

Wednesday April 18, 2012

Ancient flumes that transport wisdom through time

By Jim Taylor

My daughter lives in a small cluster of houses in a little valley nestled into a fold in a series of arid hills cloaked in sagebrush. Above her house there's a narrow horizontal track etched into the slopes.

Investigation revealed that it had once been a flume.

Flume – an open irrigation channel, as distinct from a pipeline, constructed to let water to flow, by gravity, from a distant source to a location where it's needed. Some flumes are just ditches dug directly into the hillside; sometimes they're built out of wood planks, on trestles, to get around cliffs or canyons.

Traditionally, flumes were always built by hand. Local farmers worked cooperatively to survey the route, build the flume itself, and organize distribution of the precious water.

The flumes of Wallachin

B.C.'s most famous flumes probably belong to the village of Wallachin, west of Kamloops. I haven't been past Wallachin for years. I suspect that the ancient wooden flumes winding along the arid bluffs north of the TransCanada Highway have largely rotted away.

Once upon a time, Wallachin was a prosperous community composed mainly of British upper-crust immigrants. When war broke out in 1914, Wallachin's young men responded en masse to the call of their home country. Few survived to come home. Lacking men to work the orchards and maintain the flumes, Wallachin withered away.

I used to watch for those flumes as we drove past. They're not necessary now, as governments provide systems that make water abundantly available to all.

But I still find myself fascinated by the way people worked together for the common good to build flumes.

Sacred writings as flumes

It also seems to me that a flume makes a good metaphor for the sacred writings of any religion. They all try to convey wisdom from some distant source, through the aridity of intervening generations, to people who need that life-giving source now.

The Hindu Upanishads, Islam's Qur'an, the Hebrew Torah, the Christian Gospels and Letters, all tap into the insights of long ago. The words that express those insights did not miraculously appear, fully formed, on pages. Humans worked together to inscribe those words onto some lasting medium – clay, parchment, paper, digital disks...

In that sense humans built the "flumes" that transport religious insights -- through time rather than distance.

But even the best flumes leak. Precious water seeps into the ground. Some spills over the edges, damaging the channel. Debris clogs ditches and impedes the flow.

Much of current biblical scholarship tries to remove debris that has fallen into the flume over time. It tries to clear the channel back to the original source.

As populations grow, flumes are expected to provide water for uses the original builders never imagined – lawns, hot tubs, dishwashers, grow ops.... It does little good to insist that that old-time flume is good enough; always has been, always will be.

So some seek additional sources – physics, biology, psychology – that can supplement the original flow. Others refuse to rely on traditional flumes any more. They turn to governments and corporations, to science and economics, to consumerism and even hedonism, to satisfy their needs.

But the flume is still there, for those who willing to expend the energy to trace it.

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YOUR TURN

Last week's column talked about the importance of inductive reasoning, using my (former) dog as a case study.

Clare Neufeld said he "laughed out loud as I read your missive about your errant pooch! I also had an Irish setter in my imagination! What an hilarious pooch, as long as I'm not the one cleaning up after, losing the back of my Bible, resewing my favourite leather jacket, etc! My laughter is an ambivalent relief, that I'm not the one to suffer, while enjoying the simple-minded pooch's gift of humour to my life, vicariously, via YOUR story."

Isabel Gibson commented, "The 'Aha!' moment is a fabulous thing, indeed. When something – anything -- drops into place for us and we 'get it', whether we can articulate it neatly or not. We own those insights more completely than anything we learn from a book or someone else's mouth. To think that this experience might be shared across species -- I may never look at a dog quite the same way again!"

Charles Hill thought my dog should enroll in his classes: "There is clearly a bell-shaped curve in ability to do reasoning of any type. Many do not have reasoning power, just as not many have the body to be a professional football player. We are not all created equal in mental or physical abilities.

"Most of my community college students (in developmental reading classes) would not connect any punishment or outcome with their actions, much less generalize to a category of self-destructive. A very few make the connection between having never read a book or even magazine to the fact that they can't read or low grades with excessive absences.

"Send Brick to my class next semester; he would be refreshing. He could also tutor our dachshund."

PSALM PARAPHRASES

I suppose Psalm 4 was chosen for the third Sunday of Easter because it reflects the uncertainty the followers of Jesus must have felt, starting over with the spirit of Jesus rather than the person of Jesus. When I wrote this paraphrase originally, I was doing quite a lot of travelling. Whenever I could, I stayed at the home of a friend, rather than a cold and impersonal hotel. But it was still a strange place to wake up in...

1 In the middle of the night, Lord, I wake.
This room is strange; I can't find the light;
I can't find the door.
The hall is long and dark.
2 I am afraid.

4 But this is your house, God.
I was a stranger, and you took me in.
I was alone, and you made me welcome.
4 In your house, I have nothing to fear.
I can sink back into my bed and set my mind at rest.
5 I put myself in your hands. I trust you.
6 Am I crazy? Am I a fool?
Some would say so. They doubt you.
7 But I know the peace I felt when you opened your door
and the warmth when you invited me to share your table.
8 I can let my eyes close;
in your home, I am at home.

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, isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Model T Websites." a simple (and cheap) seven-page website for congregations who want to develop a web presence <<http://www.modeltwebsites.com>>
- 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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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
