

Wednesday May 30, 2012

Epiphanies take time to change lives

By Jim Taylor

Our grandson Stephen had an epiphany the other day. For his approximate fifth birthday – the Ethiopian village he came from was less than rigorous about recording birthdates – we took both grandchildren out for dinner.

As we waited for dessert to arrive, his older sister Katherine started playing games on grandma's iPhone. The magic of a touch screen transported her, almost instantly, into a world of her own.

Her brother Stephen felt left out, excluded. He wanted his turn with the iPhone. Katherine paid no attention to him. His normally cheerful face took on a scowl.

"I'm starting to feel angry," he declared.

An angry Stephen is not a joy to have around. Especially in a public place. He tends to lash out physically. Or to throw an embarrassing tantrum.

His mother could have scolded him for feeling angry. With great wisdom, she didn't.

"That's wonderful," she praised him. "When you recognize that you're starting to feel angry, you can do something about it."

For him, it's an epiphany, an insight that will eventually change his life.

Behind every vice, a virtue

Unfortunately, many people – including many so-called adults – have never learned that they are more than their feelings. When a feeling surges within them, they're incapable of NOT acting on it. Lust becomes its own justification for rape; greed, for fraud; anger, for physical violence.

Because they have never learned to stand back, to identify their emotions without surrendering to them.

There's nothing wrong with anger – even if Pope Gregory the Great did call it one of the Seven Deadly Sins. Without anger, there would be no justice movements. No rebellions against tyranny. No struggles to change oppressive systems.

Anger is a powerful motivator, when channeled into constructive purposes.

That's what young Stephen can now start to do. His epiphany hasn't turned his life around, of course. He's much too young, still, for any single insight to shift his entire perspective.

But the other day, he identified another emotion: "I'm bored!"

Good for him!

What not to do

Epiphanies take time. But you have to start somewhere.

According to the Bible, Jesus had an epiphany when John the Baptist plunged him into the Jordan River. It took him 40 days on his own in the wilderness to figure out what that epiphany meant for his life.

Another young Jew, a Pharisee named Saul, had an epiphany on a road somewhere near Damascus. It left him unable to see where he was going. It took another 14 years before he hit his stride as the man who introduced Christianity to Europe.

My own epiphanies, I must confess, tend to come more as a realization of something I should not have done, or should not have said. I get carried away by the high of performing for an appreciative audience; I ad lib something that seems brilliant at the moment; later, I learn I have hurt someone.

Sometimes the learning lasts. And sometimes I have to learn painful lessons over and over again. The way that I'm sure our grandson Stephen will have to learn about channeling his emotions constructively.

But it will happen. Epiphanies take time.

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YOUR TURN

Sometimes my columns provide news that fails to get carried by any other vehicle. Thus it was that Bev Ireland heard about Arnie Schreder's death, in last week's column. She wrote, "What a shock! Had he been ill? It has been many years since I saw Arnie but I did know him when he lived and worked in Weyburn as a young man. His dad was one of my nursing instructors and Arnie also worked at the Saskatchewan Hospital for a short time. Please convey to his wife and family my condolences and tell her he is remembered by many of his old friends from Weyburn."

One of the Pritchards (unsigned, but it might be Hazel?) concurred with my assessment of things people do not want to be told: "When I went through my cancer experience I had people saying 'My cousin developed breast cancer -- she had awful treatment for years and now she's dead', 'It's all for a reason', and 'What treatment are you going to be on? Well be thankful you're not on such and such -- then you really would be ill!' This last from a chemo nurse!!! I wasn't sure what my response should have been in these cases -- I could only weep silently inside for their insensitivity.

"My recommendation is to give the person a hug, weep with them, go to appointments with them, give them the casserole. Unless you have been through a similar experience [I would say, even if you have been through a similar experience: JT] you cannot know what it is like but you can hold them, pray for them, love them, and be present."

Steve Lawson wrote, "In my ministry I have found that silent listening are the best words you can use. I have witnessed the destruction that ill-placed words have created -- here are a couple more that probably shouldn't be said: "I know just how you feel", and "I understand what you are saying". Just this week two people in crisis have asked to see me not because I am a good counsellor or have words of wisdom that might help but because they just want non-judgmental conversation and want someone who will listen. Only once have I offered 'advice' when someone I knew well at a wake said to me in a tragic and quiet moment, 'Isn't God cruel.' I felt moved to offer instead, 'Yes, John, life can be cruel.' Thanks for your words about no words."

