Tower of Babel

By BOB LANE

People who build monuments to themselves soon are unable to communicate with other people. They end up, with a half-finished monument, muttering a different language from everyone else.

This idea emerged from a discussion of the Tower of Babel story with a group of people in the Senior Citizens College in Parksville. In discussing the story, we considered several interpretations. It's a story about how the various natural languages come to be - a kind of pseudo-scientific origin myth. It's also a story about the self-centred disobedience of an edict from God. (Read "reason", "intuition", "inner light", or the word of your choice).

Like most Biblical stories it is very short, symbolic, and taken some thinking to get at the meaning of the story. It is related in a simple narrative form and the images are particular and specific. We see the unified action of a tribe become self-destructive as the act of building the tower to heaven becomes more and more an obsession, a goal to be achieved which will glorify the pride of the people involved.

Finally God (read "reason", "intuition", "inner light", or the word of your choice) gets angry with the silliness of the project and in order to stop the project (no doubt sponsored by a complex bureaucracy) He compounds the language of the group. Soon they cannot complete the project for everyone is speaking a different tongue!

Imagine the confusion! It must have been like city council or a college meeting: everyone speaking a different language! No one could understand anyone else, or at least, one imagines, small groups could communicate (read "scheme", "plot", or the word of your choice) with each other but inter-group communication (read "scheme", "plot", or the word of your choice) would have been impossible.

After a while, one imagines, all those involved in building the tower would have become totally frustrated. Some would try longer than others to be heard through the din, but finally everyone would have to turn away from the tower and turn his or her attention to something else.

Building monuments to oneself is destructive. I believe that is what the Tower of Babel story is about. Of course we can all rest assured, for that all happened very long time ago in a land far, far away.

And besides those Bible stories are either literally true or else just legends. They couldn't be true in any important way.