

Wednesday June 13, 2012

How long are some ideas edible?

By Jim Taylor

My wife Joan found a can of Campbell's soup in a back corner of our pantry. She hadn't bought it. Neither had I. We concluded it must have been left by a friend who stayed at our house more than six months ago.

Joan checked the "best-before" date on the label. It was still good, she decided. So we had that soup for lunch.

I hadn't even realized that canned food had best-before dates. I knew perishable products needed best-before dates. Although I do wonder what can happen to sour cream after its best-before date expires. It's already sour. Does it go fresh again?

But canned food always seemed imperishable. When I was young, we had a simple test for canned food. If it had built up gas pressure inside and bulged like a balloon, it wasn't safe any longer. (It could take off like a rocket if thrown into a campfire, though!)

Long past any best-before date

One summer, back in university days, my friend Gord Forward and I worked with a forestry company surveying timber resources on B.C.'s north coast. Gord's crew went up Surf Inlet, a narrow fjord on Princess Royal Island.

Along the shores, they found a gold miner's cabin, abandoned for several decades. The roof had fallen in. Inside, only a metal bed frame had survived the elements. And a couple of rusty cans, still perched on what remained of a shelf.

The cans had not bulged. They made the right kind of vacuum-sucking sounds when punctured. So Gord cooked the contents for supper that night.

Beans, of course. With pork.

If those cans ever had a best-before date, it had long vanished. In that coastal climate, paper labels soon disintegrate.

Can ideas become toxic?

But if there's no best-before date, how do we know if the contents are still safe to consume?

Obviously, I'm not thinking just about food.

No one attaches a best-before date to ideas, for instance. But an economic theory based on a world of small independent banks might prove toxic in a global context where currency manipulators have international tentacles, where transactions take place in the blink of a computer chip.

Is a political philosophy rooted in the conquest of the Wild West's vast open spaces still applicable in an urban civilization?

We know that the shelf life of some fundamental precepts in chemistry and physics expired with the advent of relativity and sub-atomic particles. And no modern surgeon would rely on a medical text written 300 years ago.

But what about the dietary rules for refugees roaming the desert, without refrigeration, 3500 years ago? And if they have a best-before date, what about the principles that emerged from the same desert experience – principles that we call the Ten Commandments?

Some people would simply trash everything old. Others hang onto it desperately – it must be right, because it has been unquestioned for so long.

Much of our world – religious, political, economic – consists of conceptual cans lacking best-before dates. It's a constant challenge to discern which cans remain safe to consume, and which should be discarded.

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YOUR TURN

Mary Margaret Boone wrote that last week's column on eye contact "opened up a whole kettle of fish for me. I like to bike and often take my bike with me when I go to conferences or events with the church. At a Worship Matters event in London Ontario I took advantage of the trails along the Thames. I always greet people that I pass or encounter but what I noticed was the use of iPods that restricted eye contact. I say hello anyway but this part of our technological culture has been instrumental in reducing eye contact whether big city or small town or urban vs. rural.

"At our recent conference, Bruce Sanguin led an exercise in eye contact -- it was a challenge and created great discussion afterwards.

"Also culturally, eye contact can be viewed differently. A friend with First Nations background explained that in her culture avoiding direct eye contact was seen as a sign of humility. In some Native Studies courses at Trent many years ago, direct eye contact was considered an affront and an invitation to 'bear walking', which allowed Shamans to shapeshift into the form of a bear and cause you bodily harm or even death!"

Eileen Wttewaal similarly noted that different cultures have different standards: "While my husband and I were teaching in Zambia back in the 80s, in the rural areas it was considered very impolite not to look at people in the eye but also to stop and greet, even briefly, whether one knew the person or not, and no matter how much you were in a hurry. This was an acknowledgement of the community.

"After I returned to Canada I had been to visit a daughter in Red Deer and returned by train on a beautiful snowy day through the mountains to Vancouver. When I climbed onto a crowded bus with my luggage, the Asian women at the front of the bus moved to give me room. Their eyes were on me so I began to tell them of the train trip. Their eyes said their appreciation for the change to their usual time of being locked in their individualized bus ride."