Debbie Stockdale endorsed the notion that you have to be a friend to that person before the crisis, if you want to be a friend to them after it.

Isobel Gibson made a similar point: "Not only should we follow Rabbi Kushner's advice ('Just say you're sorry and shut up') but we also need to recognize that people can't always handle more sympathy.

"Although we want not just to help/rescue but also to express our own feelings, it isn't about us. Just because someone in my extended circle has troubles, doesn't give me permission to intrude on their pain or grief. Maybe we'd do better to look after the ones we are close to, a little better, every day."

Ginny Adams had a helpful suggestion -- be helpful! "Last year my brother-in-law and his wife had a son commit suicide; well-meaning folks kept calling the house wanting to do something. The parents couldn't think of anything

and were getting further depressed by the ringing phone. After two days of this, my brother-in-law told his wife to tell the next person who calls that we need our house cleaned. And it worked -- four people showed up that afternoon and cleaned the house, top to bottom! Sometimes when words won't do the trick, maybe a mop or vacuum will."

Thom Bower shared his experience: "Before I was ordained, I taught in two programs that significantly shaped me. The first was a curriculum consultant for a program for parish nurses. One of the program's mottoes was "Practice the Presence" -- that being with the other was more significant than anything else we can do or say.

"The second was leading a grant-funded program in a continuing-care retirement community, developing pre-critical-need end-of-life-care decision-making (lots of hyphens!). Essentially, I helped residents, family members, staff, nurses, chaplains, and administrators talk about respecting one's life-values before the end of life so that those values could be respected at will, I taught a lot of active-listening skills.

"[When I] went into my first parish as a solo pastor, I wasn't yet 40 years old. Shortly thereafter a woman who was a pillar of the congregation died. About a week after the funeral, I went to the 90-year-old widower's home and sat. I didn't say much; I gave him space to speak.

"Months later he said to me, 'You gave me a great gift that day: you listened to me like no one else did.' He asked where I learned such wisdom. I shared with him that when I was a teenager my grandmother died. My grandfather's best friend came by. They said almost nothing for two hours. All the other schooling reinforced what I learned that evening: it is better to accompany someone in the mystery of dying and death than to try to give words to it."

Charles Hill clarified that role: "It's called a 'non-anxious' presence. Another's death or suffering reminds us that we are vulnerable. At some level, we are scared. A touch, a hug, and as you said, a meal communicates what was called 'solidarity' by those with similar views or needs. I'm in the boat of human vulnerability with you."

One of the joys of publishing these columns is hearing from people who may have dropped out of my life 20 or more years ago. And so it was that John Klassen sent along a recommendation: "I just finished reading a book by Johanna Selles *Empathic Communities* (WIPF & Stock . Eugene . Oregon 2011) She talks about how we struggle with being with suffering. Interesting reading."

PSALM PARAPHRASES

Trinity Sunday, the first Sunday after Pentecost, calls for Psalm 29 – a psalm that describes a Zeus-like God who rains thunderbolts on people to demonstrate his power. I have a sense that we are more likely to come face-to-face with God in crisis than in thunderstorm. So I cast this paraphrase as our reaction to events that shatter the stability of our ordered lives.

- 1 Trust God--don't pin your faith to human capabilities.
- 2 Science and technology, wealth and popularity--
These will all pass away.
Only God is worthy of lasting worship.
- 3 Fame and fortune will not save you when the tempest strikes.
The winds whirl in; waves crash upon your shore.
- 4 Houses collapse like cards; corporations crumble; assets become worthless.
- 5 Branches break off; mighty empires are uprooted.
- 6 In this storm, you are as naked and helpless as the day you were born.
Your possessions, your wealth, your status are useless to you.
- 7 There is just you and the awesome power that buffets you.
- 8 You tremble like a twig in a tempest.

9 All that you depended upon is stripped away, like the last leaves from autumn trees.
10 Before the ultimate mystery, you face your own frailty.
Nothing can save you--except God.
11 Only God is greater than every human crisis.
Only God can sustain you through the storm;
only God can carry you to the calm on the other side.

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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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
