

*Wednesday October 2, 2013*

## **Encountering things we cannot believe**

By Jim Taylor

The grapes were ready to pick in the vineyard on the hill above us. Perhaps that accounts for the great hover of crows collected on the telephone wires.

Yes, I know, the accepted term for such an avian assembly is “a murder of crows,” but I consider that a prejudiced description for some of the most intelligent creatures on the planet.

The crows were all lined up, all facing the same way. I counted over 70 – totally covering the wires stretched between not just two but three telephone poles – when, without a sound, without a signal, without a single caw, they all took off at once into the vineyard.

I’ve read theories about why birds of a feather flock together, and why fish swim in dense schools. It’s an instinctive response, apparently, designed to confuse predators. But there were no predators hunting these crows. And when they took off, they de-flocked to different areas in the vineyard.

Watching them, I cannot believe that crows do not have some form of telepathic communication.

I’m sure several readers will immediately inform me about scientific research into crow communication. But whether crows do or do not communicate is not the point – the point is my inability to believe that their coherent behavior results from chance or instinct.

## **Limits of credulity**

As I walked on, I pondered how many other matters are defined for us by our inability, or our unwillingness, to believe something.

I read a book debunking climate change. The author was obviously intelligent and well read. He knew all the studies about global warming and its predicted effects. And over and over, he dismissed those conclusions as “unthinkable,” “unimaginable,” “impossible,” “beyond credulity”....

Once I identified this pattern, I could see that his objections to climate change had less to do with science than with his own inability to imagine those consequences.

I get invitations to attend “Intelligent Design” presentations. From what I can see, pure Creationists believe that a deity – specifically, the Christian God -- created the world, as is, 6,000 years ago. Intelligent Design adherents accept that life may have taken eons to evolve, but insist that “certain features of the universe and of living things are best explained by an intelligent cause, not an undirected process such as natural selection.”

That quote comes from Wikipedia, which goes on: “Certain biological features are too complex and improbable to be the result of evolutionary processes, and [therefore] these features are evidence of design.”

In other words, they cannot believe that complex structures could evolve on their own. The similarities between an octopus’ eye and a human eye can’t be coincidence. They must have been planned, or at least tinkered with along their evolutionary way.

I suppose the religious authorities, 20 centuries ago, could not believe that a Galilean peasant might embody the nature of God. And 600 years earlier, the Hebrew people could not believe that Yahweh would let his/her chosen people be exiled to Babylon.

I wonder how many opportunities we have missed, and may continue to miss, because we can’t, or won’t, allow our minds to colour outside the lines.

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## YOUR TURN

It turns out that several of you had heard of Sandon already.

"I was in Sandon on Tuesday of this week," wrote friend Ken Phipps. "I was also there in August, plus last year, etc., etc. So good thing you did not wager any money on this bet."

In further correspondence, Ken noted, "I have been going through that country late 1950s. I often go in just to take friends/relatives/families in there. We have hiked many of the old railway lines, up to abandoned mines, etc., even went way up the road starting out of Sandon up the hill towards Idaho Peak, but then started running into snow and washouts, so never got too far up there.

"I have 6 or so small books re Ghost Towns in Kootenays, Boundary Country, etc. plus a full sized one entitled Silver, Lead and Hell, The Story of Sandon."

Isabel Gibson, however, had not heard of Sandon before, although she describes herself as "A Westerner for all but 11 years of my life... Thanks for reminding me of yet another of the stories I don't yet know -- there is a world full of them out there.

"Your message -- 'Times change' - is as true for us as it was for the Sandonites and writer(s?) of Ecclesiastes and the Greek who muttered about not being able to step into the same river twice. Maybe even more true, given our rate of change.

"It's tough, especially when things are winding down instead of starting up, to see the eternal threads that wind through all this change, but I do think they're there."

Ivan Gamble described his own favoured ghost town: "We have an Okanagan Valley example, the gold mining town of Fairview overlooking Oliver. After the town closed, it was decided to move the old Presbyterian Church to Okanagan Falls. After all the windows and furniture were removed, a fairly large amount of dynamite was set off to loosen the 'square nails'. It worked, the church was dismantled, and is now a part of the United Church in its new location."

