fought wars for independence.

Depression from the helplessness engendered by the residential schools still afflicts Canada's aboriginal peoples.

Compared to those situations, an uncooperative computer seems rather insignificant.

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YOUR TURN

Scott Edwards really liked last week's column, about the effects of fundamentalism: "Brilliant column, sir; kudos. You have articulated, logically and succinctly, what I have always thought. I have often thought that, had fundamentalists held sway in the time before time, we would still be debating the relative merits of fire while squatting in caves!"

Bruce McGillis vented, "There are still plenty of quasi Canadian fundamentalisms at work here. I know and have known many people where their ego, vindictiveness, and all of the human adverse idiosyncrasies prevent accepting

there are more enlightened concepts that are not only worthy but are required in to meet the societal changes we force upon ourselves. There seems to be a human need to be backward and vicious.”

Jorgen Hansen wrote, “Good explanation re religion.” Jorgen went on to describe his own fundamentalist background, and what turned him against it: “My grandfather was a religious zealot in Denmark... About 9 out of his 15 [children] are fundamentalists and crazy with religion. After I was 10 I began to question where god was, heaven and so on. My father grew up in this crazy household---he left at age of 14 to get away

“I see religion as a man’s way to control others and push your will to the ends of the Bible. I can see the history of religion—nearly always a man’s world. I am now a confirmed atheist, but I have problems explaining mankind and our ability to function as we do. I see so many religions and everyone says that they are the only true one.”

Isabel Gibson carried on a conversation about a previous column with a note that ties in with Jorgen’s last comment: “In my extended family, there is an Anglican (I’d call him nominally an Anglican -- he doesn’t attend worship services but insisted on having his daughters baptized as early as practicable for fear of them not being ‘covered’) who says, without any self-consciousness at all, that everyone thinks their own religion is the one true religion -- why else would you bother? That you might just carry on in the tradition you were used to (I find that inertia explains a lot about life), or that different paths worked just tickety for different folks but they mostly end up at the same place -- those ideas were baffling to him. No, it was all about Truth.”

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 Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

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Other sources worth pursuing:

- 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 “SeemslieGod” page, www.seemsliegod.org;
- Alan Reynold’s weekly musings, punningly titled “Reynolds Rap” -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson’s thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- 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.
