

Wednesday April 25, 2012

How do children process their losses?

By Jim Taylor

Children don't know how to grieve. And so we adults don't know how to help them.

This understanding came through to me when an old friend – actually, I've never met her in person, but that's how friendships happen on the Internet – sent me her newsletter.

Deirdre Straughan and I attended the same school in India, but about 20 years apart.

One day recently, Deirdre found herself reading a column by Roger Ebert, in which he mourned the loss of old friends and the memories they held. "We exist in the minds of other people," Roger wrote, "in thousands of memory clusters, and one by one those clusters fade and disappear."

Roger's musings on losses prompted Deirdre to recall a variety of losses in her own life. Among them was a choice she didn't make, to be a "Third Culture Kid" – a description for expatriate children in a foreign country. Their parents choose to work in an overseas environment. But the children they take along with them belong neither to the new culture nor to the culture they came from.

"You leave behind almost everything you knew," Deirdre wrote.

"No parent wants to think they make choices that hurt their children," she continued. "So they ... often do not allow their kids to decently mourn what was left behind. The kids deal with their feelings as best they can, get settled, make new friends, grow accustomed to new routines, adopt new pets – and then it's time to leave again."

Sealed for storage

Until I read her reflections, it had never occurred to me that I must have mourned – or failed to mourn – my own uprooting from India, at the time the only culture I knew.

But when my wife and I travelled to India 12 years ago, I discovered memories that I didn't know I had. I walked into a classroom and knew instantly where I once sat. I walked along a road, and realized that I knew exactly where a footpath led up the hillside behind a particular house. I stood under a pine tree, and knew where to scuff away the needles to uncover an ancient grave marker...

Those memories had not surfaced in 54 years. But they were so fresh, so sharp, it was as if I had vacuum-sealed them and put them into storage.

And perhaps I did just that. I deep-froze them, buried them, because as a child I didn't know what else to do with them.

Were they painful? I suppose they must have been. But I don't know, any more.

Could my parents have helped me wipe the blackboard clear? I don't know that either.

Typically, adults need friends willing to let us exhume those painful memories until they subside into memories of memories. We need ways to re-define our self-worth that don't depend on what we used to be. We need to accept, even welcome, the changes that come faster and faster.

But children don't talk or think that way.

We tell them, "You'll get over it." And they will. As we all do. But I wonder what kinds of scars are left behind, and how they might shape the way children -- like Deirdre and me -- eventually grow up.

Copyright © 2012 by Jim Taylor. Non-profit use in congregations and study groups welcomed; all other rights reserved.

Please encourage your friends to subscribe to these columns. But if you forward a column, please identify yourself as the sender, so that I don't get accused of sending out spam!

To send comments on this column, to subscribe or to unsubscribe, send an e-mail with Soft Edges in the subject line to jimt@quixotic.ca

YOUR TURN

Last week, I used the image of flumes, that carry water from geographically distant sources, and compared flumes to the scriptures, which carry wisdom and insight from time-distant sources.

Jean Hamilton, a long-time friend in the Maritime provinces, admitted that she had never heard of a flume before. She wondered if it might be a “strange western term.”

She, by contrast, “was raised on the story of ‘the sluice.’ I was born in a seaside village where the forested hills ran down to the river and the beach, and where lumber was shipped from the mouth of the river. To get the wood down to sea level, it was necessary to build a sluice...a sort of open-ended, open topped, miles-long wooden box filled with water, the grade of which obviously had to be absolutely correct in order to keep things moving. Legend has it that my grandfather, with no formal mathematical training, figured the whole thing out ‘on the back of an envelope,’ and was for years responsible for its maintenance.

“He had worked in the shipyards, where he met my grandmother when she brought the tea basket to the men working on the beach, but that’s another story.”

Jean also sent along a chapter from a book, that included the story of her grandfather walking down the flume to check it, and almost getting knocked off it by a rush of lumber coming down behind him.

Ivan Gamble wanted to add an additional flume to my “Ancient Texts, namely our churches’ hymn books. I look upon our present [Presbyterian] ‘Book of Praise’ (fifth edition) as a worship collection spanning 3000 years. It includes at least two paraphrases of ‘The Song of Moses’, Psalm 90, including ‘O God Our Help’ by Isaac Watts. There is also a beautiful Paraphrase of ‘The Magnificat’, by contemporary R.C. nun Marie Therese Winter, of the Medical Mission Sisters, who came to Kamloops with her choir of Nuns while we were there.”

