

Wednesday June 19, 2013

The portals we pass through

By Jim Taylor

Our cat Joey has a thing about doors. If he's outside, he claws at the door to get in. If he's inside, he wants to get out – even if there's a blizzard outside, and he just came in to escape from it.

There's something about doors that Joey finds irresistible.

I wouldn't mind so much living as servant to a cat if Joey displayed more intentionality about passing through a door. But no – he just wants through, whatever it is. We open a door. He zips through, as if he had an urgent mission to accomplish. Then he stops and looks around, wondering why he wanted out so desperately. Especially in the middle of a thunderstorm.

Any door. Anytime.

If I open the door to the garage, he scoots through. Then I remember that the thing I need is actually in the basement storage room. So Joey gets trapped in the garage. He has, on occasion, spent most of a day there while we searched for him elsewhere.

Of course, if I had opened the door to the storage room, he would have shot between my ankles into it, instead. Where we would be even less likely to find him.

Don't recommend a cat door. We built our house for its view. All our doors have full-length double-paned glass. Not suitable for conventional cat doors.

Loss of memory

Mind you, I can sympathize. I go to the kitchen for a second cup of coffee. Somehow, passing through the doorway drives coffee out of my mind. I find myself emptying the dishwasher or putting some pencils away, instead of refilling my cup.

The phenomenon is so common that a trio of researchers at Notre Dame University developed experiments to test it. They found that passing through a doorway actually does affect memory. They explained it as the result of entering a different environment. We tend to associate things with their context; when the context changes, we lose the markers that help us keep a memory in mind.

According to Notre Dame Psychology Professor Gabriel Radvansky, "Entering or exiting through a doorway serves as an 'event boundary' in the mind, which separates episodes of activity.... Recalling the decision or activity that was made in a different room is difficult because it has been compartmentalized."

He's talking about physical doorways, of course. But I wonder if there may be invisible doorways too. Portals, perhaps, into new life experiences. You get married, and the incessant search for a suitable mate fades away – or should. Your spouse dies, and you wonder why you bothered bickering about always being early for appointments.

Maybe there are other portals. Going to school for the first time. Having a child. Surviving a serious car accident. Rattling around an empty nest, after the kids grow up and move away. Losing your job, or retiring.

Suddenly, everything on the other side of that portal seems distant, far away, almost irrelevant. What was it that used to be so important? Why did it seem to matter so much?

You've passed through a portal. Life is different now.

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YOUR TURN

Okay, I admit it – I expected to get stomped on for last week's column, in which I defined some things that I no longer believe. It didn't happen. I received 24 responses, and not one of them accused me of heresy! Indeed, Steve Roney told me, "Jim, you may think you are rebelling against something (or maybe not?), but you sound here to me mostly like a good Catholic."

Steve did challenge some of my points: "In stressing free will, you agree, of course, with the great majority of Christian thought; everyone but the Calvinists, I think. But it does not follow, from the fact that we have free will, that God cannot know in advance what we will choose. It all has to do with whether God is subject to, or beyond, time. And if he is God, he must be the latter."

Doug Giles made the same point: "My Great Whatever, like yours, is omnipotent. My Great Whatever, like yours, gave me Free Will. My Great Whatever, however, because He is omnipotent, knows everything past, present, and future."

"Knowing what I'm going to do is not the same as making me do it or approving it. Ask any parent, they can read their kids like a book. God really does know what I'm going to do. The 'free will' part is: even though God may not like my choices, God will permit it."

Most of the mail was laudatory. Jim Henderschedt, for example: "Bravo! This should be required reading for everyone from confirmands to seminary professors."

Paul Coffman wrote, "I'm 79 years old. I grew up in an anabaptist church (Church of the Brethren) with orthodox beliefs. I have come to the same beliefs you express in this column."

And from Constance St. Hilaire: "You have taken the spiritual road of many a Unitarian Universalist. We start out by discovering what we do not believe in and finally come to the positive side, what we do believe in."

Charlene Fairchild wrote, "Thank you Jim. I'm not saying we share identical beliefs but boy they sure resonate. There's a bit of the mystic in me that finds the writings of St John of the Cross very powerful. The idea that we are immersed in God like fish in the ocean, like the air we breathe. I am attuned to both Jewish & Christian mysticism with their powerful hunger for the 'Great Whatever.'"

"For many years God -- for me -- has been 'more than.' I find a lot of God talk limiting and somewhat narcissistic as folk ascribe to God facets of themselves."

