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Wednesday July 23, 2014

Growing at the ends and edges

By Jim Taylor

Having become a gardener late in life, I have to admit that I get a certain sadistic satisfaction from the sucking sound that roots make as weeds reluctantly give up clutching the earth.

Of course, I'm kidding myself that the entire root mass has come up.

Years ago, an exhibit at the Ontario Science Centre demonstrated that a large part of any plant's roots are invisible. They're little tendrils of slime that prepare a path for the rest of the root to follow.

That's how a boreal spruce can wedge itself into an infinitesimal crack. Slime will infiltrate even the finest of fissures. And where the slime has gone, woody root cells will follow. Until eventually the root splits a four-billion-year-old rock.

Sometimes I visualize trees as surgical stitches that bind earth and air together.

The two ends of trees -- roots and branches -- share many similarities. Both reach out from a central core. Both divide into smaller and smaller filaments. Both grow only at their farthest ends....

Branches and tributaries

The pattern replicates in many other forms of life. It's no coincidence that when we draw our ancestral lineages, we call them a family tree. The tributaries of a river make a root pattern as they flow together; when they reach a delta, they branch profusely. Our human circulatory system pumps

blood out into smaller and smaller capillaries, then reverses the process to gather it back for cleansing and renewal.

Even our brains may work the same way. An impulse fires millions of axons and dendrites; the brain filters that input to the neurons most capable of handling it, and feeds back a conscious thought.

We ourselves, when born, have only one connection – an umbilical cord to the person whose bodily organs sustained us for nine months. Then that connection is severed, and we start building invisible networks of relationships. Consciousness networks, perhaps. Filaments of shared experience. Which extend farther and grow more complex as we mature.

A universal pattern

The pattern seems so universal, I'm tempted to extrapolate from it. For example, to hypothesize that growth only happens at the ends and edges.

In our personal lives, that means we need to keep pushing into uncharted territory to keep growing. We need to send out feelers into untested theories, unfamiliar relationships, unexplored situations. To see if something might take root there.

Also in our corporate lives. Growth does not come from our boardrooms and our head offices. The main trunk of any tree is mostly deadwood. Its sole purpose is to support the growing edges.

The early Christian church, a theology professor once pointed, grew at the edges. The new ideas – whether gentiles must observe Jewish law, whether women could be leaders, whether slaves could be free – got fed back from the new Christian communities to the central core.

Not all new ideas succeeded, of course. Some roots ran into dead ends. But others split the ancient rocks of tradition and created new ways of living.

The message seems clear – personally and collectively, we need to keep branching out beyond our comfort zones.

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YOUR TURN

A local reader told me, “I didn’t get the point of your column this week.”

Fortunately, a number of you e-mail subscribers seemed to get the point.

Florence Driedger wrote, “You did a great piece on today’s topic. I will be sharing this with some of my friends. Thank you!”

Similarly, Ralph Milton sent a note, “Beautiful, Jim. Beautiful and good. You are more of a mystic than you know.”

Charles Hill thought I might be asking too much of some readers: “A wise counselor once observed that few individuals can live with uncertainty. It is really scary to pursue that unknown destination. Life appears to be a winding mountain road, with not only the destination obscured but the potential for a boulder in the road around the next curve.”

Without knowing what Charles had written, Ted Wilson replied, “---- and that is what makes it so exciting!”

Dan Wilkie wrote from Colorado, “My High School class motto is “Let us not say we have found the truth, but rather a truth”. I think you are absolutely right when you stated that information is not the truth, but rather a way to work towards the truth. Sadly, I feel that far too many people, desperate for anything they can see as truth, succumb to the lure of information as the truth, rather than continue the search.”

Henry Yorke wrote about the paraphrases that I include with Soft Edges: “Thank you for your musings/ramblings in Soft Edges each week; they are often amusing, sometimes challenging, but always thought-provoking. I’m finding the paraphrases particularly helpful, both personally and as a valuable resource when I’m leading services in my local Methodist area.”

Mervyn Flecknoe also had a general comment: “I continue to read with pleasure every column you send. I don’t often reply. Be assured that you bring enlightenment into my life and that one human being over here in Yorkshire really appreciates your readable and insightful writing. Many thanks.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

Flying across the country overnight, you can sometimes see the light of dawn from the east spreading across the darkened lands below. That image came to mind when I wrote this paraphrase of Psalm 105.

1 The still earth stirs to the touch of God;

Give thanks, give thanks to God.

Fresh light spills across the resting lands.

2 Waken the sleepers to share in the wonder;

Sing praises to the creator, all you people.

3 The glory of dawn rises over the horizon;

Our hearts rise in response.

4 Look, see how the wonders extend to the edge of the world;

Everywhere, the glory of God bursts into being.

5 Years come, and years go,

But each new day is a miracle.

God hovers over the world, from the east to the west,

And banishes the fears of darkness.

6 Yet this same God chooses to watch over us;

God has chosen us to watch over.

7 This is the wonder of the Lord our God:

The creator of the universe--

the ruler of earth, the life of the lands--

8 This God cares about us,

And about our children, and our children's children.

9 This God cared about our ancestors,

And our ancestors' ancestors,

Long before we ever existed.

Before we were aware of existence,

10 God made promises to us.

God will keep those promises.

11 God said, "I will give you this land.

Pass it on in good condition

to your children,

and to your children's children."

For paraphrases of most of the psalms used by the RCL, you can order my book
***Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publishing, info@woodlake.com.**

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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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;
- 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
