

Because

...for anyone who's ever asked, 'why?'

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Mikhail Timofeyevich Kalashnikov died on the 23rd December 2013 aged 94. His name is a by-word all around the planet especially where there is war and conflict, because as you know he invented the cheapest, simplest, and most reliable rifle in the world – the Kalashnikov! It is commonly known as the AK- 47: “AK” for Automat Kalashnikova, “47” for 1947 – the year it was invented by this Russian general.

Some time ago, I read an article written by a newspaper reporter called Robert Fisk who met him at an arms fair in Abu Dhabi 12 years ago. Apparently he asked him some pointed questions about all the carnage, death and destruction that his weapon had brought about over the years but, of course, the replies to his questions sought to justify the rifle and blame the policies of governments worldwide.

Perhaps this elderly soldier had come to terms with his invention. He actually made this statement to the reporter: “You see, all these feelings come about because one side wants to liberate itself with arms. But in my opinion, it is good that prevails. It will be after I am dead, but the time will come when my weapons will be no more used or necessary.”¹ This is quite prophetic because the Bible tells us

about a time when “they shall beat their swords (Kalashnikovs) into ploughshares!” (Isa 2:4 NRSV)

General Kalashnikov was also asked, “But what about God? What would God say to him when he died?” His reply, “We were educated in such a way that I am probably an atheist, but something exists...”¹

I think that this elderly gentleman who had given most of his life to war and the manufacture of his famous, or infamous, rifle was pondering the future and perhaps seeing a glimmer of truth. I sincerely hope so.

Yes, he was right, “Something exists!” And that great Being informs us that sometime in the future whenever he comes to dwell with us mortals – “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more.” (Rev 21:4 NRSV) Or as General Kalashnikov put it, “The time will come when my weapons will be no more used or necessary!” As we enter 2016, that’s a wonderful vision of the future, don’t you think?

1 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/is-mikhail-kalashnikov-in-hell-the-man-was-confident-he-would-not-go-there-9025337.html>



THE BABY IN THE GUEST ROOM

BY JAMES HENDERSON

I saw a Christmas card the other day that depicted Joseph and the heavily pregnant Mary on a donkey being sent on their way into a cold, snowy Bethlehem from a hotel with a “no vacancies” sign lit up above its entrance. But did it happen that way?

With modern research often translations of historical texts get more accurate, and this is the case with some well-known biblical passages. The traditional story of “no room at the inn” is an example of this.

Today’s New International Version of Luke 2:7 reads, “...and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them”.

Did you notice that the passage above read “guest room” instead of the better-known “room at the inn”? The original Greek term is sometimes translated as “guest chamber”, a place in the house specifically used for visiting friends and family.

The same Greek word is used in Luke 22:9-11 when Christ instructs Peter to follow a man carrying a jar of water into a house and to ask the master of the house, “Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?” The room in question was a furnished upper room within this residence. This is a reference to a room reserved for guests

in someone’s home. Normally the Greeks used a different word to denote a commercial inn such as is described in the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:34).

Does this distinction make any difference? Some scholars imply that it does. One is Kenneth E. Bailey, who wrote *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: cultural studies in the Gospel*, published in 2008 by SPCK, UK.

Bailey suggests that this confirms that Joseph and Mary were lodged in the family room of a house. “Simple village homes in Palestine often had but two rooms. One was exclusively for guests” (page 28). The other room was where the family slept. Appended to it, sometimes a few steps lower, might be an area where some family livestock would be kept for the night.

The thought is that, because the guest room was full of other visitors, relatives of Joseph took him and Mary into the main family room or into the adjacent, warm animal quarters where the newborn child was wrapped securely and laid in a manger for comfort. Thus Jesus was welcomed, not rejected.

Note also that Joseph “took Mary home as his wife” (Matthew 1:24) for the census back to his family

residence in Bethlehem. To welcome him and his wife into the house would fit in with the custom of hospitality that would have been common then and that most likely would have been shown towards a member of the ancient Jewish royal household of David. Therefore, when the wise men came to “the house” (Matthew 2:11), it would have been to the same place where Jesus was born.

