

*Sunday June 17, 2012*

## **The privilege of being present**

By Jim Taylor

I was mowing the lawn after supper, eight years ago, surrounded by my private cocoon of sound, when I saw my wife running towards a neighbor's house. I looked around, and saw other neighbors running the same direction – Del and Bonnie, Joe and Dorothy...

"Someone was screaming," my wife called as she passed me.

I joined the rush down the winding driveway to the neighbour's house.

Fay (because this story is so personal, I shall use first names only) stood just inside the door. "It's Gord," she gasped. "He's in the bedroom. Oh God, I think he's gone!"

She was stabbing at the buttons on her phone, trying to get through to 9-1-1.

Gord lay on his back on the bed, partly dressed. His eyes were open, staring at the ceiling. His skin had a grayish pallor.

"There's no pulse," said Del, fingers feeling Gord's carotid artery.

Del had taken CPR training. He leaped onto the bed, thumping on Gord's chest. Gord's mouth was open, but he wasn't breathing. I tried to remember all that I had ever learned about mouth to mouth resuscitation.

There was a bubble of spittle in the corner of his mouth.

I took a deep breath and covered his mouth with mine. I blew out, hard, and felt someone blowing air into my ear. For I second, I thought Gord was breathing. Then I realized I had forgotten to close off his nose. That was my own breath, blowing back at me.

Fay had gotten through to the 9-1-1 paramedics. "Keep his head straight," she said, relaying instructions. "Fifteen thumps of CPR. Now stop, and two deep breaths..."

Gord's tongue was lolling out the side of his mouth. He hadn't shaved for several days. I forced myself to squeeze his nose shut with one hand, pursed his mouth with the other, and sealed my lips over his once more. I blew. His chest rose. I lifted my mouth off. The air rushed back out of his chest; his lips made raspberry noises.

"He's breathing!" Fay gasped. "He's breathing!"

But he wasn't. It was just gravity causing his chest to collapse again.

## **Giving up hope**

We kept it up for about 15 minutes, I suppose. I didn't have time to check my watch. Then the paramedics started arriving. First the emergency response team from the local fire hall. Then the ambulance crew from the hospital in Kelowna, their vehicle's brakes literally smoking after their trip up over the ridge and down the steep hill. Two police cars parked at the head of the driveway, blue and red lights flashing in the gathering gloom.

The paramedics inserted an airway.

They checked his heart.

They took the airway out, and started putting their gear away. I got out of the room.

Fay had collapsed in a deck chair, outside, sobbing. She kept saying, "Please God, no, don't let this happen..."

But she knew, long before the senior paramedic came out and squatted on the ground beside her. Gord was gone.

## **Memories come back**

All that happened long enough ago that I think I can safely tell this story without ripping open the emotional wounds of Gord's friends and loved ones. I'm sure they haven't forgotten, but the pain will no longer be as raw.

I had almost forgotten it myself, until a municipal work crew came by to make some repairs to a culvert that Gord had installed across the end of his driveway, and the memories came flooding back.

Three memories in particular stay with me.

I remember how kind, how patient, how gentle the senior paramedic was. I don't know how long he spent with Fay –listening, explaining, counseling... Meanwhile the rest of his team quietly packed up their monitors, their oxygen cylinders, their stretchers...

I remember too the silence in the house after the paramedics and the cops left. The silence was deepened but not broken as Fay's sobs gave way to deep, shuddering breaths. In the kitchen, neighbours occasionally made little clattering sounds as they did meaningless tasks while they waited for Fay's family to arrive.

And I remember my own feelings. Of failure, initially. Someone had died. We had not been able to save him.

Of despair. Is this all that life comes to, in the end?

And at the same time, a feeling of profound privilege. To be present, at the most vulnerable time in any person's life. Just to be there, even if we didn't manage to save him.

Usually, the medical system isolates us from death, as if it were a communicable disease. The only death most people in the western world will ever experience is their own.

Only one other time in 75 years have I been present for someone's death. I felt blessed to have been there this time.

And I hope it never happens again.

\*\*\*\*\*

Copyright © 2012 by Jim Taylor. Non-profit use in congregations and study groups encouraged; all other rights reserved.

Please encourage your friends to subscribe to these columns.

