

Never too late to mend broken bridges



Highland Views

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Columnist

When I moved to an island in my native Washington State, I had a desire to reconnect with old friends and family I hadn't seen in years. Phoning my aunt Ann, who lived in a small rural home, I could tell she was surprised to hear from me. It was embarrassing to admit how many years had gone by, but I told her I would like to come visit.

There was a moment of hesitation in her voice. "Well," she said, "you know, we're not religious people and don't go to church."

It was my turn to hesitate before assuring her, "I don't always go to church myself and don't consider myself religious."

Aunt Ann was delighted, "Come on up! We'd love to see you!"

When I did go to see her, we had a wonderful talk. As I got up to leave, she looked me in the eye and made it crystal clear that I never had to call first before a visit. "Just come on by!" That was the kind of hospitality in their country blood. I've rarely felt that in my life, even from family.

I thought a lot about what aunt Ann said to me on the phone that day. I guess she was concerned I was going to preach to her or something. She knew through the family gossip line that I had studied religion in school, went on to seminary and became a minister. That's really all she knew about my life over the years.

It came as a relief to her that I merely wanted to see her after such a long time. We were family, and that's all that mattered. There was no hidden intent.

How many of our misunderstandings come through miscommunications or lack of communication? It may seem obvious, but maybe we should look closer since this is a major obstacle standing in the way of harmony in human relationships.



This broken bridge was under repair at the Botanical Gardens of Asheville. CHRIS HIGHLAND/COLUMNIST

"There is nothing better than to know that you don't know." This teaching from ancient Chinese philosophy is appropriate for our information-overloaded times. The wisdom continues with a warning: "Not knowing, yet thinking you know — this is sickness" (Tao Te Ching). Consider how much data is flowing over the internet while there seems to be an increase in ignorance and isolation. Our heads can be jammed with info-bits, but is there understanding or true communication?

As the ancients remind us, we don't know as much as we think we know. Have we forgotten the wisdom of the centuries? Maybe we need to exit the wireless superhighways once in a while to explore — or repair — the back roads and bridges of human knowledge.

As the director of a county emergency shelter for a few seasons it was an important part of my job to communicate with the street community, the county, congregations and volunteers. This was made a little easier since many already knew me from my years as a chaplain. Yet my role had changed and I literally had changed hats. There were certain similarities in the

positions of chaplain and director and, with a little clarification, I continued to have good contact and communications with the religious community.

How many of the problems in our communities are due to basic communication issues?

I recently attended a luncheon at the First Baptist Church of Asheville, where we heard a presentation by the NC Council of Churches (NCCC). There were people in the room, like myself, who are not religious (or not theists), but we all applauded the good work of this council, which includes members from over 6,000 congregations and organizations in North Carolina. It was impressive to hear of their educational and collaborative programs.

One religious leader at the luncheon asked the director of the NCCC how they were seeking to "expand the circle" and reach out to congregations who "don't always see their mission related to justice issues." The director responded they are trying to connect, willing to meet with faith leaders across the spectrum in order to fulfill the vision and mission. As their website states, their mission is:

"[To enable] denominations, congregations, and people of faith to impact our state on issues such as economic justice and development, human well-being, equality, compassion and peace, following the example and mission of Jesus Christ."

After the presentation, speaking with a humanist leader, we were expressing support for the valuable work of the NCCC while lamenting the mission that appears to exclude secular folks like us. Talking with the organizers it was clear they welcome nonbelievers while focusing specifically on believers.

Some of us understand that, and it isn't a huge obstacle. On the other hand, Aunt Ann might not feel she could drop by for a visit.

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