Of course none of us was physically there (although the whole world was there spiritually), and we don’t know what happened exactly save for the scant biblical records. In my mind the idea above

is appealing. Just like so many children, Jesus was warmly received. He was born into humanity and he was one of us. He took on our humanity not only with all the warts and wrinkles, but also with all the joy and laughter and excitement that surround a newborn child.

God is not some visitor that we keep in a distant hotel or in a separate guest room of our heart’s home. He is in the house, living with us and among us.

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I laughed out loud when I saw this scientific formula for happiness in an article¹ in *Psychology Today*, pictured right.

Though viewing this nonsensical formula brought momentary happiness, it did not bring lasting joy. Don’t misunderstand; I enjoy a good laugh as much as anyone—that’s why I appreciate this statement from Karl Barth: “Laughter is the closest thing to the grace of God.” But though both happiness and joy can bring us to laughter, there’s an important distinction between the

$$\text{Happiness}(t) = w_0 + w_1 \sum_{j=1}^t \gamma^{t-j} CR_j + w_2 \sum_{j=1}^t \gamma^{t-j} EV_j + w_3 \sum_{j=1}^t \gamma^{t-j} RPE_j$$

two—a difference I experienced many years ago when my dad died (we’re pictured together at right). Obviously I was not happy about my dad’s passing, but I was calmed and encouraged by the joy I had knowing he was experiencing a new closeness to God in eternity. The thought of that glorious reality continues to give me joy.

The Biblical writer Paul helps us understand the difference between happiness and joy in his letter to the first century church in Philippi, which he wrote while imprisoned in

Rome. In that letter he used the words *joy*, *rejoice* and *joyful* 16 times. I've visited many jails and prisons and you don't typically find happy people there. Yet Paul found joy while chained in prison, not knowing if he would live or die. Due to his faith in Christ, he was content—through eyes of faith Paul saw his circumstances in an entirely different light than most people would. Note what he wrote:

Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear. (Philippians 1:12-14)

These powerful words came from an inner joy that Paul experienced despite his circumstances. He knew who he was in Christ, and who Christ was in him. He wrote:

I am not saying this because I am in need. I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength. (Philippians 4:11-13)

We can summarize the distinction between happiness and joy in many ways. Here are three:

1. Happiness is temporary—often momentary or the result of short-term contentment. Joy is eternal and spiritual, resulting from knowing who God is and what he has done,

is doing and will yet do.

2. Because happiness is dependent on many factors, it is fleeting and doesn't deepen or mature. Joy matures as we grow in relationship with God and with each other.
3. Happiness comes from temporal external events, observations and actions. Joy lies within you and comes from the work of the Holy Spirit.

Because God created us for fellowship with himself, nothing else can satisfy our souls and bring us lasting joy. Through faith, Jesus lives in us and we in him. Because we no longer live for ourselves, we are able to rejoice in all kinds of circumstances—even suffering (James 1:2), through which we join with Jesus who suffered on our behalf. Despite his great suffering in prison, Paul wrote this: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4).

The joy of eternity enables us to see the miseries of this life as opportunities to receive grace and know and trust

God more deeply. We learn to appreciate the joys of eternity even more after we have struggled with the shackles of sin and the difficulties in this life. We will appreciate glorified bodies even more after we experience the pains of our physical bodies. I believe that is why Karl Barth said this: "Joy is the simplest form of gratitude." We can be grateful that the joy set before Jesus, which enabled him to endure the cross, has also been set before us.

1 "The Happiness Equation," Psychology Today, August 22, 2014, www.psychologytoday.com/blog/neuronarrative/201408/the-happiness-equation.



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GROWING OLD: *Bitter or Better?*

by Lianne Trevarthen

Some old women and men grow bitter with age. *'The more their teeth drop out the more biting they get'*, said the 19th century American satirist George Dennison Prentice.

There is an expectation of bitterness and hopelessness that tends to colour our view of old age, not with bright laughter, sunshine, and hope, but with the grey of despair and regret. While we might think we will never be like that, perhaps each of us needs to ask: what are we doing now to stop us growing bitter with age?

