

Wednesday December 26, 2012

Out of nothing, something beautiful

By Jim Taylor

The music is familiar; the instruments are not. The musicians play Mozart and Beethoven, the Beatles and Henry Mancini. Their fluid notes have flowed through more than 80 concert halls in Central and South America.

The musicians are children who live on a landfill in Cateura, Paraguay. Every day, Paraguay's capital city Asunción dumps another 1500 tons of trash on Cateura. The residents comb the debris for items they can recycle and sell.

Some of those salvaged items get turned into musical instruments. Two large jelly cans become the body of a classical guitar. Bottle caps, coins, and junked housekeys form keys and pads for a makeshift saxophone. An oil drum provides resonance for a cello. Old X-ray film makes drum skins.

The Orchestra of Instruments Recycled from Cateura is the brainchild of Favio Chavez, a social worker and music teacher, and an eco-worker on the landfill. Initially, he provided his own instruments. Then the demand grew. So he and residents of the landfill began innovating instruments out of whatever they could find.

The music is beautiful. You can hear bits of it in YouTube trailers for what will, eventually, be a feature documentary called LandFillHarmonic. (The title is a play on words -- the "F" is the shape of the cutout in a violin body.)

The trailers have gone viral on the Internet.

The affluent world, it seems, has taken these desperately poor youngsters to its heart.

Reverse flow

We who live in that affluent world -- the world that creates 1500 tons of trash per day for the children to scabble through in search of dinner forks that can be turned into tuning pegs -- like to think knowledge and progress flows down from us to the poorer world. It ain't so. It's the poor who risk being innovative. Because they have to. And we copy them.

Residents of a landfill outside Rio de Janeiro drove pipes into the festering mountain of junk they lived on, and captured methane gas for cooking. Now the city of Kelowna is planning to do the same with its landfill.

Starving Italians made their food go farther by spreading tomato paste on flat bread. We turned their poverty into pizza parlours.

We rarely recall the origins of things that we now take for granted.

Just as we don't often think of the origins of the customs we celebrated in various ways yesterday.

The brightly lit trees, the piles of presents, the turkey dinners, all began with a family so poor they had to seek shelter in a stable. Among the animals. On decades-deep manure.

Strangers, outsiders in a close-knit town, they had nothing. To them, even the refuse piles of Cateura might have felt like manna from heaven.

We, who by comparison have everything, have taken the original story and absorbed it into our own culture until it's almost unrecognizable.

Perhaps we will also borrow the inventiveness of the landfill dwellers of Cateura. Perhaps we'll learn to recycle more of our throwaways. We might even make beautiful music with it. But I wonder if we'll remember where the inspiration came from.

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YOUR TURN

Steve Lawson liked the concluding sentences of last week's column. "Every day," he agreed, "is our choice in how we deal with things in our life. It is a choice every day how we live -- by promise and hope, with peace and love."

Cliff Boldt had his own views about the Mayan calendar: "If the Mayans were so good at predicting the future, there would still be a Mayan empire!"

Mary-Margaret Boone wrote, "I went to the Mayan exhibit at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto so I could speak more intelligently about the meaning of the calendar of renewal. I used other end-of-days scenarios, including my favourite Wayne and Schuster skit, with the line, 'The world ends tomorrow at midnight - 12:30 in Newfoundland!'

"This week a friend forwarded an invitation to celebrate the calendar of renewal by the Mayan community of Toronto. It said, 'The Oxlajuj Baqtun is the time to retrieve, revive the theory and practice about life in general, the life of the Cosmos, life in nature in which human life is involved. Therefore, the Oxlajuj Baqtun is the renewal of the concept of life, the rethinking of the ways of living according to natural cycles.' (This quote is directly from the poster. so if the Toronto Mayan community is confident enough to celebrate, so am I.

"I am still amazed at the hysteria this has caused, One funeral director shared some calls that they had received -- [including] refunds of prepaid funerals! While I might have liked getting out of sermon writing, I love life with all of its challenges and blessings."

Carla Gilbert had been pondering, for some time, the question of whether people's concerns need to be repeated by the pastor or priest: "At Union Church in Berea, KY, it is the lay reader who leads community prayers and who repeats those names. As a retired United Church of Christ clergy, serving several churches in the US west, and here in Berea as Worship Board chair, when we've discussed [the repeating] being redundant and taking too much time because every one's already heard it, the majority of comments express that it is comforting to hear their loved one's or those of others reiterated. That comment is what gives repeating thnifem priority."

Jim Henderschedt had a comment about last week's psalm paraphrase: "You have succeeded in rendering the beautiful Magnificat in a way that it is freed from language, concepts, and idioms that have long since ceased to be meaningful, and have captured 'Mary's Song' in images that make it relevant to our time and mind. I can't wait to share it with those who are joining me in a quest for Adult Spirituality."

Beth Hawley did her own version of the Magnificat, in a shared reading with her six-year-old granddaughter.

More and more, I think we have to paraphrase to re-discover the meaning of the original biblical texts.

PSALM PARAPHRASES

Assuming that you celebrate this coming Sunday as the First Sunday after Christmas, the RCL calls for Psalm 148. Here's my take on it.

1 Jubilation, exaltation, celebration, one and all!
2 Within the womb of the heavens, the orb of earth leaps to praise its Creator.
3, 4 As the pearl necklace of the planets swings around the sun,
as the shining oceans embrace the continents,
so do all living things praise the giver of life.
5 For God expressed a thought, and the thought took life.
6 God wanted to speak, and the Word became flesh and lived among us.
7 In that Word was holiness,
the spirit that makes every life more than the sum of its chemicals.
From the tiniest plankton in the sea to the great whales,
from the ants that burrow in the dust to the eagle that soars in the heavens--
all owe their existence to God.

8 Fire and hail, snow and frost, sun and drought, wind and rain--
in God, all things work together for good.
9 The mighty mountains compost into rich soil;
fruit trees and cedars aerate the atmosphere.
10 The dung beetle depends on the wastes of cattle;
birds and currents carry seeds to new orchards.
11 No one is cut off from the energy of God,
neither presidents throned in offices nor derelicts huddled under bridges.
12 For in God there is neither male nor female, old nor young, Christian or Buddhist.
13 All have been equally created by God;
their lives all witness to God's grace.
14 With profligate generosity, God scatters new life among weeds and thistles.
And all of creation responds with rejoicing.

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

HYMNSIGHT

My friend Ralph Milton, who published his Rumors newsletter for many years, has something special for you. It's called HYMNSIGHT, and it's for any church that currently projects the words of hymns and prayers, or plans to.

Ralph writes, Since retiring, I have rediscovered my old love of photography, and found creative use for my pictures in the life of First United where Bev and I worship. Our entire liturgy is projected, so that people read responses and sing hymns from screens. I use my photos to add color, vitality and depth to all the hymns and most of the liturgy.

In the course of this, I have developed slide sets to go with 600 hymns, plus about two thousand slides, in both the standard screen and the newer wide screen shape. You can use all of them, in any way you wish, without permission, and absolutely free, as long as it's non-profit and church related.

All you need to access the website is go to:

<http://www.hymnsight.ca> www.hymnsight.ca

In addition to all that visual material, there's a comprehensive "how-to" manual for those who are new to the idea of using projected visuals in church, and for those who have already begun.

HymnSight provides a set of suggested visuals to go with each hymn, but the words to the hymn are not there, mainly for copyright considerations.

Please take a look to see if this service scratches where you itch. If you think it's worthwhile, please let some of your colleagues in ministry know about it. And if you know of a website that could benefit from a link to HymnSight, why not add it?

Blessings,
Ralph Milton

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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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
