

Treasure closer than we think



Highland Views

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Columnist

When my daughter was young we would read bedtime stories. Nothing unusual about that. But when your father is a minister and interfaith chaplain, you might have to read a few of those "God Stories" now and then. It's not all bunnies, bears and ballerinas.

One storybook we used to read together was called "The Treasure," based on a Hasidic Jewish tale (see Martin Buber, "Tales of the Hasidim").

It goes something like this: Rabbi Bunam told a story ...

Rabbi Isaac lived many years in great poverty. He had a dream that told him he should journey from Krakow to Prague and search for a treasure under the bridge leading into the palace. After the dream returned three times, Isaac set out for Prague.

He found the bridge guarded day and night, so he was afraid to dig under it. He went back to the bridge every morning and walked around it until evening. Finally the captain of the guard asked whether he was looking for someone or something. Isaac told him the dream he had in the faraway country.

The captain broke out in laughter. "You wore out your shoes to come here! If I had that dream, it would have said I should go to Krakow and dig for a treasure under the stove of a poor man named Isaac!" He couldn't stop laughing.

Isaac bowed to the captain, turned and made the long journey home, dug up the treasure under his own stove and built a school on the spot.

"Take this story to heart," Rabbi Bunam said. "There is something you cannot find anywhere in the world, even in the holy places, but there is, nevertheless, a place where you can find it."

Like a good parable, this tale leaves you pondering, wondering and maybe ready for bedtime and dreamtime.

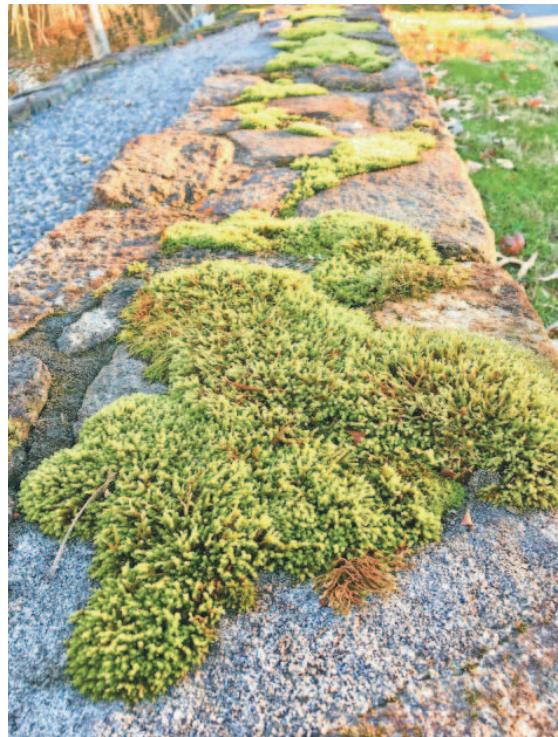
Isaac was poor, living in a tiny hut with a small stove to cook on and keep him warm. He dreamed of a treasure, but what did he imagine? A treasure could be a fortune, like winning the lottery, or a key to a new house in the city, or it could be a book of tales to inspire and guide his life.

Isaac was skeptical but finally decided these dreams might be worth exploring. He made the journey, probably thinking he must be crazy. Afraid to dig under the bridge he just kept walking around, uncertain what to do.

Then the palace guard questions him and laughs at the reply. In his amusement he awakens a wonderful idea in the seeker. If he goes back home, to his familiar poverty, he might find what he's looking for right where it's always been, near at hand.

I've always enjoyed this story. It's reminded me many times in life that good things, good gifts, treasures great and small, may be closer than I think. When unsure of where to "dig" for valuable insights and ideas or new paths or connections, I often find I don't need to look very far. I've simply overlooked the most needful things right in front of me.

Some people of faith might be puzzled by Isaac's story. He didn't ask for divine guidance and it doesn't



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say the dream came from an angel. If it was the voice of God, why would he be sent on a difficult journey just to be laughed at and sent home? Why would God hide a treasure under a stove? If the whole point was to build a school, why not just drop a bag of gold at the front door?

We could consider a more secular interpretation: The "treasure" is one's reason, one's integrity or humanity. There is no specific place or special person where this can be found. We may travel far and search for years, but each person can find the "treasure" near at hand, hidden or buried within one's own mind, one's own "heart."

The clue may be in Rabbi Bunam's conclusion: "There is something you cannot find anywhere in the world, even in the holy places, but there is, nevertheless, a place where you can find it."

There is something. We may be searching though not even aware we are looking. Is it a person, a face, a location, a place? Is the Rabbi talking about a "spiritual truth"? If so, he says we won't find that "even in the holy places." How can that be? Most of us have been taught that sacred places are addresses for awe or worship.

Yet "there is a place." And there we can find a "treasure."

This season presents a good opportunity to search near at hand. Tales of dreams and journeys may be more than bedtime stories for children. Though they can be precious as well.

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.