

Always time to celebrate the good beyond 'us and them'



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My wife Carol and I enjoyed the "Let it Shine" event at the Unitarian Universalist congregation one recent night. Hundreds of people came together for a "celebration of community light." Though many express fears and frustrations over our nation's leadership choices, there is hope in the air in the season of light.

I'm used to participating in these welcoming events, so it was impressive to see representatives of many groups coming forward to simply light a candle and place it in sand. Flames were glowing to honor a large number of agencies and congregations including the Asheville City Schools Foundation, Building Bridges, Center for Diversity Education, YMCA, the ACLU, the NAACP, Congregation Beth Israel, Cathedral of All Souls and many others. You felt surrounded by good people doing good work on behalf of everyone.

Frank Goldsmith, of Carolina Jews for Justice, read a powerful community statement of solidarity that included these encouraging lines:

"We are truly blessed to live in a community that today strives to welcome and support people of every creed, ethnicity, religion, background,

gender and orientation....

"There are so many organizations and individuals in Asheville that work every day to reach out across barriers, bringing greater understanding into our community... When we look at all of these efforts together, it is easy to see that there is a strong web of resources and profound hope for our shared future."

Far from idealistic, this statement set the tone for speakers from Green Opportunities, Asheville Jewish Community Center, Nuestro Centro, Literacy Council of Buncombe County and Tranzmission. County Commissioner Ellen Frost spoke passionately about the need for strong coalitions and firm actions against hatred and exclusion. She received a standing ovation for the commission's commitment to justice. African-American, Latina, Libyan and English speakers stirred the shoulder-to-shoulder audience with poems in various colorful languages.

This is the kind of thing that can happen when agencies, congregations and civil leaders decide to communicate, cooperate and collaborate. I think it's close to what people mean when they speak of a "healthy community."

As a secular person, I was delighted to see that this event, facilitated by religious folks and held in a religious venue, was not focused on faith but on the concerns and issues we all care about regardless of belief systems. The

operative "belief" is believing in the power of reasonable people to agree on commonalities — what unites rather than divides us.

The statement ended with this energizing invitation: "Today, we are calling upon this entire community to join us in making a choice to shine a light of love in the world; to reject hatred and to seek out ways to quench our own biases with curiosity about those who seem different."

Who would not answer that call?

Events and celebrations like that night are certainly not merely hand-clapping or hand-wringing times for liberals and Progressives. I kept looking around wondering if there were conservatives and Republicans in the crowd. I'd like to think so. And maybe they would be a bit uncomfortable listening to some of the rhetoric. Yet I think it was clear that though most voices were clearly on the left end of the political spectrum, the overall theme of "community light" was not excluding "those and them" at all.

And here's one funny thing: I looked around and thought of seculars too, aware that many of us might feel just the way some conservatives might feel sitting in that crowd. This is the lesson some never learn: to consider the feelings of others; to ask who is being excluded by our words or actions; to look beyond our own voice to the voices who may be missing.

At one point of the program, two Latina women were reading a poem — first in Spanish, then in English. It seemed very long and my attention was slipping, hoping the poem would be over soon. But I had to focus and appreciate the powerful words, realizing these were words from people rarely heard, listened to or valued. When the gentleman rose to read a poem in Arabic I had the same feeling. From the response, it appeared the gathering greatly valued this voice too.

After her many travels around the world, Eleanor Roosevelt once reflected, "I cannot understand or believe that anything that has to be preserved by fear will stand permanently against a system which offers love and trust among peoples and removes fear so that all feel free to think and express their ideas" (Autobiography, 1961).

Eleanor seemed to understand that fear diminishes when we get to know people who are different, and celebrate the good beyond Us and Them.

I saw the seeds of this growing right here in Asheville.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and freethinker. Chris and his wife, Carol, a Presbyterian minister, are new to Asheville, but not new to the issues common in all communities. Learn more at chighland.com.

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