

Wednesday October 31, 2012

Life is a live performance

By Jim Taylor

Life is not a dress rehearsal. We don't go through life practicing our responses to situations so that we can get them right when the real thing comes along.

Life is the real thing.

You're out there on the stage. With no rehearsal, no script, no prompter. Whether you earn a standing ovation or a barrage of tomatoes depends on how you perform your part, right now.

Dress rehearsals exist only in the artificial world of theatre. In real life, you may never have a spotlight on you. In fact, no one may notice that you're performing at all. It's just you.

But you never get a second chance to play that scene, whatever it is. The next time it comes up, if it ever does, it won't be the same scene. There will be different characters involved, different settings, even a different plot.

At the very least, you won't be the same player you were when you last played that scene.

Theatre analogies

Over my lifetime, I have written plays, directed plays, and acted in plays. I know that no play ever goes exactly the way it's supposed to.

As a writer, I have a vision in my head of how the various characters will deliver their lines. Which would be fine, if I were playing all the characters myself. But I'm not. And the people playing those characters have their own ideas of how that person would behave, would move, would speak.

Changing the emphasis of a single word, as a line is delivered, can force a fractionally altered response.

When I'm an actor, I have to be aware of those subtle changes. If I don't respond, the play sounds artificial, memorized, rather than an excerpt from real life.

I admit to inflicting some of those unexpected changes on other actors.

As I grew older, I discovered I could no longer memorize meandering monologues. I could capture the gist of them. I could remember key words. I could usually remember the cue line that told my counterparts when to leap in. But I hardly ever managed to deliver that speech exactly the same way two nights in a row.

Audience members told me later how intently the other actors listened to me. Little wonder. They never knew quite how my lines would come out!

And as a director, I also had to cope with totally unplanned eventualities. In one amateur play, the lead actor fell off a ladder during the last rehearsal. He had to go to hospital. The only available understudy was, you guessed it, moi. Fortunately, everyone else improvised as furiously as I did. For four hectic performances. We were SO glad to see the star back for the final shows!

It's one of the attractions of live performances, compared to recorded ones. On any given day, you never quite know how all the pieces will fit together.

A great performance is any performance that lets you go on stage again tomorrow.

Like life. Which is also performed live.

Life isn't always perfect either. Sometimes the best you can expect is that you can continue your imperfect performance again tomorrow.

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YOUR TURN

Ted Spenser suggested that his reaction to the young man who swerved out through the traffic on a dark night might have been different from mine: "Most of us have encountered this person or his doppelganger. My instant, visceral reaction is [that] I want to track that person down and slap him silly. I imagine how he would spoil the rest of my life if I killed him. I'd see the horror of that moment forever. A stupid, inconsiderate twit has no right to do that to me, or to anyone else."

Charles Hill commented, "You have just described the criminal mind. I won't get caught. No one can hurt me. The rules and laws of consequences don't apply to me.

"There is also a failure to understand the suffering of others. I'm not sure but I think that Christianity is unique among religions in having a 'part' of God who actually suffered horribly and therefore understands humans."

Keith Veerman focused on the safety aspect: "Thanks for continuing to spread a much needed safety message -- wearing reflective gear OR at least a reflective arm/leg band. And good for Rotary to supply the armbands, which we have 3 of. My wife and I have also seen the 'dark' riders/walkers etc. and even stopped by a couple walking along a local road to offer a free red blinker light, supplied by my employer. Bizarrely, they refused our offer. Go figure!"

Steve Roney had a terse rejoinder to my comment that young men seemed to feel themselves exempt from the consequences of their actions. "I don't think that's it at all," Steve wrote. "I think it comes from a need for young men to test their courage. It is not that they don't think the bad thing could happen to them -- if they thought it could not, there would be no point in the stunt."

Cliff Boldt recognized a lack of congruity in his own behaviour: "Driving a car is among the riskiest things we can do. As I get older, I become more aware that the statistics are not on my side whenever I am riding in or driving a car. I think about it, but I wouldn't dream of not driving in some situations. Do I have a death wish?"

Ralph Milton challenged my assertion that "people who run out of luck are no longer around to tell their stories." "Do you really believe that?" Ralph asked.

Well, yes. I believe that they are no longer around to tell their stories, which might counter our stories of survival and triumph. And I also believe they ran out of luck -- and that most of us are still alive because of luck, not because of divine intervention on our behalf.

And Dale Perkins opened up a whole new can of words with these comments about an interventionist God: "People feel obliged to retain the word God to describe the Divine Mystery of life. Somehow it is just not possible to use another word or words to describe that reality. So they keep using the word God, and massaging it this way and that to make it feel less constrained by past associations with the word.

"We keep playing with other adjectives and pronouns for God, hoping that would work. It hasn't! From my experience, when people still use the word God, there is an immediate anthropomorphic overlay put in place. And the Divine Mystery takes on a gender or human qualities like 'seeing', 'coming', 'walking with', 'hearing' and 'knowing', etc. So we sing God of many names, but always right in the immediate background is this 'free standing' Being/Entity God...

"Is a spiritual life possible without that word?"

PSALM PARAPHRASES

I have a couple of versions of Psalm 146, the scheduled lectionary psalm for Sunday November 4. But with the U.S. elections coming up in the following week, I thought this version might be most appropriate.

- 1 Who can you trust these days?
Only God. Forever and ever.
- 2 You can put your faith in God as long as you live.
God will never abandon you.
- 3 Do not put your trust in any government.
You cannot count on them.
- 4 Human life is short, but governments are shorter.
With each election, their policies change;
their promises dry up faster than morning dew.
- 5 Put your trust in God;
for eternal confidence,
count on the one who knows eternity.
- 6 What human agency can claim to have created the earth?
What human agency can claim to care for it?
- 7 Look and see the actions that God favours:
To feed the hungry; to set free the prisoners;
- 8 To give sight to the blind; to let the lame walk;
to grant liberty to the oppressed....
- 9 Those who always take care of their own concerns
are brought down by their own vaulting ambitions.
God cares for the strangers, the widows, the orphans --
God watches over those who cannot watch out for themselves.
- 10 Can any human authority make that claim?
God's stewardship includes all creation.
Trust in God forever!

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

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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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 "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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