

Wednesday February 29, 2012

The Law of Diminishing Returns

By Jim Taylor

When I was young, we had TB chest X-rays every year. I had regular smallpox vaccinations – I can't remember how often. When I travelled overseas, I had to carry a little yellow book detailing my vaccinations and immunizations.

No immigration official has asked for that book in a dozen years. I haven't had a TB test since the 1960s. And smallpox doesn't exist anywhere on the planet any more.

That's how far we have come in eliminating diseases that used to kill millions.

We're "that close" to doing the same with polio -- ads on TV show people holding thumb-and-finger a fraction apart.

Polio was a child killer in my childhood. I remember seeing victims struggling with crutches and braces and wheelchairs. On one occasion, our class visited a girl living in an iron lung. For weeks, I had nightmares about being imprisoned in a great wheezing cylinder...

Memory has mercifully blotted out any recollection of those who didn't survive polio.

Hurdles still to overcome

Thanks to the efforts of international aid agencies – especially Rotary International – polio now exists only in three countries world-wide: Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Nigeria.

Polio may be beaten even in India, which has not had a reported case of polio in over a year.

Immunization requires only two drops of oral vaccine. No pain. No terror. No side effects.

What's harder to overcome is prejudice. In Islamic northern Nigeria, fundamentalists claim the drops will convert children to Christianity. (Evangelists might wish conversions were that easy!) In Afghanistan, and Pakistan, anti-western fanatics foment fears that the vaccine will render children sterile. (Again, advocates of population control might wish it were that easy.)

So near, yet so far

Finishing any job is always harder than getting it going. I call this the Law of Diminishing Returns.

Running a vacuum over the floors is relatively easy; getting into all the corners takes longer. Pulling big weeds is easy; uprooting every tiny seedling takes forever.

It's sometimes said that 20 per cent of the people in community organizations do 80 per cent of the work. And vice versa. Whatever the statistical validity of that saying, I've found that a similar principle applies to editing projects.

If a manuscript will require 100 hours of work, I can make an 80 per cent improvement in 20 hours. But fixing that last 20 per cent – chasing down every quotation, testing every numeric table, reconsidering every word choice, correcting every flaw in logic, and then negotiating all these amendments with an obstinate author – will require at least another 80 hours.

That's the problem facing polio eradication.

You and I can't go to India or Nigeria to administer those life-saving drops. But we can help. Prayers, moral support, letters to national leaders, and financial donations all bring success a fraction closer.

Working together, we wiped out smallpox. Working together, we controlled TB – at least in developed areas. Working together, we can eliminate polio too – "if," as Microsoft's Bill Gates says, "we have the fortitude to see this effort through to the end."

The final kick to the finish line always demands the most energy.

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YOUR TURN

Last week's column about obsessions didn't, apparently, get many of you thinking about the role our obsessions play in our lives. But it certainly prompted you to share some of your own obsessions with me.

For example, Mary-Margaret Boone confessed, "Mine is collecting -- as my kids have told me, every new thing in my life becomes the start of a new collection. I collect first day Canadian postage covers, vases, angels, rocks, shells, Trixie Belden books, Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys books as well, Bibles, plates for my plate rail, (which I can now fill twice but the plates have to be bread and butter-sized), miniature animals, miniature anything actually. My son laughed when I spoke about what I would try to save if the house was on fire -- I probably would not get out of the house! A sad thought of being tied to one's possessions..."

Ruth Shaver had an obsession similar to my own: "I, too, am obsessed with words, specifically the improper use of them and of poor grammar which impedes the understanding of them. And I also shout at the television and radio voices which misuse and abuse the English language. I attribute this obsession to the influence of my grandmother, who was an English teacher, and to my father, who imbued his childhood experiences of learning to speak and to write from his 'excruciatingly precise' mother. My obsession has, however, served me well most of the time!"

Heather Richard also has a dog with a food obsession: "Your description of Phoebe's obsession with food made me think of my dog, a 4-year-old English Springer Spaniel named Cody. In a house with three teenage children, he often gets quite a bit of food that isn't good for him. His obsession has caused his weight to get to the point where the vet said 'severe diet or he won't be able to walk in 2 years'. So now poor Cody is cut down to 2 cups of low calorie dog food a day, no treats, and NO human food. He's even more obsessed with food now -- his counter-surfing skills have reached new heights!

"This shows how obsessions, magnificent or minor, can have powerful effects on our lives. As human beings, we have to make the decision whether an obsession is worth pursuing to extremes.

"Oh, did I mention that one time when Cody was left alone, he ate the full butter dish, two boxes of cereal, and a bottle of shower gel?"

Carolyn Terry was catching up on columns that she had set aside for the time being, and wanted to comment on the column about hoar frost: "That was a really true piece of writing. As soon as I read it, I felt as if I'd known it all a long."

I thought it was one of my better efforts too, but Carolyn's comment put me in mind of a placard I used to have on my office wall: "Genius does not consist simply of originality, but of saying what others didn't know yet that they were thinking."

ABOUT MY BOOKS, ETC.

I still have half a dozen copies of a book my father wrote exploring Christian theology through Christian art.

The problem with art, of course, is that it cannot put an abstract concept on canvas. An artist cannot paint an Incarnation or a Resurrection without putting real humans, in real situations, into the picture. The expression, therefore, has to be grounded in a particular culture and society; the infinite and universal has to be represented in finite terms.

My father – who once took art lessons from members of Canada’s Group of Seven – spent much of his life after retiring as principal of the Vancouver School of Theology, seeking out the ways artists through the centuries had attempted to deal with this dilemma. I’m probably biased, but I think that in examining the ways art portrays theological concepts, he explained those concepts better than most theological texts.

The book is “Seeing the Mystery: Exploring Christian Faith through the Eyes of Artists,” by William S. Taylor, 94 pages. There are only about 20 copies left in the world. Most of the illustrations are in full colour.

If you would like a copy, write to me – Jim Taylor, 1300 6th Street, Lake Country, BC, Canada, V4V 2H7.

Unfortunately, I can’t send these out on the honour system, as I do with my biblical paraphrases. I will have to charge \$30 Canadian to include postage, paid in advance.

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. 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

- David Keating’s “SeemslkeGod” page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson’s thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold’s weekly musings, punningly titled “Reynolds Rap,” write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin’s “Model T Websites.” a simple (and cheap) seven-page website for congregations who want to develop a web presence <<http://www.modeltwebsites.com>>
- 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.

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, or send a note to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca
