

*Wednesday March 12, 2014*

## **The relationships we build**

By Jim Taylor

In the space of three days, I lost one old friend and found another.

At my age, old friends seem to be an endangered species. One after another, they exit into the wings and don't return for the curtain call.

The most recent departure was Bob Scott, aged 84. I remember Bob principally as a performer – whether in front of his classes at Seneca College in Toronto, in the choir at Parkwoods United Church, or dominating the stage in plays and musicals put on by the local theatre group.

For decades, his rich and rumbling bass anchored the church choir. Admittedly, not all the choir directors appreciated his irreverent sense of humour or his boyish delight in puncturing balloons of pretension.

As a thespian, Bob starred in the play *Inherit the Wind* – the dramatization of the Scopes Monkey Trial of 1925 – as the bombastic Matthew Harrison Brady. Although Brady's theology was far from Bob's own, Bob threw himself into the part with a passion that made Spenser Tracy look like a bumbling amateur.

Bob and I played rivals on stage, and became friends in life.

No one will ever be an understudy for Bob Scott.

## **Lose one, win one**

And the old friend found again? That's a longer story.

In 1971, I was sent to the impoverished African nation of Malawi, to help an ecumenical consortium of churches there develop print materials to help them solicit funds from European aid agencies. To learn about their work first hand, I was sent out in a station wagon with a driver, a photographer, and a young man named Sam Nazombe.

We slept on beaches under the stars, in borrowed beds, in stuffy tents. We tramped through shoulder-high grass to draw water from hidden springs and pumped water from deep boreholes. We hoed fields of vegetables, counted pills in ill-stocked medical clinics, and kicked soccer balls with shrieking school children.

Sam decided he wanted to be a journalist, like me. Two years later, he came to Canada for an apprenticeship of sorts.

The bewildered kid from Central Africa arrived in a snowstorm in January. He left in a snowstorm in April. During his three months in Canada, he never once saw a green leaf or blade of grass. But he wrote stories. He met other journalists. He boiled maple syrup in the bush. He rode a toboggan down a ravine.

After Sam returned to Malawi, we sent letters back and forth for about seven years. Then Sam vanished. I heard he had died.

Like singer Peggy Lee, I wondered, "Is that all there is?"

No, it isn't. Sam's son, Anthony, tracked me down through the Internet. Anthony now lives in Australia, with his wife and infant daughter. He wants to stay in touch with me.

It felt like a resurrection.

## **Beyond death**

It confirms my conviction that relationships often last longer than the individuals who formed them. For good or ill, they will surface again, unexpectedly, unpredictably. And they will continue to affect lives. Good

relationships provide links between the children of long-dead friends; ancient hurts explode into hostilities as they did in Bosnia, and are doing today in Crimea.

Fare thee well, Bob. Welcome back, Anthony. To old friends, and to new friends, I'chaim!

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## YOUR TURN

Jane Bennett called last week's column -- about what trees might say, if they could speak -- "a beautiful column and a beautiful letter. It has touched me deeply, and I wonder how old Anitha S. is, and what life experience she(?) has had that moves her to write so poetically about something we all take for granted.

"I have always loved trees. Our cottage in Muskoka has a beautiful towering white pine. It is so big, it takes more than two adults to join hands around its base. On hot summer days, I sit on the dock and gaze at it and wonder what it must have seen in its long life -- what birds it has nested, what storms it has survived, what forest fires it has escaped. If only it could talk, I'd imagine it would write a letter not unlike Anitha's (but hopefully without the sense of an early demise)."

Isabel Gibson found the challenge of thinking like a tree to be "An interesting exercise -- most of the time I have a hard time imagining someone else's point of view, and that's within my species! Profit does often seem to be the sole driver for development decisions."

Isabel is currently holidaying in Phoenix: "I've been interested to see what the City of Gilbert (part of metro Phoenix) is doing about sustainable use of water, which is a sore point here in the Southwest. They use their treated wastewater for irrigation (farms and golf courses) and for 'water parks' -- not with slides and swimming pools, but with ponds and plantings for wildlife.

"As the water gradually seeps down to recharge the aquifer, it supports habitat for an amazing array of birds, transient and otherwise. They add walking trails and educational components, and there you have it -- a winning project on every front.

"Add to that the sparing of natural desert washes (coulees, wadis, ditches) and the creation of artificial ones in areas of new development, and suddenly an urban landscape is dotted with linked oases. Encouraging. And fabulous to experience.

"Is it cost effective? I don't know. I do know it isn't cheap. But it seems to be working."

Gwynne Harries wrote, "I read this to the trees outside our window and they cried."

Lewis Coffman found the column timely: "I have been involved here in our village of Paisley, Ontario with a group who are actively involved in tree promotion through preservation and planting over the past several years. From time to time I contribute short articles to our local paper on topics related to trees and the benefits they provide for our environment."

Charles Hill usually agrees with me, but this time he didn't. He found the tree's reasoning "a good argument for a disaster that puts the human race back to a farming, hunting (minus firearms) society."

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## PSALM PARAPHRASES

Lent 2, and – ah! – Psalm 121. Living here among the mountains, I resonate with that opening line, “I lift up my eyes to the hills....” Every summer, I go for a week’s hiking in the Rockies; this paraphrase grew out of that experience.

- 1 I look up, past the highest peaks.  
From somewhere out there comes my help.
- 2 It comes from God, who shaped the peaks and the valleys,  
provided the air and the earth.
- 3 Yet God is close enough to guide my feet,  
every step I take along life's precipitous paths.
- 4 I may grow weary, but God does not doze off;  
My mind may wander, but God always stays alert.
- 5 God looks after me.
- 6 God stays as close to me as the hat that shelters me from the summer sun,  
as close as the jacket that shields me from the slashing rain.  
God watches over me.
- 7 God's hand holds me when I crawl along the edge of a cliff;  
It saves me from delusions of depending on my own abilities.  
God keeps me from slipping off the edge.  
God keeps my feet safely on the path.
- 8 Wherever I go, wherever I may find myself,  
God will go with me and look after me,  
Even after life ends.

For paraphrases of most of the psalms used by the RCL, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publications, [info@woodlake.com](mailto:info@woodlake.com).

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

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

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