

Candles, cranes and light in dark places



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

One cold and rainy December evening I lugged my guitar and songbooks into the county jail for my weekly “interfaith service” with inmates. First, the men’s unit, then “max” (maximum security), then the women’s side. As the chaplain, many people expected I would be telling the Christmas Story that night. They were in for a surprise.

As you can imagine, the holidays are the hardest time of year for people inside. Separated from family and freedom, there is little to brighten the season. No decorations are allowed in a place where boring drabness and blaring televisions are part of the punishment (even when many have not yet been convicted of a crime).

“Merry Christmas!” or “Happy Holidays!” aren’t the best greetings for an incarcerated person. You can’t be too merry or cheerful when locked up. The faces of jail staff show the strain as well. You learn sensitive respect for a spectrum of emotions when you’re among people locked away in the shadows of our justice system. A chaplain practices a listening presence more than praying or preaching.

Over the December holidays I usually led songs of the season including traditional Christmas and Hanukkah music. Not everyone was in the holiday mood, so I would throw in some folk songs or old spirituals. We welcomed a wonderful mix of humanity in those gatherings: Black, White, Asian, Latino, Native American; Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Pagan, Atheist and None of the Above. The diversity helped brighten up a very dull concrete and steel room that seemed a long way from the “free world.” This was an eye-opening, heart-opening education for me as a chaplain along with guests I would bring inside including Jewish rabbis, Buddhist priests, Muslim imams and other Christian clergy.

In lively discussions of historic traditions, deeply personal stories were shared. An inmate lit colorful candles on a menorah centered in a fresh wreath placed on a muslim prayer rug. Prisoners moved in close around the warmth, breathing the scent of greenery. Black, brown and white hands joined in a circle of silence, staring into the light.

This particular December I carried in sheets of brightly colored paper, much of it textured like wrapping paper. I laid the squares of origami out on the cold steel tables while telling the Japanese story of the “Peace Crane,” slowly folding a graceful bird with long neck, legs and wings.

The story of the little girl and the crane is simple and profound. As told by Japan Times (Aug. 1, 2018), “Sadako



Birds fly free in winter COURTESY OF CHRIS HIGHLAND

ko Sasaki, the now-famous little girl who developed acute leukemia 10 years after being exposed to radiation during the atomic bombing of Hiroshima [was] inspired by the age-old Japanese belief that anyone who makes 1,000 origami cranes will see their wish come true. Sadako spent her last days folding paper cranes on her hospital bed in the hope she would recover.” After her death in 1955, her story “sparked a children’s peace movement … that swept through Japan and transformed the origami crane into an international symbol of peace. The Children’s Peace Monument in the center of Hiroshima’s Peace Memorial Park … celebrated its 60th anniversary (in 2018).”

I sensed this story would inspire those who weren’t feeling much “peace on earth” or goodwill behind bars. Each one was silently attentive to my words and hands. The story of the suffering of an innocent child and the hope of healing and freedom touched everyone. The women were especially eager to start folding. I left an assortment of colors.

Later that week, I walked down the hallway onto the women’s side and called out the usual “Man on Line!” to alert them of a male presence. Someone shouted, “Chaplain Chris is here!” Then as I rounded the corner I

was greeted with a joyful surprise – the best gift I could have received: all along the steel bars of the cellblock, row after row of origami cranes. All the colors displayed where no color was allowed. The women were smiling and laughing, delighted to show me what they had made. Some had carefully laced string from their jail-issue blankets through the birds to hang miniature mobiles on the bars, like ornaments gently turning in the air.

I brought the paper, taught them how to fold it, told the story. Yet, it was the women who brought the brightness into their dark and depressing space. They had nothing but time and they used it for creativity in a very uncreative environment.

I’ll never forget that season. In some ways I think that experience with the origami paper became a symbol of my chaplaincy and perhaps my life. An image of peacemaking, bird by bird – a gesture of hope folded into my memory.

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.