

Wednesday February 20, 2013

Hidden codes in my operating system

By Jim Taylor

A spate of news items about computer hackers crossed my screen recently. In the U.S., apparently, there's a "massive, sustained cyber-espionage campaign against American businesses and institutions." So says the 2013 National Intelligence Estimate. Chinese hackers have targeted the "energy, finance, information technology, aerospace, and automotive" industries.

Someone gained access to e-mails between former presidents George W. and George H.W. Bush. There was no suggestion that any intelligence was threatened.

The *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* both admitted that their computers had been hacked.

Here in Canada, naval officer Jeffrey Delisle was sentenced to 18 years in prison for selling military secrets to the Russians. No one knows what information he actually turned over. It could have been anything from a list of the CIA's undercover agents in Iran to the attack capabilities of Canada's fleet of aging Sea-King helicopters. (For non-Canadian readers, that's an in-joke; the Sea-Kings spend more time being repaired than flying.)

And somewhere in all that came news of the funeral of Aaron Swartz, revered in the hacker community for managing to penetrate MIT's massively protected archives and download 4.8 million articles.

Hacking the system

Obviously, if all of these can get hacked by unauthorized users, no one's computer is safe.

Passwords offer only puny protection. Encryption, only temporary protection. Anti-virus software, just a minor speedbump on someone's way into your hard disk.

And once in, it takes only seconds to implant a few lines of code. You might never know that your computer now sends a copy of everything you do, or write, to a third party somewhere else.

Fortunately, no one has yet managed to hack into the human brain.

Sudden horrible thought – maybe someone has!

Isn't that the purpose of raising children within a social culture? To embed some important precepts, some lines of coded instruction, that will kick in at various times during their lives and help them know what to do?

Installed software

In that sense, we've all been programmed. By our parents, our teachers, our mentors. While our brains were still soft and malleable, we learned – to a greater or lesser extent – to distinguish right from wrong. To evaluate evidence. To apply critical analysis to our experiences.

That "software" runs even when we're unaware of it.

Which is why I feel compelled to hold the door for women who are younger and fitter than I am, for example. Why I need to finish everything on my plate. Why I hate going into debt. Why I fuss over language....

Sometimes I can still hear my mother gently correcting my word choices.

I also realize that I've had to de-bug -- sometimes painfully -- a few of those lines of operating instructions. Especially the ones about women's roles, gays and lesbians, individualism....

Yes, and about a vengeful god who has to be bought off with human sacrifices.

Not that everything I was taught was wrong. Far from it. The people who programmed me provided the best software they could. They coded a strong foundation of ethics and morals. I shall always be grateful.

But I recognize that there are hidden factors shaping me that I had little to do with.

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YOUR TURN

When Fran Ota read last week's column about my feeling of rejoicing as the sun rises higher in the sky again, she was in Japan, attending her mother-in-law's funeral, on "a winter colder than many have seen in a while... [But] today was a clear blue day, temps of about 14 degrees, and it was just wonderful to get outside, stand facing the sun, plum blossoms and camellias coming out and the narcissus up everywhere. It was a perfect day."

Beth Burgess felt similarly ecstatic: "Ah, the sun, how I love it! I'm happier and healthier when I have more sun. I sleep more in the winter when the days are shorter. I will spend my third summer in Alaska starting in a few months. While there will be lots of rain, there will also be light for so many hours ... it energizes me. I'm in Arizona now, and like you, watching the days grow longer and doing so with delight. The sun is shining brightly through my windows right now and all is right in my world."

I had suggested that we no longer worship the sun as a god. Isabel Gibson replied, "Maybe we should rethink what we mean by 'god'. Anything we greet each morning with awe, delight, and gratitude (and yes, I'd include myself in that group) maybe warrants its own category of some sort."

Dave Denholm disagreed about sun worship: "Ah, but we DO worship the sun. You admitted that when you wrote the column. And here in the north central part of Alberta I/we do without a doubt worship warmth/light/above nothing (zero) ...

