

*Wednesday July 3, 2013*

## **Underlying themes**

By Jim Taylor

Like most children, I had to take music lessons. Theoretically, I learned to read music. That means only that I learned which line is a G and which a D. I learned the difference between half-notes and eighth-notes. I learned what sharps and flats are. But I never really learned to hear those notes in my head.

Musically, I'm like someone who knows every letter of the alphabet, but can't put those letters together into words. In other words, I'm musically illiterate.

My first lessons were piano. My teachers wanted me to play chords. I couldn't think of that many notes at once.

So I switched to the violin. Which I thought could only play one note at a time. I was wrong, but I didn't know it at the time.

Until recently, therefore, all I could ever hear was the melody. I knew that harmonies enriched the melody. But I could not hear those additional notes.

Over the last few years, singing in our church choir, I've been slowly learning to sing – and to hear – other parts.

It has been, I imagine, like a color-blind person discovering colors.

All of which leads to a chamber music concert I attended a while ago.

The violin or piano usually carried the primary melody. It would have been easy – and entertaining – to pay attention only to that dominant theme.

But for a change I tried deliberately listening to the underlying threads – usually the cello, but sometimes the pianist's left hand.

And it was amazing how much that simple exercise opened up the interwoven layers of music.

## **Overlooked characters**

It's the first time I've applied the technique to music. Which is surprising, because I have often applied it to literature. Especially to Bible study.

So often, we perceive the story only through the eyes and ears of the primary character – Abraham, for example. Or Hamlet, or James Bond. We get so familiar with the story from that one perspective that we assume we know the story thoroughly.

So in writing classes, I have sometimes instructed students to tell the familiar story from the perspective of one of the overlooked characters – Hagar, or Ophelia, or Moneypenny.

One student re-told the story of Joseph the way Potiphar's wife might have written it, the woman Joseph was accused of raping. Another described Easter morning from the perspective of one of the women who first went to the tomb and found it empty.

Out tumbled an astonishing wealth of insight into the feelings of people who felt ignored, abandoned, used, exploited, shouldered aside by the elite...

These writers didn't need to be biblical experts. They just had to find themselves in that story.

The writing exercise cast new light on the relationships of the primary characters. Just as the cello enhanced the siren song of the violin, and as the pianist's left hand enriched the dexterity of his right.

Try it sometime. In music or literature, in life and justice, try seeing and hearing through the perceptions of one of the lesser characters. You may be surprised at the difference it makes.

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## YOUR TURN

Okay, last week's column was sort of tongue-in-cheek, suggesting that one way to get people into church was to pay them. But it turns out that some places are already doing it.

Peggy Ostrum wrote, "Your Soft Edges column today made me realize that our church actually does pay its young people to attend. I had not looked at it this way before.

"We have an arrangement with our young people that the church will pay half the cost of their church camp registration fee if they attend 30 times in a calendar year. Attendance is considered for all activities including attending worship services, Sunday Church School, youth and outreach activities, midweek youth groups, vocal choir, handbell choir, fundraisers, and other special events. With the fundraising events, those who work are allocated a share of the profit that is applied to their half of the camp cost.

"This year we sent 14 young people to church camp. Most had earned enough from attending to pay their way completely."

Similarly, Susan Price wrote, "The radical course you suggest is in fact quite similar to the approach taken by some school districts, of paying students for attendance and good grades. Many adults were horrified because after all, a good education should be its own reward. But that's an adult point of view, and one that only shows its worth AFTER you've been educated. Pay-as-they-go at least gets the kids into the classrooms where they have a chance to learn how valuable learning can be. Perhaps a similar approach WOULD work with unchurched families who don't yet know the value of belonging to a body of faith..."

However, Ted Spencer challenged the idea: "As a United Church lifer, I've a vested interest in seeing that this juggernaut continues to roll through the streets of life. That interest is not entirely irrational, although it has irrationality in it. The church is a wonderful vehicle for delivering compassion, inspiration, companionship, solace, and any number of other essential human needs. But we seem to get it so terribly wrong much of the time. For years, I've applied my 'Mars Test' to the goings on: if someone from Mars dropped in, unsteeped in the church broth, what would she make of the goings-on? All too often, she'd see incomprehensible nonsense. We, on the 'inside', accept these occasions for what they are: things done because they're done. Those on the outside haven't my vested interest: they may come once, but they won't come twice. Would paying them \$200 a Sunday make them continue? Not likely.