To send comments, to subscribe, or to unsubscribe, write to [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca)

\*\*\*\*\*

## YOUR TURN

Last week, I wrote about three (alleged) murderers who failed to fit the classic pattern of mystery novel killers. My wife told me I shouldn't use the term stooooopid!" but that seemed to fit the pattern of these three. I lamented their apparent inability to think beyond the immediate moment.

"Who thinks?" Cliff Boldt responded. "I'm told most murders are crimes of passion."

Charles Hill has dealt with many of those I wrote about. "There is a subset of humans that we call 'sociopaths' or 'psychopaths,'" he wrote. "They appear to be born without a sense of pain in others or even themselves. They lack what we call a 'conscience.' Some are intelligent, some are stupid. The commonality is that all that exists is them and what they want or believe. Their justifications, if they offer one, may be personal, religious, or political. There is no medical or psychological treatment. They come from all societies, belief systems, and socio-economic levels. They are corporate executives and homeless drifters. Some are highly educated, making them more dangerous. There is never remorse for what they do, or who they hurt."

Isabel Gibson tackled the question of insanity defences: "The legal defence of 'insanity' seems to rely on the inability to distinguish right from wrong -- how much scarier are those who know that what they do is wrong, but just don't care.

"I have come to wonder whether we will one day extend the definition of mental illness to include those who are unable to care about others. It passes the common-sense filter, I think -- empathy seems to me to be an essential component of a healthy human.

Whether that makes sense from a legal perspective is a question outside my area."

Art Gans wondered if my loss of interest in conventional murder mysteries had to do with my age: "Your problem with mysteries may be generational. Both you and I belong to a generation that has largely stopped [relating] to the thought processes of the majority. We are out of it to some extent. The mysteries that I

enjoy reading are not from modern times, but ones like Sister Fidelma [7th century Ireland] or the Knights Templars series [Knights Templars were eliminated in the 13th century]. I make an exception for a few modern figures, but only those who use brain power rather than modern DNA science to solve the problem.

"I think our generation has had enough of war, massacre, genocide, etc., and no longer find it an interesting topic to read about."

Ruth Zenger recommended "What was he doing before he shot her" by PD James, for what she called "a different take on murder mysteries."

Vic Sedo sent along a further follow-up to the previous week's column about the contents of canned goods – mostly about the consumption of canned spam in Hawaii, apparently the highest in the world. "Without Spam world war II may of been lost," Vic hypothesized. "It was in an army-colored can of course. There is a Spam Jam in Waikiki every April to honor Hawaiians who consume the most Spam in the World per population. They have at least seven different flavors. MacDonald's in Waikiki has a spam breakfast.

"Your article on canned goods reminded me of all this. Hormel has a Spam Museum in Minnesota. Spam in Hawaii is around \$1.50 to \$2.00 a can; in Edmonton, \$3.25 to \$4.50. But it all comes from Minnesota. Go figure, as the young folks say!"

\*\*\*\*\*

## PSALM PARAPHRASES

I have started including a psalm paraphrase for the coming Sunday with my Soft Edges column, on Wednesdays. Why not on Sunday, you ask? Well, partly because psalms seem to me to fit better with the general mood of Soft Edges, which is more likely to deal directly with faith-related matters than these Sharp Edges columns. And partly because Soft Edges is about 250 words shorter than Sharp Edges, and so including the paraphrase on Wednesday won't make the e-mailing quite as long.

That does mean that if you want to receive the paraphrase, and are not on the Soft Edges mailing list, you'll need to subscribe. No charge, just send me a message, [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca). Or you can subscribe automatically by sending a blank e-mail to [softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca).

\*\*\*\*\*

## TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca).

To subscribe or unsubscribe, send me an e-mail message at the address above. Or you can subscribe electronically by sending a blank e-mail (no message) to [sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca). Similarly, you can un-subscribe at [sharpedges-unsubscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:sharpedges-unsubscribe@quixotic.ca).

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](mailto: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](mailto: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

- David Keating's "SeemslieGod" page, [www.seemsliegod.org](http://www.seemsliegod.org);
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsrap@shaw.ca)
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com](mailto:isabel@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>](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](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

\*\*\*\*\*