

Religious awe can be felt without religion



Highland Views
Chris Highland
Columnist

Religious experience can be very emotional. That's not a surprising statement to make. Some of us grew up around "fellowships" where there was a lot of emotion. Even in college, where weekly chapel services were required, we would sing, pray or hear inspiring speakers, and deep feelings were stirred.

Once, I was sitting in chapel next to a classmate; as we sang an old hymn, I turned to see tears streaming down her face. She looked at me, I smiled and squeezed her hand.

Those of us who made a conscious, rational choice to leave faith often remember how faith felt. In many ways, faith "was" feeling. We knew we were "moved" by the Spirit when we "got emotional" in the "presence of God." At times, services would have a mix of highly emotional singing, praying and even shouting. Other times, we would sit or stand silently feeling that Prescence.

Religious experience can also be calm and content, centered in a sense of peaceful connection.

A woman in her 80s left a comment on my blog asking if I would write some-

thing about her experience of faith.

"Maybe you could write about people like me who love the emotional part of religion. I am basically agnostic because from experience I've learned we don't know what else there is."

She describes going to church just to hear some of the songs.

"I don't believe them, but they touch a part of childhood memories ... humanism leaves out that stuff unless you are into nature or an artist ... humanism and freethinkers are into their heads."

An honest statement worthy of thought and response, followed by: "I find I am a little lost in my beliefs."

How refreshing to hear these gentle, heartfelt comments.

In the definition presented by the American Humanist Association, a humanist is a person "guided by reason, inspired by compassion, and informed by experience — [seeking] to live a life well and fully ... [animating] our lives with a deep sense of purpose, finding wonder and awe in the joys and beauties of human existence, its challenges and tragedies."

It seems that emotion can indeed be integral to humanistic practice.

Naturalist John Burroughs' felt that human life is not truly complete without religion, understood as "an emotional experience ... a feeling of awe and reverence."

Robert Green Ingersoll, known as "The Great Agnostic," was very heady, yet he was a person with depth of feeling. In "Why I Am an Agnostic," he wrote of how he felt when he outgrew the faith of his childhood:

"There entered into my brain, my soul, the sense, the feeling, the joy of freedom ... I was free — free to think, to express my thoughts — free to live to my own ideal — free to live for myself and those I loved — free to use all my faculties, all my senses ... We can be as honest as we are ignorant. If we are, when asked what is beyond the horizon of the known, we must say that we do not know ... We can fill our lives with generous deeds, with loving words, with art and song, and all the ecstasies of love. We can flood our years with sunshine — with the divine climate of kindness, and we can drain to the last drop the golden cup of joy."

That's a free mind with freedom to feel.

Yet with all these definitions and explanations of religion, we can easily miss the salient observation the good reader brings to our attention: If we're "in our heads" too much, we may overlook the comfort of at least some of the words, songs, images of our past.

My wife can tell you, even I walk around the house singing some old hymn now and then.

Reflecting on the reader's comment (confession?) about being "lost in beliefs," I think — I feel — a sensitive listener will pause and contemplate. Aren't we all, to some extent, "lost in our beliefs"?

Isn't it true to say it would do us good to be so honest to confess "we don't know what else there is"? In other words, maybe we could all admit we are agnostics — we don't know and shouldn't pretend that we do.

This is freethinking at its most sensible and sensitive. This is humanism at its most practical — when philosophy and religion melt into "just being a thinking, and feeling, human being."

That's the joy of freedom — to think, to feel — freedom to sing an old hymn if we feel like it, though we don't believe a word it says. Even to attend a service, though many words seem empty. Even a little lost in our beliefs — or our unbeliefs — it's a lostness to share and to feel together.

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