"For the last TOO many months I have left the house to go to work and returned to the house after work 'in the dark'. I turned on the back door porch light so I could see the lock to get the key into it to lock the house when I left, and struggled to get the key into it when I got home.... But halleluia! for the past week or so I can SEE. The light of the SUN is helping me to see what was in darkness."

Steve Roney offered this thought: "I think there is a good reason why nobody, or almost nobody, has been inspired to worship the sun as the supreme God. The sun is absent for about half of every day. This makes it less than supreme in its attributes. It is half of a duality. It symbolizes only the waking and the material world."

Steve also questioned my claim that "Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten ... imposed the world's first pure monotheism."

"That's pretty much up for grabs in the field of comparative religions," Steve wrote. "Many think monotheism is found in many if not all hunter-gatherer religions. Conversely, some believe Akhenaton's religion was not true monotheism."

Mary Margaret Boone mused, "And isn't it interesting in our world of science and knowledge we still persist in stating that the sun rises in the east and sets in the ... It's still about putting us first and not our place in the whole universe. Also perhaps inadvertently, or perhaps not, we reinforce Biblical literalism [by this speech habit]."

Dale Perkins sent along a newsletter put out by a group he's associated with, called the Progressive Spirituality Circle. It included a couple of things Dale wrote: "You can see I'm struggling with an anthropomorphic god in one piece..."

The newsletter looks interesting, but – as I write this the day immediately before my own newsletter goes out – I can't find an address in case you want to subscribe. Perhaps Dale will send that along for next week.

PSALM PARAPHRASES

Okay, I gave you the wrong psalm last Sunday. This coming Sunday is, I hope, the SECOND Sunday of Lent, for which the lectionary lists Psalm 27 – all 14 verses of it. I'm only going to give you the first six, which came out of an experience a few years ago, where the week that a friend was to be married, she was diagnosed with cancer.

1 In the darkness of the night I lie awake and tremble.
But with the dawn, fears fade away.
When I can see with my own eyes that there is nothing to be afraid of,
why should I fear?
If I could see with God's eyes, I would know I have nothing to fear.

2 No, not even if scalpels carve up my flesh,
even if treatment poison my body,
I have nothing to fear.
Malignant forces that might harm me will surely self-destruct;
By their own rapacious appetites, they will destroy themselves.

3 Though fate stacks the deck against me,
I will not despair.
Though tumors grow within me,
Yet I will remain confident, as long as you are with me.

4 I have only one desire, one goal in life:
I want to be part of your family.
I want to look along the thanksgiving table
and to feel the bonds of kinship--
with my cousins, my ancestors, my descendants.

5 Within that family I can feel safe.
I can hide my face in my mother's skirts;
I can rest my head on my son's shoulder.

6 Within that family, I need no longer fear what anyone thinks of me;
I can sing and dance;
I can be the joyful child that you created.

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

HYMNSIGHT

My friend Ralph Milton, who published his Rumors newsletter for many years, has something special for you. It's called HYMNSIGHT, and it's for any church that currently projects the words of hymns and prayers, or plans to.

Ralph writes, Since retiring, I have rediscovered my old love of photography, and found creative use for my pictures in the life of First United where Bev and I worship. Our entire liturgy is projected, so that people read responses and sing hymns from screens. I use my photos to add color, vitality and depth to all the hymns and most of the liturgy.

In the course of this, I have developed slide sets to go with 600 hymns, plus about two thousand slides, in both the standard screen and the newer wide screen shape. You can use all of them, in any way you wish, without permission, and absolutely free, as long as it's non-profit and church related.

All you need to access the website is go to:

<http://www.hymnsight.ca> www.hymnsight.ca

In addition to all that visual material, there's a comprehensive "how-to" manual for those who are new to the idea of using projected visuals in church, and for those who have already begun.

HymnSight provides a set of suggested visuals to go with each hymn, but the words to the hymn are not there, mainly for copyright considerations.

Please take a look to see if this service scratches where you itch. If you think it's worthwhile, please let some of your colleagues in ministry know about it. And if you know of a website that could benefit from a link to HymnSight, why not add it?

Blessings,

Ralph Milton

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, 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
