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Listen in the silence

By Jim Taylor

On one of the hikes I took this last summer, I got sandwiched between two groups of talkers. Up front, a pair of former national park wardens happily reminisced about their adventures; behind me, three friends animatedly discussed grandchildren and tomatoes.

As the line of hikers spread out, I found myself in a blessed isthmus of silence between two lakes of chatter.

I could hear distant birds cry out. I could hear the earth scrunch under my boots. I could hear pine needles whisper.

And I realized how rare silence is, these days.

In homes and workplaces, there's almost always some kind of audio playing. Motors whir. Microwaves beep. Furnaces fans blow. Cars and trucks rumble by. Planes buzz overhead.

And don't ask for my opinion about motorcycles and powerboats that deliberately assault us with unmuffled exhausts!

If that weren't bad enough, we take noise with us when we go out. I rarely see walkers who don't have earbuds plugged into iPods, feeding somebody's idea of music directly into their brains.

Car makers make vehicles more and more quiet – so that we can crank up 500-watt stereo systems. Some people listen to lectures while they drive. Others carry on endless conversations on cell phones.

Too much at once

Why, I wonder. Are we afraid of missing something important? Afraid we might be wasting precious time?

Increasingly, studies suggest that multitasking actually wastes more time than it saves. And the more tasks we try to handle at once, the less efficiently we handle each task.

I'm not arguing for the old-fashioned notion of concentrating exclusively on one thing at a time. Kids don't have to lock themselves into a soundproof cubicle to do homework; seniors don't need to retreat to a monastery to do Sudoku puzzles.

But I do believe we need to reduce distractions. While driving, obviously. Even glancing away from the road to adjust heating controls can precipitate an accident. But also in other situations. It's almost impossible to balance a chequebook while a three-year-old tugs at your sleeve. Or to discuss household rules with a teenager while trying to watch the latest convolutions of *The Young and the Restless*.

Taking a break is different from multitasking.

When I write these columns, I have to keep my message at the front of my mind. Once I have a draft, though, it helps to take the dog for a walk. Or to pull some weeds. Or boil a kettle for tea. And in the middle of that different activity – sometimes in the middle of night! – I realize the point I wanted to make, the sentence I could have expressed better, the snide aside I should have left out.

Maybe minds are like lakes. Multitasking is like thrashing around in the shallows, constantly stirring up the water. Lakes and minds need periods of calm to let the sediments settle, for clarity to return.

Songwriter Linnea Good penned a simple chant: "Listen, in the silence... listen to the sound of/ the Spirit's voice."

Perhaps it's only in silence that we clear away enough distractions to hear that voice.

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YOUR TURN

The notion of drawing God, however inadequately, prompted Ralph Milton to send along a story that I'm sure you have heard before: "Reminds me of the child who was drawing a picture.

"'What are you drawing?' asked Mom.

“‘God,’ said the child.

“‘But nobody knows what God looks like,’ said Mom.

“‘They will now,’ said the child.”

Rachel Pritchard didn’t like the idea of drawing God: “If I had been asked to draw God my first reaction would have been anger because someone is asking me to draw and I can’t draw anything, let alone God. My next would have been to draw the sun so big that it took up more than my page. And my third would have been to hide it because it is too personal and when you reveal yourself, you open yourself to ridicule. So I’m glad I wasn’t there!”

Rachel then commented about the film Calvary, recommended last week by James Russell: “The way I see Calvary is that it is about forgiveness and doing one’s duty in the face of never expecting a reward. A very powerful film that stays with me.”

In further correspondence, James added, “The film deals directly with the connection between love and forgiveness and whether an innocent man should accept death for the sins of others, for the future redemption of present sinners. You may have heard that story somewhere before ...”

I never know what will catch readers’ attention. In last week’s letters section, I made a passing comment about not knowing whether my trees loved me.

“Sometimes when I comment about my atheistic attitude to people,” Frank Martens responded, “I add that my ‘religion’ is nature. Much like native people, I have a feeling of ‘awe’ for nature. I walk in my orchard nearly every day, just as I walk in the woods outside my home nearly every day. I talk to the trees and I’m sure they respond to me. It’s sort of a 5th sense you have when you spend as much time as I have with them. Sometimes they die, and I’m sad, but I think of their death as a replenishment to the soil from which they (and in some sense, we) came. I’ve cut down many a tree, and to each I have apologized, and I sense that they forgive -- much more easily than a human would. When I’m out in nature, I refer to it, and really think of it, as my ‘church’ -- much like you might think of your church and how it makes you feel toward your ‘God.’”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

We all need family histories. No one is so poor as the person with no roots. I'm sure that's why Deuteronomy stresses that when children ask about laws and statutes, you should tell them a story. I worked that idea into the Psalm 78 reading for this coming Sunday.

1 If I say, "Once upon a time," everyone knows a story is starting.

**2 I do not know the meanings of my stories;
I merely pass them on as they were passed to me.**

3 Only you can decide what they mean to you.

**4 This is our story. This is where we came from.
When you hear this story, you must also tell it,
so that others may also know where they came from.**

12 Once upon a time, we were slaves.

We were exploited for economic growth, and held captive by capital.

**13 But God freed us from the prisons of our past.
God flung open our minds, and let us see new possibilities.**

14 By signs and symbols, God led us to new life.

15 In arid canyons of crisis, God showed us how to drink deeply of life.

16 In barren wastelands of despair, God gave us joy.

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

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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Or 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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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
