

Wednesday October 24, 2012

The laws of life and death apply to everyone else

By Jim Taylor

We were driving home from Thanksgiving dinner with our daughter and grandchildren. (Note to non-Canadian readers: Canadian Thanksgiving happens in early October.) It was dark, of course – darkness creeps up on us these autumn nights. The last-quarter moon had not yet risen.

Suddenly, a cyclist swooped out of a side street. Without stopping. He seized a momentary break in the stream of cars to angle across three lanes of traffic. Over a central median. Across three more lanes of traffic. And up a side street on the far side.

No helmet. No lights. No reflectors on his bicycle. No reflective clothing. Dark clothing; black pack slung on his back.

What was he thinking?

Here in Lake Country, the local Rotary club has had a two-year campaign to distribute reflective armbands through the community. Some school children wear the armbands. Others hang the armbands on their backpacks. Occasional adults attach an armband to their dogs' collars for night walks.

It's amazing how far away a single reflective stripe shows up in car headlights.

But the cyclist that night had nothing – nothing at all – to make himself more visible.

But not to me

I try to understand the mentality that takes such risks. Sometimes I've hypothesized that they have an unshakeable belief in immortality. But that's too theoretical. I doubt if there's any conscious mentality operating at all – just a blind conviction that bad things only happen to other people. Never to me.

Perhaps, deep down, we all harbour that delusion.

When I read about a bus crash, a train wreck, a collapsed building, I immediately imagine how I might respond in such a situation. Somehow I always visualize myself offering heroic help to other victims. I never think of myself as pinned beneath the rubble. Or frying in a fire. Or bleeding to death from severed arteries...

Why not? That would be consistent with my experience so far. Over 70-plus years, I've managed to survive my share of falls, accidents, and medical emergencies.

You probably have your own collection of good luck stories.

Everyone does. Because, if you stop to think about it, the people who run out of luck are no longer around to tell their stories.

So we don't get to hear about the car that didn't quite make it across the railway tracks in time. The cyclist who miscalculated the gap in traffic. The rock climber whose foothold failed. The pedestrian who didn't get noticed when she stepped into the crosswalk...

Transcendent selves

If there's a belief system operating here, it's that I – whoever I am – exist separately from the world around me. The laws that apply to everyone else – human laws or natural laws -- don't apply to me. I transcend them.

It's such a universal belief that I wonder if it influences our religious faith. Almost every religion imagines its god or gods as transcendent. They live on Mount Olympus or in heaven. They don't grow old or catch colds. They live beyond our petty limitations.

After all, why would I want a God who is less than I am? If I can think of myself as above the realities of my world, wouldn't any god be more so?

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YOUR TURN

First, a comment from Hugh Pett about my psalm paraphrase last week, in which I drew a parallel between God and gravity: "As a Science grad, and amateur astronomer, it still took me to Verse 6 before the metaphor blossomed before me. Thank you for your Psalm Paraphrase, an offbeat paeon to both Science and Spirit."

Now the other letters -- lots of interesting mail prompted by last week's column, on how our minds manage to conjure memories out of the fog of the past.

Judith Fetter connected my final sentence to her experience with her husband: "Once when Lawrie was already pretty far gone in Alzheimer's, in a meditation I found myself walking along a road in the presence of Jesus. I was carrying a box, and I knew that the box contained all my own memories. I got a bit anxious and asked if I should go back and get the box of Lawrie's memories, since he could no longer carry it himself. I was told not to worry, that all his memories were safe with God. It was a very comforting thing to hear. So - somehow, even though our memories may fade, 'we' are still there!"

And speaking of losing memories, Lois Siemens wrote, "Your column reminded me of my favorite children's book, 'Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge' by Mem Fox. It is about a boy who lives beside a nursing home and he goes to visit. Miss Nancy has lost her memory and he is determined to help her find it. You can find it on YouTube."

Bruce Fraser wrote, "Yes indeed, the mind is a wonderful thing. I took a course once with Dallas Willard. By profession, he's a philosophy professor. But in his spare time, he is a renowned Christian thinker and writer. He asked the class, 'If you and another person had an operation where your brains were switched, when you woke up, who would you be?'

Willard's answer was, 'You'd still be the same person.'

"He continued (this is not verbatim), 'The brain is not the essence of who you are. We are not physical creatures who have a soul; we are souls who, for a while, inhabit a physical body. After the body dies, the soul continues, still fully aware and retaining all the memories of your life.'"

Charles Hill noted, "Memory is truly mysterious. Memory can be destroyed by Alzheimer's Disease, a condition not clearly understood by the scientific community. Other aspects are fascinating. A depressed individual shades memory in the direction of his/her mis-steps and mistakes. Others, as you stated, shade memories to enhance their self-esteem.

"At 75, I find that I haven't really forgotten much that was initially important, if the recall isn't in a stressful situation. Ask me the name of a street before we leave home and I'll remember it; ask me the name when we have to make a quick decision about turning and I'll go blank.

"Personally, I find some forgetfulness a blessing. There is a lot in my history that I'd like to forget."

Isabel Gibson found “this business of editing our memories deeply disturbing. Whaddya mean that we don't remember ‘what really happened’? Taking a memory out for a stroll, and then putting it away again, a bit different for the wear, just seems wrong.

“If I lose my memories, does the ‘I’ fade away? In my own head, I think so -- an early death. Yet I also exist in other people as much as (or more) than in the one continuous thread I carry around inside myself. And those pieces of me in others will carry on, whether I remember or not.”

Jack Dreiger pondered how our brains work: “Most, if not all, my dreams are about being in a situation from which it is hard to escape. Quite often I am in a building where I cannot find my way out. Every room has an exit door which leads into another room with an exit door. I never panic in my dream. I just find it somewhat annoying....

“Other dreams are similar. I try to accomplish something, but something happens to prevent me from getting done what needs to be done. Again I wake up well rested.

“What's happening in my brain to create these dreams? What causes my brain to make me dream dreams with a similar theme every time? How come my brain activity while I sleep does not exhaust me or never prevents me from being well rested after sleeping?”

I'll let John Clinton have the last word: “Something VERY important came to mind as I read your article on ‘Memory.’ Then the phone rang, my wife asked for help, I took the dog out.... Who's Jim and what did I want to say to him?

“I think my name is John...”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

It seems to me that the point of Psalm 34:1-8, the recommended reading for Sunday October 28, is not that God will make life easy for believers, but that God will enable believers to accept whatever life dishes up without being crushed.

- 1 I will speak only good of God;
I will not let a critical thought off my tongue.
- 2 For God has been good to me.
That is the good news I want you to know.
- 4 Yes, I have suffered like you.
I have known grief, and loss, and pain;
I have wondered where my next meal would come from;
I have asked myself if anyone cared.
- 6 But through it all, God has been good to me.
God cared.
- 3 As we have shared in these experiences,
so let us share in giving the glory to God.
- 5 Put your hand in the hand of God,
and walk forward with confidence;
Turn your face towards God, and see clearly.
- 7 For though God will not, with a snap of fingers,
turn all your troubles around,
God will, miraculously, put them into perspective.
God will make your mountains into molehills,
your road closures into pedestrian paths.
- 8 Trust, and see.
God makes a difference.
God is good.

For this and other paraphrases, you can order *Everyday Psalms* through Wood Lake Publications, info@woodlake.com or 1-800-663-2775.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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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 "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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