We can prepare for growing older by living our lives now in a fruitful way, growing in wisdom, investing our time in things that matter. Time is short, and wisdom helps us use what little time we have to its fullest.

In ancient Israel there was a king, Solomon, renowned for his wisdom, who wrote:

*You're blessed when you meet Lady Wisdom,
when you make friends with Madame Insight.
She's worth far more than money in the bank;
her friendship is better than a big salary.
Her value exceeds all the trappings of wealth;
nothing you could wish for holds a candle to her.
With one hand she gives long life,
with the other she confers recognition.
Her manner is beautiful,
her life wonderfully complete.*

*She's the very Tree of Life to those who embrace her.
Hold her tight—and be blessed!*
(Proverbs 3:13-18 THE MESSAGE)

Why do we disregard this precious gift of time? Why carry on as if we will never get old, and waste our lives 'living for the moment' and on things that have no lasting value? We reap what we sow, and it is better to avoid the pitfalls which can lead to us bearing sad consequences later in life. Make the best use of your talents while you can, and use them as the lining of your future.

Growing old gracefully is possible!

What does growing old gracefully look like? It is beautiful! The French novelist Victor Hugo, famous for writing *Les Misérables*, said: 'When grace is joined with wrinkles, it is adorable. There is an unspeakable dawn in happy old age'.

Let's put aside regrets, seek forgiveness for things we did or didn't do, accept what can't, or couldn't, be changed, and keep moving forward.



Nineteenth century American poet and novelist, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, wrote: 'To keep the heart unwrinkled, to be hopeful, kindly, cheerful, reverent—that is to triumph over old age'.

Which would you rather be as you grow old? Bitter or better?

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What Are You Sending Out?

BY RICHARD FOWLER



At the moment what I would like to talk to you about is travelling at a speed of approximately 39,000 miles per hour! Not only that but it is the furthest manmade object from earth – some 12 billion miles away! What am I talking about...?

Voyager 1, a spacecraft launched in 1977 to explore Jupiter and Saturn (pictured above).

In this more-than-37-year journey Voyager 1 has passed the Heliosphere (the bubble-like region encompassing the solar system) and has now reached Interstellar Space – the region between stars.

Now, when this colossus of human endeavour was planned someone asked the question: what if it finds intelligent life? Or, the contrary, what if intelligent life finds it? This got NASA thinking. So in anticipation for such a happening someone suggested a bright idea – why don't we load it up with an audio-visual device with messages from and about earth...

The golden-plated record was born!!! (pictured above)

But, of course, this begs the question...exactly what

information do you put on the record to represent earth and its global culture?

Well, after, I'm sure, a few coffee-injected meetings it was settled. It was decided the record would have greetings in over 55 languages, pictures of Earth's life forms, various scientific knowledge, and recordings of pieces of music and earth sounds...I can just picture it, an alien listening to the dulcet tones of waves crashing onto a shore.



This was earth's attempt to send out information from its part of the Milky Way neighbourhood to represent its collective community – us!

But, if we stop for a moment, there is something for us to consider in this astronomical adventure, which is – life is out there!!! In fact, it is all around us! It's there when we step out of the front door, when we drive on the roads, and when we're in our workplaces.

I may have just stated the breathtakingly obvious, but there is a lesson that Voyager 1 illuminates, which I think is worth bringing back to earth! What is that lesson?

It is the fact that, as each of us travels through our

celestial surroundings, we too are giving out an audio-visual representation of our personal world. Through our interactions with those around us, our words and actions tell a story about us. Simply put, whatever we do and say gives out information to be processed by other intelligent beings – humans – and this will define what kind of person people think we are!

So the question is: what are you sending out?

It is amazing that each of us will potentially meet a whopping 80,000 people in our lifetime. That equates to interacting with 3 new people a day. So what information do we give to those 3 people? It is said that we say enough words in one week to fill a book...what kind of books are we writing for those 21 new people? What is our life saying about us?

Surely communicating who and what we are to other intelligent life forms is not rocket science. It certainly does not take a NASA mission into Interstellar space. It just takes 3 things and will not cost you a penny!

