

Highland

Continued from Page 2D

ACLU and President Kennedy's Commission on the Status of Women, Murray was a co-founder of the National Organization for Women in 1966.

Because she was orphaned at an early age, her aunt Pauline, a schoolteacher in Durham, raised her and remained a deep and abiding influence. Confronting endless obstacles due to her ethnicity and/or her gender (one writer believes Murray exhibited transgender traits) Pauli found courage in her aunt, who modeled an unquenchable inner resolve.

I especially appreciate that Murray never hid her doubts and faults. Her struggles along each step of the way are always apparent.

Becoming an Episcopal priest in the last 10 years of her life only continued her decades as a freethinker. Her faith was a further motivator in her practice of justice and nonviolence, inspired in part by Gandhi, with a tough persistence that never let up.



Pauli Murray COURTESY OF
PAULI MURRAY CENTER

Her feelings toward the church were always mixed. Not only had she experienced firsthand how segregated the church could be, but later in life, as she considered joining the priesthood, it was painfully, aggravatingly apparent that the Episcopal church she loved remained closed to the full participation of women.

"My feelings toward the church were ambivalent," she wrote. "I could neither stay away entirely nor enter wholeheartedly into Christian community."

In her most powerful poem, "Dark Testament," Murray wrote: "Hope is a crushed stalk, / Between clenched fingers / Hope is a bird's wing, / Broken by a stone ..." And: "Hope is a song in a weary throat." Then: "Give me a song of hope / And a world where I can sing it."

Through a lifetime of struggle, Pauli Murray somehow found the song, the voice and the hope. The preamble she placed in her poetry collection shines a light on her hopefulness:

"Friends and countrymen! I speak for my race and my people — / The human race and just people."

This inclusive, universal view is evident up to the end. Her autobiography concludes with the heart of her sense of ministry, where there is no north or south, black or white, male or female, "only the spirit of love and reconciliation drawing us all toward the goal of human wholeness."

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. Chris will be teaching a course through the Great Smokies Writing Program this spring.