

Sunday June 22, 2014

Polio gets a second chance

By Jim Taylor

Dinosaurs aren't the only creatures that have gone extinct. So have some diseases.

The last recorded case of smallpox anywhere in the world was in 1977. Before then it was so virulent that as a child in India I had to have vaccinations every year. I could date each of the small circular scars on my upper arm.

We almost made another disease disappear. As late as the 1980s, polio epidemics infected hundreds of thousands of people. Although medically unknown until the 1800s, each epidemic seemed to grow worse. In North America, fear of polio ranked second only to fear of nuclear war. No one was immune – not even U.S. presidents. But because it mainly targeted children, it was commonly known as Infantile Paralysis.

In my early teens, by now in Canada, I was myself hospitalized with suspected polio. Fortunately, it wasn't.

My school class visited a girl kept alive by a huge machine called an iron lung. It wheezed and grunted and did her breathing for her. Only her head stuck out. I was appalled that any human had to live in such circumstances to survive.

Misconceptions abounded. At one point, an otherwise well-educated adult assured me that bulrushes caused polio!

The first vaccines

Then Jonas Salk (and a team of researchers, of course) developed a polio vaccine. The first vaccine, based on live polio virus, had to be injected. A later vaccine, using killed virus, required only two drops taken orally.

In 1988, the World Health Assembly set a goal of rendering polio extinct. At the time, polio was endemic in 125 countries; about 350,000 people, primarily young children, were paralyzed annually. Rotary clubs provided volunteers and opened doors for immunization teams to go into rural, uneducated, and remote communities. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation committed almost \$2 billion to the cause.

Immunization efforts reduced the number of polio cases globally by more than 99 percent.

Success seemed within grasp. You may have seen advertisements showing various celebrities, holding thumb and forefinger not quite touching, with the caption, "This close!"

Tragically, it's not "this close" any more.

Spreading again

Since 2008, more than 20 countries have experienced new outbreaks of polio, imported from the few countries where polio remains endemic.

Three years ago just three nations still harboured active polio cases: Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Nigeria. Only 223 cases existed. India had been on the list, but that same year it recorded its last active case of polio – a two-year-old boy. In 2014, India was declared officially polio-free and taken off the list.

That's the good news.

The bad news is that polio is now spreading through ten countries, not just three. Its incidence has risen in Afghanistan. It has recurred in Syria. It has spread from northern Nigeria to Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea. New

cases have sprung up in Ethiopia and Somalia. And there are almost certainly unreported cases in that cesspool of war, rape, and vengeance -- the watershed of the mighty Congo River.

It's no coincidence that polio's resurgences has happened in war zones. In Afghanistan and Nigeria particularly, efforts to immunize children have been hampered by militant hostility to western (and Christian) civilization. In Nigeria, Islamic extremists preach that polio vaccines will convert African children to Christianity. In Pakistan, Taliban mullahs claim that the drops will render children sterile.

They have some validity for their suspicions. The CIA recently admitted it had used a hepatitis immunization program in Pakistan as cover during its hunt for Osama Bin Laden. Some polio vaccination workers were killed in a backlash against immunization. Aid agencies pulled workers.

Pakistan's incidence of new polio cases has doubled in the last two years, mainly in areas controlled by anti-western forces.

War and disease

If my history books made the connection between war and disease, I don't remember it. Certainly my history teachers didn't.

History is highly selective. It largely ignores the non-European epidemics that ravaged China or India. It also ignores the deliberate decimation of North American aboriginal peoples by the introduction of smallpox-infected blankets and other gifts.

When I search for information about pandemics, I usually find the Black Plague that ravaged Europe in the 1300s blamed on traders doing business with the Far East. In fact, the disease entered Europe through the Crimean region conquered by the "Mongol hordes" from Central Asia.

The world's most deadly pandemic -- the Spanish Flu of 1918 that killed up to 100 million people -- was enhanced by the mass movements of troops and refugees after World War I.

War and disease travel hand in hand.

This week, Iraq flared into open war again. Militants recruited for jihad from Afghanistan and Pakistan will probably bring the polio virus with them. They join fanatic dissidents from the west. And polio will gain another new foothold.

According to World Health estimates, our failure to eradicate polio, when we had the chance, could lead to 200,000 new cases each year within a decade.

And we were so close.

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YOUR TURN

The reactions to last week's column, asserting that God does not cause tragedies, varied. For some reason the only negative responses came from those who read the print edition in the local newspaper.

So someone who signed only with his initials commented acidly, "Who'd have thought...all of Christian theology could be dealt with by simply asking Jim Taylor to quote William Sloan Coffin, Jr. Now maybe we could ask Jim to quote some Jewish rabbi to answer all Holocaust issues... Can I have the name of your theological college -- I've got some free time this week and would love to get an M.Th. too."

The second negative letter assured me that if I visited the Jehovah's Witness website, I would find all the answers to my angst. "You will see many Jehovah's Witnesses, all willing to provide information on this and any scriptural questions you may have."

On the other hand, I think all the responses from e-mail readers were positive.

Bob Walker offered a rebuttal to the letters above: "The Holy One is not a puppeteer, mercilessly dangling the strings causing us to move against either our will, or our common sense. If grace is truly the spirit of the deity then it's love, not hate, that's poured on us.