Musing about his time at St. Andrew’s Presbyterian in Kamloops, Ivan commented, “The church was located at 6th and Douglas. Douglas Street was described as ‘a short street, with a cemetery on one end and the Presbyterian church on the other, and they are both dead ends!’”

Ivan described his visits to Wallachin, also to Oliver, which similarly depended on a flume, “built shortly after WW1, by BC Premier ‘Honest’ John Oliver, especially for the benefit of returning veterans. He had a cement flume system built to channel the Okanagan River to the arid southern Okanagan. Each veteran could have ‘an acre lot’ within the town of Oliver. We spent about 20 years in Oliver...”

John McTavish was not “entirely comfortable with your designation of the Hebrew Torah and Christian gospels and letters as ‘conveyors of wisdom from a distant source.’ They are that, of course. But are they not also and above all prophetic writings pointing to the coming of the Word, and apostolic writings attesting its fulfillment in Jesus Christ?

“But even granting this neo-orthodox point,” John went on, “you are right in including the biblical writings among those very human documents that did not simply fall from heaven. This is why, among other arguments, the canon must still be considered open, at least theoretically. Less than 500 years ago, Luther and Calvin and others were successful in dumping the apocryphal writings, and if Luther had had his way James would have gone as well. What I would dearly love to see excised are those passages in 1 Timothy that are almost certainly not authentically Pauline but have been tacked on, thereby giving Paul the reputation of a terrible misogynist, and saddling the church not only with mean-spirited verses that damn widows for living for pleasure (5:6) and want to marry again (5:11), but also with racist passages that urge slaves to “regard their masters as worthy of all honor” (6:1) and to show respect on the ground that the owners “are members of the church” (6:2).

Dale Perkins wanted to add an additional thought, “that flumes carried the raw stories and accounts from their past to their present -- they were only able to go as far as the present without any expectation that they will carry their content into the future... Also, I wonder whether they thought of those stories as wisdom -- I think they just thought of them as good stories and accounts they wanted to retain for now and their present generation -- perhaps with a

trust that contained in the stories/accounts was something important and valuable to remember or hear again. I doubt whether they were analytical about the contents of those stories or anecdotes/sayings/songs, etc.

“As for us, living hundreds/thousands of years after they were written, there remains the task of attempting to locate the ‘wisdom’ of those stories for those people then, with the constant question -- is there still wisdom for us now? Wisdom is elusive – it comes and goes -- and is never a timeless feature of anything... We must locate it here and now, and some of it may be hidden in the past literature of our ancestors, but just as likely, it will be uncovered in the literature and expressive art forms of the present.”

A reader who signs herself “Valentina Gal” wrote, “I can't express how this week's offering has moved me. I'm a budding author myself who often refers to Christian concepts and truth in my writing. I'm not a person who chooses to beat folks with my Christian experiences but, I'm learning to stand up for what is true for me and what has sustained me when nothing else does. In my travels, I get asked how something that old can still have relevance, or I have to listen to how it is not much more than a myth or fairy-tale. This beautiful comparison will be another tool that I hope you don't mind if I use.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

Psalm 23, the RCL recommendation for Easter Four, was the very first psalm paraphrase I attempted. I had read many attempts to revise Psalm 23 into more contemporary language without changing its basic “shepherd and sheep” metaphor. They simply watered it down, in my opinion. I felt that the only way to paraphrase this psalm was to take a totally different metaphor that still conveyed the wonderful sense of trust of the original.

One image that came to me was a small child walking down the street holding her mother's hand.

My Mommy holds my hand;
I'm not afraid.
She takes me to school in the mornings;
She sets me free in the playgrounds and the parks;
She makes me feel good.
She shows me how to cross the streets,
Because she loves me.

Even when we walk downtown, among the crowds and the cars,
I will not be afraid.
If I can hold onto her hand or her coat,
I know she's with me,
And I'm all right.

And sometimes when I fall down an' I'm all covered with mud an' I come home crying,
She picks me up in her arms,
She wipes my hands, and dries my tears,
and I just hafta cry again,
'Cause she loves me so much.

How can anything go wrong
with that kind of Mommy near me?
I want to live the rest of my life with Mommy,
in my Mommy's home for ever'n'ever.

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.

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, jimt@quixotic.ca.

To subscribe or unsubscribe, send me an e-mail message at jimt@quixotic.ca. Or you can subscribe electronically by sending a blank e-mail (no message) to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca. Similarly, you can unsubscribe at softedges-unsubscribe@quixotic.ca.

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