Cliff Gieseke also cautioned, "Don't forget the cultural factors. I spent four years living in Colombia, in Bogota and Cartagena, teaching English on the peso economy. English speakers tend to stand farther apart than Spanish speakers and may [thus] seem 'standoffish.' In crowded Bogota, there may be less eye contact in crowded spaces, but it does occur, depending on peoples' mood, which may depend on the weather. (Bogota is often overcast and a bit gloomy, and moods change when the sun comes out -- more smiles and eye contact.) Cartagena, on the coast, is hot country, and there are lots of smiles and eye contact. And, as I said, they tend to get close together than native English speakers. It took a while, but I learned to enjoy being close to friendly Spanish speakers, often strangers."

Diane Robinson applied the column to her current experience: "I live, on an equal basis, in a community of 950 (my working life) and a community of 200,000 (my personal life). The joke in the community of 950 is that, when you flush your toilet, the other end of town knows about it 5 minutes later!

"In the community of 950, you are offended if people don't wave to you as they drive past ... People chat on the street corners about their neighbours, their friends, their families, the weather, the crops... It would be considered rude not to do any of the foregoing (including making eye contact!). Indeed, there doesn't seem to be any privacy in this small town.....but still, small town people can be private. Certainly, people in the small town still seem to embrace the idea of 'communion' with one another even though it means losing (is it really a loss, tho'?) their privacy.

"In the city of 200,000 people often don't want to make eye contact. Making eye contact means we're going to have to be IN relationship.....and that idea seems to be becoming more and more foreign in our increasingly-connected (but technologically, not face to face) world. I, however, will frequently try to make eye contact, to see what happens. When eye contact happens (it's not as rare as you'd think!) I smile -- and a relationship has begun even if that relationship lasts for the briefest of moments. I've been astounded, time and again, how often my eye contact and the accompanying smile seem to have invited people (usually complete strangers) to share a snapshot(s) of their life with me.

"What all this is about, I think, is that people (whether in large cities or small towns, regardless of age or gender, whether scared or confident) are thirsty for 'communion', for 'community', for 'relationship'. People want - - need! -- to believe, even for the briefest of interactions and moments, that someone cared enough to look into their eyes and know them as a person who has a story that's important enough to listen to.

"Is there risk in communion? In community? In relationship? In making eye contact? In 'intimacy'? Will it be 'embarrassing'? I've never experienced embarrassment. Have I been affected by the encounter? Absolutely."

Isabel Gibson "watched with amusement as my two travelling companions -- both extroverts -- overwhelmed a clerk with their interactiveness. The clerk clearly did not expect to be chatted up quite so vigorously... or, maybe, at all.

"But to your point about the way we guard our separateness, I remember my shock in hitting the notion that we aren't really separate. 'I am a part of all that I have met', said Tennyson -- and all that I have met is a part of me."

PSALM PARAPHRASES

I find it hard to believe that our daughter Sharon finished her Master's degree and moved to a new city 24 years ago this summer. Way back then, I thought of Psalm 20 as a kind of blessing to a child growing up and leaving the parental nest. I've modified this version slightly from the one that appears in *Everyday Psalms* (published by Wood Lake Books, 1-800-663-2775 if you want to order it.)

1 Bless you, my child.

As you launch yourself into the world, God go with you;
For every beat of your wings, may God watch over you.

2 When you're feeling low, may God send you a shoulder to cry upon,
And a friendly hand to help you up.

3 When you're feeling good, may your laughter echo in the heavens;
whatever you do, may it be acceptable in God's sight.

4 May God hear the deepest longings of your heart,
and help your longings blossom into reality.

5 May the word we hear of you always be good.
Then we will know that you have known God while you were growing up.
We will know that God continues to be part of your new life.

May you remember how to pray;

6 For God will not desert those who stay in touch.

7 Some of your new friends will put their faith in money,
others in power, and some in fast cars;
Put your faith only in the Lord our God.

8 Those who put their faith in false gods will stumble and fall,
But you will not be afraid of the sky;
you can soar to the heavens.

9 Lord, into your hands we commit our child;
take her under your wing,
for our sakes, and yours.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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- 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 "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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