



COURTESY OF CHRIS HIGHLAND

A cardinal among the spring leaves.

## The heaven I look for now is different from my youth



**CHRIS HIGHLAND**  
HIGHLAND VIEWS

**H**ow many of us enjoyed church youth groups when we were growing up? If you're like me, you spent many hours with other youth in Sunday classes, chapels, camps, concerts and conferences. A very formative time.

We did a lot of singing. Apart from rejoicing in the fellowship of friends and apart from praying and reading the Bible together, singing was the highlight of our gatherings. I learned to strum the guitar in our Presbyterian group, then went on to sing in the church choir and a youth chorus performing in services around town. In college, I sang in our chapel choir. Don't tell anyone, but I even sang at a Billy Graham crusade in a Seattle stadium. I don't think anyone noticed me though. There were 8,000 voices!

At that young age, my brain was saturated with many of those songs. As a result, I still remember a whole lot of the words and even some of the feelings I had while singing them with my friends. We sang,

"I've got a home in gloryland that outshines the sun."

"Mama taught me how to pray before I reached the age of seven / And when I'm down on my knees that's when I'm close to heaven."

"When the shadows appear; and the night draws near; and the day is past and gone; / At the river I stand, guide my feet, hold my hand; take my hand precious Lord lead me home."

"I can't wait to see heaven, and to walk on the streets of pure gold; / I can't wait to check into my mansion, and get my sleeping bag unrolled."

"Heaven is a wonderful place, filled with glory and grace; / I wanna see my Savior's face, heaven is a wonderful place."

From ninth grade to college, we sang these songs. Hundreds of youthful voices singing praises and prayers, joyful and tearful, full of emotion.

Then the countless hymns, gospel songs and folk ballads that stir a higher vision, like "Be Thou My Vision":

"High King of Heaven, my victory won / May I reach Heaven's joys, O bright Heaven's Sun! / Heart of my own heart, whatever befall / Still be my Vision, O Ruler of all."

Notice any pattern here? Any common thread? We were only teens, but we didn't feel at home; we were ready to go, ready to be taken away, up there, up to heaven. We would have done anything to get there. If our young lives were over, fantastic! — Someone who

loved us was calling us Home.

This was the 1970s and "Late, Great Planet Earth" was a bestseller. We were ecstatic to be among the "Jesus People" and our favorite films were "Godspell" and "Jesus Christ Superstar." We fully expected to witness the Second Coming of Christ and be "caught up in glory with Jesus" when he returned — very soon! — to "take us home."

Now, looking back, I can feel the love we felt for each other, for God, and the deep longing to go home to be with God. Very strong; very compelling. And now sad and a little bit frightening.

In the 1800s the great naturalist John Muir ventured into the "cathedrals" and "temples" of the high Sierra mountains and walked straight into paradise. Muir was raised in a strict religious family but found a new, natural religion in the wilderness. He wrote:

"Some of the days I have spent alone in the depths of the wilderness have shown me that immortal life beyond the grave is not essential to perfect happiness." (Journals)

"The forests ... seem kindly familiar, and the lakes and meadows and glad singing streams. I should like to dwell with them forever. ... A new heaven and a new earth every day." (My First Summer in the Sierras)

Describing his mountain temple, Muir listens to the birds and breezes: "the sweetest church music I ever enjoyed." (My First Summer)

That's the heaven I look for now.

Why didn't I hear about John Muir when I young? I loved nature, but there were so many voices insisting that I "look higher" than this "fallen world." Why were so many preachers and evangelists pointing me to "heaven's shores" and "my home up yonder"? How could adults — who should have known better — encourage my friends and me to spend our precious adolescence singing praises to a God who was always "calling us home"? It's a wonder we didn't all drink Kool-Aid or jump off a cliff.

There were some spiritual songs that kept our feet on the earth: "Peace Like a River," "Make Me an Instrument," "Stand By Me" and others.

I wonder, if more people of faith joined in song with secular voices, maybe the world would hear something quite heavenly.

*Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer, free-thinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com.*