"Several years ago I delved into John Calvin's two volume theological teachings. It was then that I found that his treatise on predestination barely filled one half of a page, and was little more than a hapless effort to explain why good people die prematurely, and why so many others act badly. Weakly, all that Calvin could conclude was that God had predestined everyone to a helpless acceptance....

"On a personal note, my 28-year-old mother died on Easter Sunday in 1934 due to peritonitis caused by a tubal pregnancy. I was halfway to being three years old. Later in my childhood several pious souls told me that God needed my mother to be an angel; so God needed her far more than I desperately needed her in what became difficult years for me in the growing up process? Utter nonsense!

"I aver that such beliefs are an insult to the mysterious God, and the truth is that the basic purpose of Christianity is a call not to beliefs, but to living the Jesus way of life. So, Jim, I stand with you and William Sloan Coffin, Jr."

Beth, in Seattle, noted that, as a Lutheran, "The Westminster Confession is not one to which we subscribe. And certainly not to predestination. Thanks for the good reminder that the things people say to 'comfort' at time of death can be horrible!"

Nenke Yongkind "grew up within Calvinistic congregations in the Netherlands and Canada. I used to think that I got [the concept of] 'predestination', but really, I never did. Now that I am almost a crone, I know how little any of that or other theological precepts really matter."

Isabel Gibson wrote simply, "Yup. Hard to face loss squarely. I still like Rabbi Kushner's approach: Say, "I'm sorry," and then shut up. If there is more to be said usefully, that will come clear."

John Clinton also referenced Rabbi Kushner: "I still think that Rabbi Kushner got it right when he answered the question: Why do bad things happen to good people? His answer: Accidents happen."

Ian Wood wrote from Nottingham, England: "I have always felt that predestination goes against the grain when trying to understand God. Perhaps that's why I am a Methodist and not a Calvinist. The questions around suffering have no easy explanations, but I cannot countenance any argument that God causes suffering. I can accept that he allows suffering because of the way he has designed the workings of the universe, and that suffering and pain and loss are part of life. I also believe that God can use suffering to draw us closer to him and to each other, but that is not the same as him wanting it to happen.

"I have always liked the words of Geoffrey Studdart-Kennedy, whom I discovered as a young man looking at the poetry of the first World War. In his poem The Sorrow of God he has these lines:

The sorrows of God must be hard to bear,
If he really has love in his heart.
And the hardest part in the world to play
Must surely be God's part."

My column provoked Tom Watson to share his own experiences: “Your thoughts about people hiding behind comforting words are spot on, as are William Sloan Coffin's.

“It was in 1996. A telephone call from our oldest daughter, Maureen. ‘I was at the doctor's office today to see about a lump on my hip, and ummm, an even bigger one on my breast. So I wouldn't mind if you could pull out all the stops with the man upstairs, because I could use a little help just now.’

“Well, I no more believed then than I believe now, that all the prayers in the world would reverse the breast cancer that had all invaded Maureen's body... Fortunately, nobody attempted to tell me it was God's will that she die and leave behind three children ages 10 and under, a distraught husband, and a family who loved her. Had anyone done so I would have found it so offensive that I'd have been tempted to smack 'em.

“On the other hand, it might have reduced my anguish had I really believed that God was in control of these matters, and that God knows best, and therefore in the long run it was far better for her to be ‘taken to be one of God's angels.’

“I think that people hide behind these kinds of misconceptions because life is often, as Thomas Hobbes put it, ‘Nasty, brutish and short.’ How to deal with the chaos, the suddenness of turmoil, all the stuff that blindsides us and keeps us off balance? Might be nice if God were to let me in on the little plan ahead of time. Could save me a lot of trying to figure things out.

“I have to leave it at this for now. I'm off to my prayer time. I need to get God to do something about our government.”

Charles Hill offered a cautionary note: “I agree with your assessment of the euphemisms concerning death and tragedy. I would be hesitant, however, to minimize or destroy beliefs that comfort and make life endurable.

“Several years ago I acquired a book entitled *Four Spiritualities: A Psychology of Contemporary Spiritual Choice*. (Peter Tufts Richardson c. 1996). His general thesis is that we differ in our abilities to cope with uncertainty, our primary way of thinking about the world, and evaluating everything. Hence, denominations range from desperately controlling and judgmental to groups who find their spirituality in more esoteric actions or beliefs. If you encountered someone who could be kept in the realm of comfort and acceptance with words that you, yourself, don't accept as necessary or accurate, would you say them? Would you drive their pain deeper by not saying anything or by presenting your version of the truth? What would be the loving thing to do?”

Several other letters also offered support and agreement.

Not all the reactions to the print version were negative, I should add. Norma Thibault wrote, “Thank you for your article ... It was a well written article that my husband and I very much enjoyed. We believe that it is God's desire to have a loving relationship with all human beings and that we can in no way qualify through our works or behavior. We too understand that the negative things that happen to people are not the will of God.”

But the very best letter came from Brian Dolman's widow Madeleine: “I cannot express enough my appreciation for your thoughts & openness. My neighbour gave me your article. He goes to different churches to listen & learn, but he was profoundly struck by your words...

“I want you to know, Jim, that when the crash killed Brian, before the police got there, a lady who was four cars back from the crash got out of her car to sit with Brian.....How selfless of her, I felt my heart melt with love...”

TECHNICAL STUFF

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

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 sources 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;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- 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.
