

Wednesday September 19, 2012

## The placebo principle

By Jim Taylor

The *Economist* magazine ran a short feature, a while ago, on what's called the "placebo effect."

The article noted that placebos – often just sugar pills or syrups – may be as effective as real medication. The key factor seems to be not what the medication actually contains, but the patient's belief in the efficacy of the pill or potion.

As Kevin Costner might say "If you believe it, it will work."

The *Economist* called the placebo effect, "the strange and inadequately explained tendency of certain medical conditions to respond to anything the patient thinks is directed at treating them, even when the treatment in question could not possibly have a direct effect on the disease."

Yet I can't imagine anyone going to their specialist and saying, "Give me a placebo."

Just as I doubt that anyone in a car crash, bleeding profusely, with broken bones, in agony, would instruct the ambulance paramedics, "Take me to a homeopath."

In a crisis, we want the real thing.

I once asked our son's doctor why there were no control groups for testing experimental cystic fibrosis treatments. "Would you be comfortable knowing your son died because he was in the control group that didn't get life-saving therapy?" he asked.

## Bewildering rewards

Yet it's clear that placebos can bring relief, especially from nerve-related problems like chronic pain. They may also affect mental states, which in turn affect the immune system. A healthy mind promotes a healthier body.

Perhaps that explains an apparent contradiction. Obviously, placebos work when patients think they are receiving proper medicines. But, the *Economist* asserted, they also work "even when patients know that they are placebos."

The average medical appointment, the *Economist* hypothesized, lasts just eight minutes. "However, complementary and alternative therapists... take much longer. Patients reward them by believing (wrongly, but usefully) that the therapy is bringing relief, rather than the attention itself."

## And beyond medicine?

And I find myself wondering if the placebo principle applies only to medicine.

Do politicians on the campaign trail offer us placebos, or genuine solutions?

Over and over, business studies suggest that employees are motivated more by morale than by bonuses. If they believe their boss/owner cares about them, they will work more diligently, with greater loyalty.

And then there's religion. I now reject many religious teachings that, as a child and a youth, I accepted without question. Indeed, I think many traditional teachings of the church, over 20 centuries, may have been plain wrong.

But perhaps the point was not whether they were correct, in any scientific sense, but whether we "patients" believed in their efficacy.

Or, at a level of secondhand faith – whether we believed that the practitioners, our priests and ministers, believed them.

We may have had doubts about heaven and hell. About creation taking 144 hours. About healing miracles. But as long as our professionals believed these things, we were content.

Now many churchgoers are upset to find that their clergy no longer believe some of these things either. We don't like to feel we've been duped by pretty pills that our own mentors can't swallow.

Doctrinal placebos may have lacked substance – in the light of later knowledge – but at the time they may have provided the authority that people needed to think was helping them. And they don't want to hear now that it was just a sugar pill, after all.

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## YOUR TURN

“A fine piece,” said my friend Don Sawatzky about last week's column, on how the earth's atmosphere makes us one, “a very fine piece.”

Mike Crockett concurred: “Breath is at the very essence of our being and our sacredness. So when we kiss passionately we exchange breath -- two souls become one at a level deeper than I had realised when my understanding was limited to genital union.”

Jim McManus, writing from Wolverhampton in England, told me I hit the jackpot twice last Wednesday: “one in the breath of life, and one in Psalm Paraphrases.”

Jim shared a discussion involving his Rector, who, he suggested, has “a doctrinal system a little bit set in concrete.” Jim offered the Rector an alternate view of Jesus' meeting with the Canaanite woman (Mark 7 24-37). “Richard, the Rector, thanked me for my comment and the territory it opens up. Jim, I found this week's article to be similar.”

Steve Lawson wrote, “What you say is so true. It's something that scientists, environmentalist, people of many faiths -- Taoism, Buddhism, even Christianity -- have been saying all along. The best example of our interdependence, our need for one another, our caring for one another, is as close as our mutual exercise of breathing. It may come down that it becomes the only defining thing we have in common, to wake us up to how we are so connected and to discover that this truth has been in our stories all along. Hope it won't be too late.”

Gwynne Harries wanted to broaden the connection: “Many believe that your comments also apply to water and that the constant recycling of water between earth and the atmosphere allows water to retain the memories of everything that ever happened on earth. This is also something to contemplate.”

And Suzanne Edgar “loved what you wrote so much, I have placed the whole thing on the back of my bulletin, with due credit, of course! To add to the breath allusions, the Priests for Equality Inclusive Bible has the footnote for the Jeremiah passage this week that there's a joke in the text. The reference to the Genesis story is clear in 4:23 where Jeremiah looked at the earth and it was formless and void -- the same Hebrew words used in Genesis. But it gets funny when the people say they don't have to listen, and accuse the prophets of being full of wind (ruach). If you dig deeper into the text, you can see that Jeremiah responded, ‘Yes, yes, I am full of wind; full of ruach (Spirit) and now

it is time for people to remember who they are.’”

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## PSALM PARAPHRASES

*Are the psalms limited to a personal relationship with God? Or could they also apply to politics and business, for example? Here's a slightly different take on Psalm 1.*

- 1 Happy are those who have inner integrity.
- 2 **They are not pushed around by opinion polls;**  
They listen to advice from all sides,  
but they choose their own course.  
**They consult constantly with God.**
- 3 A spring of deep wisdom bubbles up within them;  
**It never dries up.**
- 4 Most of us are more like dandelion fluff;  
**we change our direction with every puff of wind.**
- 5 It is no wonder our words are not heard.  
**Without that wellspring of wisdom,**  
**we are no more than dust,**  
**waiting to return to dust.**
- 6 Fads and fashions will pass away,  
**but the way of wisdom will go on forever.**

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

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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

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, [www.seemslkegod.org](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com](mailto:isabel@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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