First, SMILE! We communicate primarily through the face – it can say a lot about us –let’s not underestimate the power each of us holds in our 43 facial muscles. I’m not suggesting you go around looking like a Cheshire Cat, but cracking an odd smile – which lifts the cheek muscles a little, actually makes you look more attractive, and will have the effect of making others smile and feel better. Try it!

Second, say ‘hello’. Actually, for that matter, just say something – you don’t know the conversations you are missing. Not speaking to people makes us less human. Once I was on a flight back from Denmark. I had sat in my seat and was making myself comfortable. A man – much bigger than I – suggested I was in his seat...I decided not to argue the matter and to move quickly. As I positioned myself in my new seat next to a lady I hoped, secretly, that she would not talk to me. It was a long flight and exiting conversations are always difficult when you are sitting next to someone. And then I heard those words which seem to be vanishing from public discourse, “How are you?”, or words to that effect. My peace had been disrupted, but what I did not anticipate was that for the next two hours I was about to enjoy a conversation with a fascinating lady who shared so many of my passions and hopes.

Third, make room for one act of kindness a day. Before I sat down to write this article, something interesting happened on my weekly food trip to Tesco. I happen to be on crutches at the time after an ankle injury, and as I ‘crutched’ down an aisle in the supermarket a man caught my eye, smiled, and said the heartiest ‘hello, how are you?’ I immediately thought, ‘Oh no! Someone who knows me but I can’t remember who they are’. But as I scanned his face it dawned upon me that I had never met this man! His response to my obvious confusion was simply, “I know what it is like, your world changes.” It was a spontaneous expression of empathy as he too had evidently been acquainted with my metallic arm extensions courtesy of the NHS. It’s amazing how kindness can have an impact; I’m now writing about him and he has no idea.

But before we end...



The list of images that went up with Voyager 1 was a pretty comprehensive collage of human experiences. I think if intelligent life did come across the images they (the aliens) would put earth on their bucket list of places to visit –who would not want to visit such an interesting and beautiful place? But my worry would be whether they would get all that the ‘brochure’ suggested. You see, there were no pictures of what has characterised human history probably more than anything else – war, fighting and division. Perhaps rightly so, the images were a sanitised expression of what earth was and is all about – the best bits.

Hopefully when we communicate to others, we are communicating those best bits. Who knows, maybe something, or someone, is watching?

Speaking of Life:

We Are God's Garden



The other day I visited a friend who was working on his garden. He's trying to get his rose bushes back into fighting shape but he's not having much luck. In fact, he's resorted to using a product called WEED AND FEED designed specifically to help kill the weeds around the plant while at the same time helping nourish the rose bush's ability to grow. And that idea reminded me of this Bible verse –

For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field" 1 Corinthians 3:9 NIV).

I've read other translations that put it like this – "You are God's garden." In the letters to the Colossians and the Ephesians, Paul calls us to be "grounded" in Christ. Now, on the surface, thinking of ourselves as gardens or plants might not be the most flattering way to illustrate our relationship with God. But I started thinking about it differently when I realized that gardens don't grow if they're left alone. They need to be tended. A garden needs a Gardener. And in our case, that Gardener is our Triune God.

You see, the Gardener plants the bushes, flowers and grass where it should be. The Gardener makes sure to give the garden the right amount of sunlight and perfect

amount of water. And it is the Gardener who ends up down his hands and knees pulling out the weeds and making sure that each seed has been properly planted.

And it's the same in our own lives. God, our Father is always eager to provide the nourishment we need so that we can mature into healthy and strong Christians. And just like a garden's plant life reflects the effort of

the Gardener, we reflect and magnify the glory of our gracious and merciful creator God.

My friend is still working on his garden. Maybe the next time I see him, I'll remind him that God will never stop working on all of us – nourishing us and bringing all creation into his presence.

I'm Joseph Tkach,
Speaking of LIFE.



Speaking of Life is now on TV! It is used by UCB (United Christian Broadcasters) in between longer programmes and is aired on UCB on Thursdays and Fridays between 7.15 - 7.30 am and between 1.45 and 2.00pm, on Saturdays between 6.45 and 7.00 am., and on Sundays between 1.45 and 2.00 pm. These timings may vary.

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