

Wednesday November 13, 2013

One-size-fits-all doesn't fit anything

By Jim Taylor

I know how to boil an egg. I can fry bacon with only minimal supervision,. I can even reheat macaroni and cheese in the microwave.

Obviously, I do not qualify as a gourmet chef.

The other day, I opened my wife's spice drawer. What a rainbow of smells! What a symphony of delectable names, in alphabetical order: basil, cayenne, chili, cinnamon, cloves, cumin, coriander, curry, dil, garlic, ginger, mace, marjoram, onion, oregano, paprika, sage, tarragon, turmeric...

Each one has its own distinct taste and smell, its own particular use in a particular recipe.

I have a great suspicion of one-size-fits-all solutions for anything. It doesn't work with pantyhose, and it doesn't work with life.

No cook would ever suggest that a single spice will suit every recipe, be it sage or cinnamon. Every dish requires – nay, demands – its own unique blend of herbs and spices for its special flavor.

I'm not claiming that the chosen spices are defined by some kind of divine edict. Innovation is always possible. Our daughter has an intuitive understanding of what each spice does. "This casserole could use a pinch of paprika," she'll say. She's usually right.

Narrow gates

But outside of the kitchen, we resort too often to those one-size-fits-all (OSFA) answers.

Anything related to economics relies on assumptions of perpetual growth. Anything else implies failure.

In politics, the Holy Grail is a majority that can ride roughshod over the self-interests of minorities.

In scientific circles, research must produce tangible results. Preferably, commercially marketable results. Even though sometimes it's just as important to prove that something *doesn't* work.

Massive doses of Vitamin C, Vitamin D, or probiotic yogurt, attempt to impose an OSFA treatment on vastly different diseases.

Religion has its own OSFAs. The solution to everything, from physical abuse to substance addiction to embezzlement, is to turn your life over to Jesus. Or Krishna. Or whoever.

Various branches of Christianity have established their own narrow gates. You need the right kind of conversion experience. Or of baptism. You must accept the authority of a particular

person or Creed or Confession. You must speak with the right kind of tongues, or use the right kind of theological terminology...

Bumper stickers that proclaim “Christ is the answer” make me wonder, “What was the question?”

Beyond black and white

Life is far more complicated than a cooking recipe. We wouldn't use the same recipe for squash soup as we would for Chateaubriand, or the same spices for a Bengal curry as an Alfredo sauce. So why the appeal of a simplistic solution for everything?

I suspect it means that most of us are about as vague about ethics as I am about haute cuisine.

Of course, sometimes a black-and-white decision is necessary. A friend mocks the idea of a referee applying “situation ethics” in a Monday night football game.

But I suggest that it's equally ludicrous to expect a whistle-tootin' Jesus – or any other guru figure – to flag a five-yard penalty in family quarrels, financial finagles, or medical controversies. Complex situations simply don't lend themselves to one-size answers.

A bouillabaisse demands more culinary sensitivity than toasting a slice of bread.

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YOUR TURN

Last week's venture into political commentary generated a few letters.

Cliff Boldt reminded me that someone – he thinks it was Mark Twain – said, “If you tell the truth, you don't have to have a good memory.” Cliff added, “I think that fits, with both Harper and Duffy.”

Charles Hill, in Texas, offered a sardonic quip about Canadian politicians: “They all need an attitude adjustment. Your mayor in Toronto might be able to supply something that would help.”

Charles added, “Ask this question. Who should cast the first stone?”

Judyth Mermelstein lit into Stephen Harper much more strongly than I did: “I was stunned when Duffy accepted the Senate appointment from Harper and switched from covering the Hill to dunning donors for the Conservative Party. The revelation that he and Wallin were using Senate money to do it made me sick to my stomach, but I've long known that most Senate appointments are for partisan service ... and it's no secret that **some** Senators don't earn their paycheques and perks honestly. As for Brazeau, who was obviously picked as token First Nations person and human photo-op, nobody I know of had any illusion that he was capable of sober second thought. [In Canada, the Senate is often referred to as the Chamber of Sober Second Thought: JT]

“On the other hand, Harper and Co. had to know (as most of the public did) that Duffy and Wallin didn't actually live in the provinces they were meant to represent, and Brazeau didn't live in Maniwaki. They also clearly knew about Wallin's side-businesses and extravagance, Brazeau's lack of qualifications, and all of the above's creative uses of expense accounts for party rather than Senate business.

“At a minimum, Harper:

- a) broke his promise not to appoint Senators for partisan reasons
- b) was well aware when [senators] Duffy and Wallin charged their fundraising and electioneering activities to the Senate instead of submitting those expenses to the party (or the Conservative Fund, for that matter)
- c) (if Duffy is to be believed on this, and I think he is), reassured Duffy long ago that his use of the housing allowance was within the rules
- d) reviewed Wallin's expenses and assured the House (on camera!) that he'd looked them over and there was nothing wrong with them
- e) demonstrated his habit of playing fast and loose with election financing law (remember how many prize MPs and campaign workers he's 'thrown under the bus' one way or another to evade his own responsibility for allowing multiple frauds, if perhaps not actually instigating them himself).

“Refusing to answer legitimate questions in Parliament may be a viable strategy these days (heaven help us) but he has gone further more than once, being deliberately obstructive and uttering more than one boldfaced lie ***on the record*** so I long ago stopped believing a word he says. As for leadership, at what point does ‘the buck stops here’ turn into ‘Fire somebody to take the pressure off me--Never mind due process, find a patsy to take the fall.’ The body-count keeps rising but I suspect his days as leader are numbered...”

I hope my editing of Judyth's letter hasn't changed her intent. Just so you know, I edit all letters. It is MY blog, after all.

Dave Ratray commented on the previous week's column, about life after death, “I need not concern myself with the hereafter, there's so much going on in the present. Some of which I certainly don't like. But ... how appropriate was your inclusion today of the Psalm selection. Thank you for that, and for you personally 'sounding off' about the sad scene in the political theatre these days.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

The Revised Common Lectionary suggests a passage from Isaiah 12 for this coming Sunday, instead of the usual Psalm.

- 2 God has rescued us from our arid deserts;
Nothing terrifies me any more.
I sing of the God who gives us living water.
- 3 From the deepest recesses of our souls, celebration gushes forth,
- 4 It spills out across an anguished land,
As an awed people pour out praises.
- 5 Their voices rise, like water in the well:
"Glory to God, who creates springs of life in the deserts of death."
- 6 So let praise pour out like the living water from the well in our midst,
the well that is our God.

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

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

- 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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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
