

Wednesday August 21, 2013

The care and feeding of friendships

By Jim Taylor

Friendships can happen unexpectedly. You meet someone, you get along, you discover you've become friends.

Maintaining those friendships takes more work. It means keeping in touch. Sharing experiences. Growing together. And sometimes, making sacrifices for the sake of that friendship.

A friend is more than just someone you see every day. You may have to make time to spend with a friend. Sometimes friends move away; then you have to deliberately, intentionally, make an effort to keep the connection alive.

In an earlier part of my life, I tried to get that idea across to a group of young people, mostly teens. I wanted them to use their friendships as a model for their relationship with God.

At that point, I didn't care what kind of God – just how they maintained that relationship.

Their eyes glazed. With a few exceptions, it had never occurred to them that they had to work at being friends – and this was before FaceBook! Few had had friends move away; fewer had lost friends. Even when the older ones left home for university, they were less concerned about losing track of old friends than about collecting a whole bunch of new friends.

The benefits of experience

I don't say that to disparage youth. Young people today have had more education than many adults. Many have travelled more widely. But their range of experiences is limited, simply because they haven't lived as long.

Granted, some adults can go through life repeating the same old routines over and over, seeing and hearing little new, and learning next to nothing as they go. But simply by having lived longer, adults have had more opportunity for experiences. They've grown up, gone to work, earned a promotion, lost a job, raised children, made commitments, cared for aging parents, exercised responsibility for others.

Children and teenagers haven't lived long enough to have most of those experiences yet.

Kindergarten pupils, for example, have had only five years to accumulate experiences. Within each culture, those experiences will be relatively uniform.

But the longer those children live, the more unique each will become. As gerontologist Greta Riddell-Dixon once told me, "As we grow older, we become more and more like what we've always been."

Growing together

No two people—not even the closest of friends—have had exactly the same experiences. Each experience colours all the experiences that follow it. So even when two adults experience the same event, they may react quite differently.

No wonder, then, that adults have vastly different understandings of whatever they think of as God.

"When I was a child, I thought like a child," wrote the apostle Paul. "But when I became an adult, I set aside childish ways...."

I don't expect everyone to share my perceptions of God. They can't, because they haven't lived my life – nor I, theirs. It's not that one person's idea is right, therefore another must be wrong.

Right and wrong apply only when people don't allow their relationship with the holy mystery we call God to grow and mature.

You can't vacuum-pack a friendship and deep-freeze it for safekeeping. It won't work with humans. Or with God.

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YOUR TURN

Last week's column about mosquitoes was partly tongue in cheek, partly a way of exploring the old question of how evil could come into existence in a world created by a totally good God.

Jack Dreidger commented, "It has been lamented that it is too bad Noah did not have a fly swatter."

Ted Spencer came to the defence of mosquitoes: "Mosquitoes ARE perfect: as an annoyance, as a humbling presence, as a test of one's ability to refrain from swearing... What other critter - a lone specimen tipping the scales at 3 milligrams -- can, all by herself, completely fill a tent or bedroom and get your undivided attention for an entire night? God would have needed to stay at work for more than an extra Sunday afternoon to have come up with anything better."

My friend Ralph Milton sent along one of Ogden Nash's terse verses:
"God in his wisdom created the fly.
And then forgot to tell us why."

Ralph also teased me about uniformly describing God as "he". That was actually deliberate, a way of poking a little at conventional notions of the Creator.

Jim Henderschedt got that point: "You have one-upped tongue-twisters by creating a mind-twister. A perfect creation from an imperfect being. (Since they're opposites they will not cancel each other out). A delight!"

Dale Perkins had a similar reaction to Ralph's: "While I liked your story about God and mosquitoes, it struck me that you've gone to a lot of trouble to retain a theistic god in the creation myth. It was amusing and enjoyable. What would your take be on mosquitoes in a non-theistic, evolutionary perspective of creation? That would be more interesting to me and probably more of your readers."

Apparently I'm not the only one who has mused on mosquitoes. John McTavish sent John Updike's poem, MOSQUITO:

On the fine wire of his whine he walked,
Unseen in the ominous bedroom dark.
A traitor to his camouflage, he talked
A thirsty blue streak distinct as a spark.

I was to him a fragrant lake of blood
From which he had to sip a drop or die.
A reservoir, a lavish field of food,
I lay awake, unconscious of my size.

We seemed fair-matched opponents. Soft he dropped
Down like an anchor on his thread of song.
His nose sank thankfully in; then I slapped
At the sting on my arm, cunning and strong.

A cunning, strong Gargantua, I struck
This lover pinned in the feast of my flesh,
Lulled by my blood, relaxed, half-sated, stuck,
Engrossed in the gross rivers of myself.

Success! Without a cry the creature died,
Became a fleck of fluff upon the sheet.

The small welt of remorse subsides as side
By side we, murderer and murdered, sleep.

John commented, "Where the Canadian in you dances around with irony and word play, the American in Updike calls in the troops!"

Isabel Gibson was grateful for one of the letters last week: "Ah, the value of community. Marjorie Bradley's thoughtful and caring reflection on celebrating and remembering, in the context of memory loss, was fabulous. Thanks for bringing it to us."

Jane Wallbrown was equally impressed with Marjorie's letter, and was brutally honest with herself: "I find I'm still a novice at handling my own emotions about my friends/relatives/loves losing their memories. I get hurt; angry; mad; irritated...a whole range of emotions. I want/need the relationships of those that I have accepted to be close to me. I find it hard to let go of what was. In other words... it's about me rather than the other. Marjorie sees the other rather than herself. She is an incredible woman. I've not yet gotten there, yet."

PSALM PARAPHRASES

Psalm 71 is sometimes described as an old man's prayer, but it could equally well apply to a young child. Both ages are vulnerable and dependent on others. I chose to paraphrase from the child's viewpoint, because every one of us has been a child; only a few of us have been old -- yet.

1 Don't let them make fun of me.
Let me hide myself behind your skirts.
2 Comfort me and protect me;
listen to my fears, and enfold me in your arms.
3 When I am in trouble, I run to you.
I have no one but you to rely on.
4 The bigger kids won't leave me alone;
their greedy hands keep poking at me.
Rescue me from their clutches.
5 From the time I was tiny, you have been my refuge.
I have always been able to trust you.
6 Before I was born, I felt safe in your womb.
As an infant, I rested on your breast.
You are all I have, and all I ever had.

For this and other paraphrases, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publications, info@woodlake.com.

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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