

October 13, 2017
(June Letter)

Dear Samantha,

I thought you would enjoy a conversation that Chloe and I had while working together in the playroom last September. She first of all showed me how to make pom-poms. Aunt Elaine had taught her during a recent visit, so Chloe very proudly demonstrated how she could make both big ones and small ones. After a few of those, she turned to a big book of cutouts and we started colouring and cutting out some of the animal figures. The following conversation was part of that exchange.

Bill: There sure are a lot of different bugs and animals in this book! Where do you think all the bugs and animals in the world came from?

Chloe: God made them.

Bill: Did God make the mosquitoes too? I don't like them. Why do you think God made them?

Chloe: It was because those two people ate some fruit. I forget their names.

Bill: Adam and Eve?

Chloe: Ya. They ate the fruit and sin came into the world.

Bill: What's sin?

Chloe: Bad things. If they didn't eat the fruit, then Grand Opa would still be alive.

My head was full of more questions, but our conversation got redirected to her instructions about which colours to use, how she cuts out the figures, and eventually dinner.

I was totally charmed and intrigued by the conversation – and especially the confidence with which she answered my questions. Initially, I thought this was something she picked up from the church across the road since they were getting the kids to memorize bible passages, but the reference to Opa's death made me wonder if she had picked it up from family members or perhaps, put it together herself. It reminded me of the way in which JP would figure out stories about life, creation, and "proper" behavior using bits and pieces from Christian, Jewish, Indigenous, and other stories that we had passed on to him. He certainly seemed to be at ease constructing stories that included a frog bringing mud to build the world on a turtle's back, Jesus, and Raven to make sense of these things.

When Fran and I were discussing how we wished to introduce our kids to religious and mythic versions of these big issues, we decided that instead of limiting them to one version, we would make sure that they heard about multiple interpretations from a wide variety of religions and cultures. This way, they would be better able to make informed decisions about the issues with the knowledge that there are many different ways to explain such phenomenon. We knew that they couldn't get away from the usual Christian stories (since so many of the family members were well connected with the church – including us), but we were concerned that they don't accept these beliefs without thinking about alternatives and developing some ability to separate reasonable from unreasonable accounts.

One of the interesting decisions we faced came when we enrolled JP into the local French school. We decided to do this because most of his friends went there and it was the most convenient one around. Daegan had gone to a school farther away which was run by the Protestant School Board and it operated mostly in English.

Both schools had language classes in the "other" language, but the quality of them was very poor. That was why we searched for, and found, one which allowed the kids to take some subjects in English as a first language and French as a first language (Fine Arts Core Education school in downtown Montréal – FACE). As a result, they ended up taking Mathématique and Histoire in French and Fine Arts and Music in English – but that's another story.

From grade 1 to 5, JP went to the local French school (Les Trois-Soleils). One of the decisions we had to make was whether we would send him to Catechism class or Enseignement Moral. We knew what would be included in Catechism, but we had no idea what they would teach in Enseignement Moral so we sent him to Catechism. It was taught by the local Catholic priest. At the end of the year, JP came home and informed us that he would like to attend First Communion at the church. This is, apparently, a big deal for Catholic families.

We weren't sure what to make of this since we had no idea what the Catholics would think of it, so we went to visit the priest. He asked if JP had been baptized. We told him that his grandfather had baptized him in the United Church. "That's okay, then," the priest responded, "in fact, JP was the best student in Catechism class."



JP was pleased with this news, but added that he wanted Fran to be the person who went down the aisle with him at the event. We never did find out why. He also informed us that he wished to be an altar boy.

I have added a couple of photos from JP's First Communion event in 1983. Actually, though, this was not his first Catholic communion, since he and Daegan had joined in the communion line one of the times we attended church at Cap-St-Ignace. Many years later, when JP was in FACE school, he tried to get us to give him a Bar Mitzvah when most of his friends were getting theirs. I guess he figured that by getting both Protestant and

Catholic recognition, he was set up for Jewish as well. Or, maybe, it was just all the gifts associated with the Bar Mitzvah event.

He acted as an altar boy about once or twice after that First Communion, but lost interest almost immediately.

