

Does faith have us flying into closed windows?



Highland Views

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Columnist

Two birds flew into our windows this week. One died and is now slowly decomposing before our eyes, returning to the earth. The other, a small woodpecker, was on its back, stunned and panting for an hour or so. Eventually, it turned over, stared in at me, then flew a crooked course back into the trees.

The way my naturalistic mind works, these avian incidents illustrate where religious faith is headed. Either it's flying right into a clear wall and dies, dissolving back into the natural order, or it hits hard, feels stunning pain for a time, slowly regains strength and flies off, having learned a valuable lesson.

What lesson is learned? While we're thinking about that:

I met up with Matthew Hoffman who teaches religious studies at Warren Wilson College. Over some spicy tea we discussed his views of education and the outlook for religion in the next generation.

Matt graduated from Union Theological Seminary in New York City. While in that masters program, he served as a chaplain at New York University and Bellevue Hospital, working with men from Rikers Island. He became deeply interested in Islam, studying at the International Institute of Islamic Thought and traveling to Indonesia (the most populous Muslim nation).

Discussing where religion seems headed, we tried to identify practical pathways forward for faith and for the relation between believers and nonbelievers.

We agreed that a primary step along any trail of progress begins with relationships. For Matt this is natural, since he has friends who are agnostic or atheist. The foundation is friendship, centered in honesty, free expression and respectful discussion leading to open dialogue that requires a learning environment, academic or personal, or simply sharing a meal or tea where each person can speak without judgment.

Matt explained that his interest in Islam is rooted in relationships and dialogue with people of Muslim faith. When I asked if that meant he was "blending" his Christian faith with Islamic beliefs he replied that he didn't see it that way. He appreciates the way Islam "informs" his "progressive" Christian faith — there is a mutual learning, leading to self-reflection and balanced wisdom.

A serious person of faith is unafraid of learning from divergent points of view. Not merely looking at others through windows and screens, it becomes possible to open doors to real people and a more realistic understanding of our world. Obviously this is not just an academic exercise for the classroom.

As a Lutheran, Matt is pushing to the edges of his community, active in two local Lutheran congregations while a candidate for ordained ministry. Once he completes that process, he will join his partner Samantha, a Presbyterian minister, as ordained clergy.

Some of the students Matt instructs at Warren Wilson identify with earth-based traditions (the college has a popular environmental component) or as atheist/agnostic, bringing a fresh crop of questions about the relevance of religion in their lives.

Matt will be offering a course in interfaith leadership, a particular interest for Matt given his past association with the Interfaith Youth Core (which includes secular youth). Students will have the opportunity to explore what interrelationships between traditions look like and then bring those crossfertilizing principles into their major field.

In the spring, Matt will teach a new course at Swannanoa Correctional Facility. This "inside/outside" class will consist of eight Warren Wilson students and eight "insiders" (women inmates) exploring religion in an environment guaranteed to generate provocative discussions.

Matt agrees that the faithful need to do more than defend against secularism. Believers and nonbelievers need to practice a positive, cooperative approach in a creative framework that includes rather than excludes, invites rather than posts warning signs: "do not disturb" or "no trespassing."

"We believe the world needs curiosity" states the Warren Wilson website. "Diversity of thought" is valued, as one story from the college reveals:

"[A student named Michael] serves on the Executive Board of our College Democrats Club and, recognizing the need for diversity of thought, he partnered with Republican students to become one of the founding members of the College Republicans Club. [He] helped get the College Republicans off the ground, and his willingness to not only engage, but support, a different viewpoint has added richness to our campus dialogue."

Can we think of a better example of that "creative framework" to clear the way forward — to swing open the windows — in religion, politics or any other arena? The next generation is already leading.

As we "encounter" the windows that separate, we are stunned, compelled to look through, beyond to what might happen when we risk relationships with the "other side" — those "out there." It's an exciting time to be in education.

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