Fran Ota thought I might have been too hard on scientists: "I have a son who is a scientist (maybe that's not a good example) who would not say he believes in God, but ***would*** say he can't believe this is all accidental either, that there is thought behind it. I worked for a medical researcher at University of Toronto, who was profoundly spiritual and religious, and said outright that he believed that 'whatever' was behind it. Gretta Vosper, a friend, says that she stopped using the word God altogether, since it comes with so much preconceived baggage. Where we differ is that I think we should use the word, but engage in discussion about the 'baggage'."

Dale Perkins also had some thoughts about scientific fundamentalists: "Regarding the enthusiasts who hear your response as a throw-back to another era and mindset, and stop talking with you -- I doubt whether there's anything you can say which would keep them interested in having a conversation with you. He sounded like just another fundamentalist who really cannot function inside mystery or wonder."

"Also I doubt whether we need to declare what we don't believe in. It's not a matter of belief; only a willingness to stay with mystery and wonder as we attempt to speak about it. And there will be others who can

accept our babbling and join the chorus now and then. For me, staying in relationship throughout the journey is the key -- I need others (people, animate beings, and so-called inanimate things) to love and to be loved as we share the life journey. Sometimes we will understand and value what they are about... Often we won't have a clue, but we trust it is evolving as intended -- perhaps by that wonderful intelligence we glimpse occasionally. I've come also to the realization that that is what I trust and have faith in. That's about as 'bedrock' as I'm capable."

The term, "the Great Whatever," drew some responses too. Marion Loree wrote, "You have put my thoughts into words exactly. I hope you don't mind if I adopt your "Great Whatever" term when speaking about 'God' to my parishioners. I have struggled with and used many appellations including Holy Presence, Source of Life, Universal Energy, Life Force etc. in an effort to dispense with the personification (especially male) of 'it' but never thought of 'Great Whatever'. I like it!"

And John Hatchard, from Australia, recalled using the "Great Whatever" term: "Presented with a similar dilemma as to what word best described the ineffable presence I became intensely aware of in my mid-teens, and not wishing to appear to take sides, or align my awareness with any particular group, I chose that phrase as the most universal one for how I felt and how I related to the Source Of All. As I read what you had written I felt for a moment that I had written it, so closely did it express my thoughts and beliefs."

Patricia McColl wrote, "Last evening we watched the documentary film 'Quantum Activist' with Amit Goswami. Intriguing to hear a Quantum Physicist explaining how 'consciousness is the ground of our being' and how quantum mathematics, 'clear as daylight', calculates possibilities. I'll need to watch it a few more times, and likely read and ponder, to understand the scientific part, but it certainly resonates. 'He too delights that science has now 'come up with the same metaphor that theologians hypothesized centuries ago' (your words). The possibilities are so hopeful!!"

Margaret Carr liked my comments about the Bible as "Holy Book" -- "But why don't our ministers teach this in their sermons? I cringe every Sunday when our minister thanks God for 'this reading of his holy word.' I too have many "don't believe" but as some great wordsmith has said, 'I believe in the sun even when it does not shine, I believe in love even when it is not shown, I believe in God even when He does not speak.' I believe I must stay open and listening so that when God does speak I can hear his voice."

Charles Hill mused about aging and belief: "As I age and approach death, I struggle with what I really believe. About 30 years ago I myself had therapy with a defrocked Roman Catholic Priest. (He had decided to get married.) One thing he said I shall never forget. He believed that most people struggle for certainty and there is no certainty. It is really scary to many to not know for sure. This need produces those who know for sure and need to have a Bible that is entirely literal in every story, and a male God who is anthropomorphic."

PSALM PARAPHRASES

The lectionary offers too many choices for Sunday June 23. The primary listing calls for Psalms 42 and 43; the alternate listing suggests the concluding paragraphs of Psalm 22. Now, psalm 22 is perhaps the most gut-wrenching psalm in the Bible, but verses 19-28 sugar-coat the agony of "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

So I have opted for a paraphrase of Psalm 43, which is fairly short, and fairly focussed.

1 The skeptics make fun of my beliefs;
They scorn my convictions.

"There is no God," they say.
"Why should we care about right and wrong?"
2 They laugh at me when I turn to you, my God.
When apparently you do not answer, they call it confirmation of their charges.
Why do you let these things happen?
3 We need a sign as unmistakable as a searchlight beam sweeping the darkness;
Then all can see and follow the beam to its luminous source.
4 There we will find you, our God.
In the white-hot arc of your presence, all doubts will burn away.
We will be ready to serve you with all our lives.
5 With heart and soul, with mind and strength, O God, I believe;
Strip away any lingering doubts.
We put our trust in you;
you are our God.

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

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 "SeemslieGod" page, www.seemsliegod.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
