

Is faith another name for whatever works?



Highland Views
Chris Highland
Guest columnist

She came into my office at a local church with a gift. I opened my hand and she dropped a small stone, a crystal. Holding it up and turning it, the light caught the beauty of colors reflecting off the smooth facets. Thanking her, I placed the stone on the makeshift "altar" on the desk among a collection of objects, images and icons representing a spectrum of "spiritual" traditions. Each one, like their giver, a story in themselves.

I have friends, family, colleagues, some of whom believe in praying to one god or another, others who have very personalized practices. I sometimes kid about their "magical thinking" but I care about these

people and respect their choices. We don't have to agree, but it's in my nature to find light, or make light.

In the present day, we are presented with a potluck, a smorgasbord, a table spread before us with something for everyone's personal taste. We're offered a feast of faith and, depending on what pleases our palate, we can choose to chew or swallow whatever we like.

Living half my life in the San Francisco Bay area, I saw just how big and chaotic the table can be. I bumped into people who believed whole-heartedly in their guru, in their newly invented religious practice, and in just about anything you can think of including the guidance of "spirits," astrology, energy chakras, chanting, psychic reading, intuitive counseling, "healing" foods and drinks, and many "alternative" cures. Crowds of people who rejected "traditional" religious beliefs and practices seemed to exchange old forms of religiosity (and credulity) for new forms of religiosity.

Religion transformed into the salad bar of spirituality which included almost anything. Even "transformation" became a kind of belief all its own. And each and every one of these chosen paths had the potential to transform into its own brand of orthodoxy.

Does this sound too harsh, cynical, even disrespectful? I'm aware that pushback can be uncomfortable, even threatening to some believers. Holding up a mirror can seem like an attack to some folks. Yet, when it comes to respect, something I value quite highly, it isn't something I automatically give without question. I've never "expected respect" for my views just because I express them. No one has to respect my beliefs at face value. I should be willing to consider questions and challenges to what I believe, or don't believe.

I wonder sometimes if religions, faiths, spiritualities essentially boil down to "whatever works for you."

See FAITH. Page 2D