We found that early Greek and Indigenous stories and myths were some of the most attractive to our kids when they were young – along with the usual “children-ready” bible stories from Christian, Jewish, and Islamic traditions. Instead of being confused (as some of our friends predicted) they seemed to have little problem with the various traditions and, as I indicated, could happily construct their own versions with various pieces from each. I also appreciated the questions they asked.

One of the things I like to think about with these various stories, are the various assumptions or themes that each story conveys by its use. In some ways this may be an important function of the stories in the various cultures, so the implications go far beyond the stories.

The Adam and Eve story, for example, suggests that women were created to be men's “helpers” (Genesis 2:18). As with so much of bible interpretation, one has to be careful with the meaning of the words (like “helper” in the Revised Standard Version) since they were originally in other languages (Hebrew and Greek in this case) – with different historical and cultural contexts and meanings in each. However, the scholars working on these things seem to agree that both the Hebrew and Greek meanings place women in a somewhat subservient role to men. As the story proceeds, we find that Eve is the one who is tempted by a serpent (not the “devil”, note, since the “devil” is never mentioned in the bible – contrary to many peoples' views). Then it is Eve who convinces Adam to eat as well.

According to the story, the fruit is from the tree of knowledge of good and evil – and this knowledge will make them like God (Genesis 3:5). It appears that this is not all knowledge but just of good and evil according to the story.

The first thing Adam and Eve notice is that they are naked (Genesis 3:7). Somehow, the author is telling us, good and evil are about sex (or at least nakedness). This, I find curious, since it is such a limited issue of ethics and morality as far as I am concerned.

I find it amusing (and a bit sad) that when God confronts Adam, his first response is to blame the woman (Genesis 3:12)! In addition, God reprimands him for listening to his wife (Genesis 3:17) and tells him that he will “rule over” women (Genesis 3:16). This sounds like a poor approach to good relations between men and women – but quite understandable since the story was probably written about 2,500 or 2,600 years ago (500 or 600 BC). It was also selected as the “word of God” by a group of rich men about 2,000 years ago (500 AD). No wonder it is used by the misogynists to justify their biases.

From this story, we “learn” that:

- Wanting to know about good and evil is unacceptable to God,
- Disobeying God is unacceptable,
- Men are somehow superior to women and men should “rule over” them,
- Men should be cautious about following women’s advice, and
- The difficulties we face in life are because we are being punished by God for disobeying or wanting to know more.

There are many other stories of creation and the difficulties we face. For example, the story of Pandora in Greek mythology has some of the same elements, but it is more palatable to find that the evil of the world is due to her overactive curiosity – and it doesn’t have the sexist qualities of the bible story. According to Hesiod (an early Greek writer), Pandora was the first woman – created from water and earth (not from a man) by Hephaestus and Athena at Zeus’ command. She was created as punishment for Prometheus’ theft of the god’s sacred fire and his giving it to mortals. She was given a jar by Zeus containing pain, sickness, and death. Her curiosity gets the better of her and when she peeked in the jar, they all (except hope) escape.

In this Greek story, we “learn” that:

- That the gods collectively created the first woman as a punishment for stealing the gift of fire from the gods,
- Pain, suffering, and death are due to the first woman’s curiosity – or perhaps instructions (since it is unclear whether Zeus gave her the jar because he expected her to open it),
- Men find women to be a source of pain, but they can’t live without them.

There are many other stories of this nature – along with various answers to the question of why a good god permits us to suffer evil. In fact, there is a branch of philosophy that tries various ways to answer this question (called Theodicy). I prefer some of the others: like Indigenous stories or Buddhism that accept the difficulties and teach us about the ways to overcome them. Indigenous stories generally teach that it is the animals that teach us how to overcome them (or they do it for us), whereas Buddhism turns to techniques and social practices to do so.

Most of them seem better than the bible version – where an all-powerful god creates a world where innocent people suffer because they are being punished for something that their first parents did thousands of years ago. It is an extreme form of “blaming the victim”! I also find the subordination of women to be annoying and distasteful.

I'm wondering how Chloe will deal with all this stuff once she gets beyond the "repeat what you heard" stage. Hopefully, by that time she will have learned some of the alternative stories about these important questions so that she will be able to make some knowledgeable and imaginative choices. I guess part of my job will be to help out in that regard.

How have you managed?

Love,
Bill