

Books

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books of all were tomes and treatises on theology. Some think that filling the world with words about God is helpful. Those books bent or broke my bookshelves, and maybe my brain and some beliefs, too.

As a multi-faith chaplain in jails and shelters I read mystics from a variety of traditions. Their stories were great discussion starters for the groups I facilitated and classes I taught. The wise words of Rumi, Meister Eckhart, Hildegard of Bingen, Celtic, Hindu, Buddhist and Jewish “saints” provided endless inspiration laced with humor.

If you could have a talk with anyone in history, whom would you choose? Would it be a great writer, poet, painter, pioneer or political leader from the past? Maybe Caesar, Cicero or the Stoic emperor, Marcus Aurelius? A philosopher like Aristotle, Plato, Socrates or Hypatia of Alexandria? A scientist such as Copernicus, Galileo or Newton? Would you choose a religious figure like Confucius, Buddha or Muhammad (someone not as familiar as Moses, Jesus or Paul).

Maybe you’d choose one of the neglected or ignored women of history who no doubt had great influence on the lives of the men we remember? Perhaps one of your own ancestors is coaxing you to climb down to the roots of your family tree.

As we know, Thomas Jefferson had a large library. Being a man of the Enlightenment he was well-read and widely-read. He especially loved to immerse himself in great thinkers from Greece and Rome. As Karl Lehmann writes (“Thomas Jefferson: American Humanist”):

“A long conversation with the ancients continued for more than seventy years [of Jefferson’s life]. . . . Although reading the ancients led to grim and realistic reflections, it was, at the same time, a source of strength and delight.” When he tired of building a new nation, Jefferson retreated deeper into his library. “The



Jefferson's library at Monticello had more than 6,000 books. CHRIS HIGHLAND/SPECIAL TO ASHEVILLE CITIZEN TIMES

true and great fruits of reason and imagination in works of science and art were ever-encouraging sources of strength.” For the Monticello man, “The study of the ancient world in itself was such a science. But it included, too, the great experience of works of art. Reason and imagination were equally strengthened by conversation with the ancients.”

Jefferson’s intellectual interest offers some keys to our own “conversations” with the past. If Lehmann is correct, that our third president was “the most universal as a human being” of all his contemporaries, maybe that universal worldview can help us take a walk with voices we choose from history.

Imagine if you could speak with Moses. Would you ask the mountain-climber from Egypt what it was like to saunter up Sinai? Maybe you’d want to know if the Voice in the burning tree sounded like the wind. Would you ask Buddha why religion seems so noisy? If you

could speak with Jesus of Nazareth would you want to know what happened to his dad, Joseph, and his brothers and sisters (Matthew 13), why he never wrote anything and what he thinks about people who don’t believe he was God? How would he feel about the millions of squabbling sectarians who use his name?

In the tradition of the two Toms – Jefferson and Paine – my insatiable curiosity leads me to have long conversations with the ancients. Yet, I’m often drawn back to the books on the bottom shelf. The voices that are overlooked and rarely heard.

Then again, not every great idea gets printed in a book.

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.