"It is, I think, fairly easy to expunge these absurdities from our churches, and nothing is lost. What's left is the essential 'religious' experience that the guy from Mars will 'get'. Most of that expunged stuff is, at its heart, a remnant of the church at its political worst."

Jim Henderschedt tests ideas by pushing them towards an extreme: "Very interesting! However, I can envision high competition among congregations....one offering higher 'pay' than others. Then, at least here in the lower 48, unions would be formed to guarantee fair compensation, and picket lines would form outside churches that refuse to go above the minimum Sunday wage.

"Come to think of it, we are well on the way. Betty and I are 'visiting' churches. So far we have been offered two coffee mugs as enticement to consider joining the churches. I think I'll hold out for the \$100 instead."

Isabel Gibson shares Jim's approach: "What a notion -- that we have the right to expect something from people who use our institutions! After you get this up and running, maybe you'd like to tackle the broader problem of citizenship?

"I read a lot of science fiction as a young person and remember one guy (possibly Jerry Pournelle, who I think had a PhD in political science) who created a future in which everyone had all the basics of life pretty much guaranteed to them -- food, accommodation, health care -- but to get full citizenship, you had to serve in the military for 2 years. The rationale? If you weren't willing to put your life on the line for your society, you weren't qualified to vote and participate in big decisions. Of course, this was in a universe where humanity was aligned against alien enemies, not the international warfare we enjoy, but an interesting notion nonetheless. And for those who don't want the military connection, we could substitute any civic service..."

Charles Hill wanted to expand the idea: "How about paid (\$50 a session) mandatory training for members? How to

smile. How to shake a hand. How to make sustained eye contact. How to give your name and ask theirs. [It sounds as if Charles has had some bad experiences! JT] We could also pay members \$20 each time they invite a visitor to a Bible study or social event being held at church or in a home. They would have to tape record the invitation before they could be paid. Finally, we could pay members each time they take a visitor out for lunch or make any contact the following week. Our church paid strangers to come to church and report back to the minister how they were received.”

Christa Bedwin commented, “Perspicacious but cynical, this column.”

Then Christa went back to the column about cats and doorways: “There must be some special intense pleasure effect for the cat passing through the door, because she will ask to come in and directly go out again.

“Also that column is useful in terms of memory. If I could be conscious of keeping the thought particularly while passing through the door, then I could remember better. I think that little nugget of wisdom has helped me already.”

I think the key comes in associating the thought (“Gotta get another cuppa coffee”) with something that will still be relevant in another location, rather than with, say, the keyboard or screen that prompted the desire. Children, teens, and adults learn in different ways, and for adults, the key is association. Hmmmm... perhaps I should plan a column on this theme. If I can remember....

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## PSALM PARAPHRASES

The RCL calls for Psalm 30 this coming Sunday. I’m almost hesitant to paraphrase it, because it contains some memorable lines. Among them, the title for Walter Wangerin’s book, “Mourning into Dancing”, and the opening line of the hymn “Joy comes with the dawn...”

Besides, I’ve used two paraphrases of this psalm already in the last two months – the lectionary is sometimes repetitious! So here goes with a new one.

Glory, hallelujah! Today marks one year  
free from cancer.  
Chemotherapy is hell.  
In that pit of self-pity  
I wondered if beating cancer was worth it.  
It’s hard to be up when you’re down.  
But the darkness of despair lifts  
when new life dawns.  
I do not coast through life on the level.  
When life is good, it is very very good,  
but when it is bad... you know the rest.  
My prayers were anguished cries.  
I stormed at God;  
I raged, “What good will it do you, for me to die  
denouncing you as impotent, faithless, unfair?”  
You heard.  
You acted.  
You have turned my kyries into hallelujahs,  
my IV bags into picnic baskets.  
Sunshine surrounds me;  
I will radiate your infinite love  
to every finite being.  
Glory, hallelujah!

For other paraphrases, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publications, [info@woodlake.com](mailto:info@woodlake.com) or 1-800-663-2775 in Canada.

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

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#### TECHNICAL STUFF

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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](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca), or send a note to [sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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