Laurna Tallman saw things differently: "There is a huge difference between the defunct mining town and the United Church. The Church gave its members experiences that continue to transform those individuals and to impact the rest of the world. My faith was born in the United Church of Canada... I could write extensively about the concepts, worship experiences, models of behaviour, and sense of mission that influenced all of my experiences in other denominations during my childhood, youth, and young adulthood. The Churches were never meant to become static monuments in the way so many people desire. Faith adapts, faith grows, and faith endures."

Steve Roney thought I got the message backwards: "The mainline Protestant churches are not preaching the same message they used to at all. For example, they used to be opposed to contraception, homosexuality, and alcohol. They used to be for sticking to the literal Bible. They used to be all sorts of things they now scoff at.

"But religions with consistent messages actually have a good track record for longevity. The Catholic Church, for example (ahem), which holds that its doctrines can never change, is probably the world's oldest organization of any kind. And still growing.

"Judaism, too, has shown remarkable talents for survival against all odds.

"In the non-Catholic Christian zone, it seems to be the denominations that have held fast to their own particular brand of old time religion that are growing: the Seventh Day Adventists, the Mormons."

Penny Gilbert wrote, “This is exactly where our three-point charge is. We are struggling and have some big decisions to make very soon. I don't think that we are totally afraid of change, but change to what? I'd like to hear about what is working out there. I definitely know what isn't working but what should a vital rural church look like? Anybody out there with some good answers?”

Debbie Brill had similar feelings: “I agree totally -- we cannot continue to do the same things in the same manner and then expect a different outcome. The struggle is to encourage those faithful who continue to attend, and are comfortable with the same things in the same manner, to be bold and head into a new direction in this wilderness time. What does that new direction look like? The answer is not one I have.”

Tom Watson offered an additional illustration of change: “I read that the last telegram in the world was sent on July 14 this year. Somewhere in India. The company was still sending 5000 telegrams a day but had been consistently losing money, so finally shut the operation down. The telegram, in its day, was as important, indeed in its beginnings as revolutionary, as the ubiquitous smart phone today.

“So, the church must also change or become a figment of the past. The troubling question is: Change how, and to what?

“A church (well, let's call it a religious place) near where I live seems to be booming. But they don't use words such as hymn, or sanctuary, or anything that would remind any unsuspecting onlooker that what they might be considering is ‘church.’ So what is that place?

“Strikes me that some of what is being attempted, in the name of ‘change’ and ‘getting with it’ is mere fiddling while Rome burns.”

Hanny Kooyman picked up an Internet program “that took place at an interesting building. Every so now and then a speaker (any topic) is invited at that location, with a discussion afterwards. The place is called today, translates as: ‘In the Red Hat’.”

Hanny noted a routine followed: “Prior to the speaker the old pipe organ is played, some classical pieces, and the same happens afterward. Bizarre actually, that that pipe organ is the last remnant to remind a person that the building once was a church. We evolve and often don't remember how we got there.”

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## **PSALM PARAPHRASES**

If I read the Revised Common Lectionary correctly, you have three choices for this coming Sunday – Psalm 137 or two possible passages from Lamentations. Because I haven't done a paraphrase of Lamentations, you're getting Psalm 137. I'm deliberately leaving out the mean and bitter verses 7-9.

Every immigrant is also an emigrant. The joy of beginning a new life is always coupled with the pain of leaving an old one.

1 Where the willows drape over the water's edge, we weep.

We remember our own rivers;

icy rapids racing among the rocks.

2 Beneath these arching branches, our tears trickle down onto muddy banks.

3 They say we should be happy;

They want us to wear a smile.

"Do another of your ethnic dances," they call;  
"Entertain us with the riches of your race, your religion!"  
4 How can we dance with our feet mired in mud?  
5 Removed so far from our native rocks, our hearts rot within us.

6 My spirit has been siphoned out of me;  
my dreams have been drained away.  
I cannot reject my roots;  
I cannot pretend to belong in this place.

For paraphrases of other psalms, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publications,  
[info@woodlake.com](mailto:info@woodlake.com).

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## OLD BOOKS AVAILABLE

I have a couple of boxes of old books that belonged to my father and grandfather. As near as I can tell, the oldest is a Shorter Catechism from 1863, the newest a 1994 text by John Polkinghorne. If you're interested in any of them, please let me know and I will send you an Excel spreadsheet with the full list of books – all I ask is that you pay for shipping.

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### 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](mailto: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

- 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

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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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