Natural goodness to trust. CHRIS HIGHLAND/COLUMNIST

Trusting the power of goodness

Highland Views
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Columnist

In a conversation over Zoom, my friend Charles, an Episcopal priest, asked why I don't seem to define "faith" in my writings. He said I do a good job explaining "secular" and "freethinking," but he wanted to hear what I would say about "faith."

Since I write so much about religion and faith I don't usually try to nail it down, no doubt because I have doubts there are firm definitions in these matters.

Charles offered one use of the word. He said, "I have faith you are a good person." That use of the word is quite different, so we agreed to continue the conversation.

Reflecting on his comment, I might respond: "So, you take it by faith that I'm a good person? Or you see my life, you've come to know me and then you make an informed decision, coming to the conclusion, through observation, that I'm a decent guy?"

I appreciate that, but suspect that's not what most people mean when they use the word faith.

Charles presented further elucidation by email. I smiled at the opening of his first statement:

"I believe faith at its heart has much less to do with a particular set of beliefs, than with a foundational trust that something is reliable."

He grew up thinking that faith and belief were attached to a particular religion. His thinking changed over the years as his questions increased and "the church didn't seem to welcome my questions." He felt that he lost his faith and stopped attending church.

"After I left the church, and to this day, the natural world and art, especially poetry, filled the yearning space within me." He felt a "reassuring sense that I was part of something much bigger than myself." This enticed him "to grow toward ... goodness and active love."

He eventually returned to church, partly due to a desire for his family to experience "the deepest values that guided my life." He went on to ordination when he realized his "questions could be an asset for ministry."

His next line was revealing: "I've had faith in questions ever since."

Charles became the founding executive director of the United Religions Initiative, a remarkable international, interfaith organization formed in 2000. While building relationships across borders around the world he discovered that "at our heart we shared a faith in the fundamental goodness of human beings, a faith that the power of love was ultimately sovereign and a faith that if we connected with each other and acted in the world [representing goodness and love] the world would be a more peaceful and just place."

Though I usually don't use the word faith in the same way Charles does, I'm right with him on the way to "live faithfully" in the sense he describes.

There are a number of ways to define faith.

The Latin "fides" can mean "complete trust or confidence in someone or something" or "strong belief in God or in the doctrines of a religion, based on spiritual apprehension rather than proof." It also can refer to "a system of religious belief" or "a strongly held belief or theory."

Many folks say they "have faith," as if it can be tucked in your pocket. Others say they are "people of faith" or members of particular religious "faiths." Others argue that faith is not belief, though they are closely related. A faithful individual has a set of beliefs but might say they "trust in God," which is how they practice their faith within a certain "faith tradition."

There are those who say nonbelievers are actually not faith-less but "have faith" in science or reason or the fact that the sun will rise in the morning. I don't see it that way. To me that's not faith but reasonable conclusions drawn from experiential evidence.

I'm confident (another trust word) that Charles and others like him in religious communities, who understand faith in this broader, creative and inclusive sense, can be open to walking and working side by side with freethinkers and nonbelievers.

When the living foundation is trust, and trust grows straight out of relationships, then creeds, theologies, churches, religions and beliefs don't need to divide us.

In Charles' words, "for me, faith has long ceased to be about believing [in beliefs] ... faith is a deep and abiding trust in what I have perceived to be the sovereign power of love and goodness."

Does this still leave serious questions about faith in our world? Sure it does. But we sense a clearer pathway ahead. Whether we think trust in God is necessary or not, we can choose to trust one another, be confident in our best intentions and trust the questions to be assets on the way forward.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many 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. His new book, "A Freethinker's Gospel," is available from Pisgah Press.