

Wednesday April 30, 2014

The challenge of being different

By Jim Taylor

Like me, Steve Roney is left-handed. When we write by hand, we curl our wrists above the line, instead of keeping them straight as taught by the MacLean Method of Cursive Handwriting.

Earlier this year, while Steve was signing a document, a man standing nearby sarcastically asked another man, “Can that be corrected?”

The short answer is, yes it can. My mother was left-handed too – left-handedness is genetic – but her teachers forced her to switch to her right hand. They whacked her knuckles with a ruler whenever she used the wrong hand.

The longer answer, though, begs a question: Why should it be corrected?

Because it’s different.

Those who belong to the complacent majority tend to see anything different as a threat. Therefore they feel compelled to stamp out that difference. Even if the person was born that way.

This view assumes that doing something in a different way from most people is a defect that must be corrected. By brute force or brainwashing, if necessary.

The prejudice has prevailed for centuries, even though many famous people were left-handed. According to Google, the list includes Joan of Arc, Julius Caesar, Queen Victoria, Mozart, Beethoven, Alexander the Great, Pablo Picasso, and Albert Einstein. Bill Gates and Barack Obama both sign documents with their left hands.

Admittedly, the list also includes some less admirable characters, such as Jack the Ripper. And – depending on your political leanings -- Fidel Castro and Maggie Thatcher.

The willingness to risk

But prejudice against left-handedness is just one example. Sexual orientation is another. In northern Nigeria, so is religion. And among diehard

Republicans, anything remotely resembling socialism.

Although nothing in the Bible suggests that Jesus was left-handed, he paid a price for daring to do things differently.

Yet it should be obvious that all human progress has depended on somebody not doing things the same way as everyone else.

Of course, there's a risk involved in doing things differently. You will either do things better than others, or worse. If your deviation from the norm makes you, and those like you, less fit to survive, you will eventually render yourself extinct.

But if you do better, others will have to follow -- or risk extinction themselves.

Rebecca Solnit wrote in *TomDispatch* about a man who ignored official instructions to go back to his office on the 66th floor of the south tower of the World Trade Centre, September 11. He got out safely. Thousands who meekly obeyed those instructions didn't.

As Solnit wrote, "People in power and bureaucrats seem exceptionally obtuse when it comes to recognizing that the world has changed... The advisors in the towers gave excellent instructions for previous crises... Sometimes the right thing to do in ordinary times is exactly the wrong thing to do in extraordinary times."

Solnit cited several concepts -- from abolishing slavery to giving women the vote, from phasing out fluorocarbons and acid rain to enforcing seatbelts and airbags -- that were once considered radical, even dangerous. Now they have become the norm.

You don't have to be left-handed to challenge the status quo. You do have to have the courage to be different.

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YOUR TURN

To my delight, you all seemed to get the point of last week's column, about the kinds of "languages" by which we communicate.

Isabel Gibson noted, "As another word-o-phile, I've also noticed the general

inarticulateness among professional musicians (Randy Bachman a notable exception). You make a good point that it might not be reasonable to expect people to speak in words about an entirely different mode of expression.

“I don't know if music is more sophisticated than words, though. I get the gradations you identify in music, but just try to make a logical argument or present a scientific thesis in musical form. Words, on the other hand, rarely bring one to tears or exaltation as effectively as music. Perhaps (like the other modes you identify) music and language are just suited for different types of expression, and we'd all be better off for being more multi-modal.”

John Clinton recommended one of those “multi-modal” experiences: “One of the most powerful messages that has ever been communicated to me was done recently by an Academy Award-winning short documentary -- “The Lady in Number 6”. Subtitled: “Music saved my Life.” It featured Alice Herz-Sommer who was said to be the oldest living Holocaust survivor (age 109).

“In 38 minutes, it captured her life-long love for music and her ability to convey that love -- even in Theresienstadt concentration camp during WW II. It was because of her music that she survived because she was asked/told to play for Nazi officers and their friends. This gave her physical, emotional, and spiritual sustenance. Unfortunately, she died in February 2014 just before the film received the Academy Award.”

My article made Ralph Milton think of watching the movie *Philomena*, starring Judi Dench: “There is one scene in which the camera stays on a close-up of her face for the longest time. There is no dialogue. Just a series of emotions playing out on her face. Marvelous!”

However, Laurina Tallman thought I had missed my own point: “If you don't understand what you call ‘intuition’ you are missing the entrance to what people call ‘experiences of God’ that form the basis of religious belief and practices. Your Psalm paraphrase dwells on precisely those sorts of experiences: ‘In the silence of the night, I listen for the breath of God: In the bedlam of a business day, I watch for a whisper of wisdom. / I keep my mind on God.’

“Let's not forget that the poetic use of language moves communication with words closer to the musical forms of expression and that words, as lyrics to music, combine those media into a fusion of expression central to our religious practice.

“There are gradations of ‘intuition’ and of awareness of the divine Voice; some people are better able than others to develop that sensitivity. Jesus exemplifies a person with ears finely attuned to that frequency where one can remain “alert” to God’s leading, as does the psalmist you paraphrase.”

Margaret Carr caught me in a verbal slip-up: “I know you are a wordsmith and a very good one too. So how come you had the wrong kind of profit (prophet) in front of Gandhi’s name?”

James Russell was out of e-touch for a while, and wanted to comment on the paraphrased parable I wrote a couple of weeks ago: “Put well and with wit! Thanks, Jim.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

The psalm for this coming Sunday, Easter 3 (Psalm 116:1-4 and 12-19) seems to me to have been chosen to make us think of the Resurrection of Jesus. I wondered how Lazarus, who was also brought back from the tomb, might have phrased his experience.

1-4: Who calls me? Whose voice do I hear?

I know that voice.

It is my friend, my brother-in-love.

I was dead.

**I was wrapped in linen clothes,
anointed with spices to preserve my flesh,
laid out in a stone tomb.**

In that pit, I cried to my Lord: “Save me!”

8-10: The stone rolled back.

Light flooded in.

It hurt my eyes.

**The love and the tears of my friend
have restored my soul.**

I stumble into his gaze.

My limbs do not know how to move with life again.

12-19: I believed in him, even in the darkness of death.

How can I repay this ultimate gift?

Until I die again, I will celebrate every moment of life.

I will raise the brimming cup of community;

I will drink deep of the joy of his presence.

He does not want us to live an endless death

He wants us to live, and live, and live!

I, who have known the emptiness on the other side

have been commissioned to give thanks for life.

I hereby present myself as a living sacrifice.

Dying no longer frightens me,

for I have seen beyond the tomb,

And I know that I dwell in the house of the Holy One.

This is a new paraphrase. For paraphrases of most of the psalms used by the RCL, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publishing, info@woodlake.com.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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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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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
