

Developing an ability to learn from disability



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

Living in the mountains can provide a "higher" perspective at times. Not necessarily a better or loftier view, but perhaps a way to think more clearly while breathing fresh air. I'd like to think my mind is clearer when my sight is clearer. Having a "mountain mind" can mean a broader and more elevated viewpoint.

Standing outside under the trees one afternoon, clouds were forming over my head as thoughts were formulating; a face came to mind, then other faces. Vivid images from years past entered, like hikers on a mountain trail emerging from the mist.

One of my earliest teaching experiences was working as an instructor in a private residential school for adults with developmental disabilities. Starting out as a "counselor," I was really more of an activities coordinator. Oddly enough, though I was a Protestant seminary student, one of the activities was walking a group of residents to a Catholic Mass each Sunday (this ecumenical experience helped prepare me for future interfaith work).

When I was promoted to instructor.

time in the classroom was supplemented with driving my class to parks, beaches, the zoo, museums, concerts, movies and other off-campus educational opportunities. I didn't always know what I was expected to teach, so I designed my own curriculum based on what I perceived each student needed.

Supervisors and administrators were primarily interested in "progress." Keeping "charts" and filing "progress reports" was part of an instructor's responsibility. Every few months we would meet with a supervisor to go over the "goals" each student should achieve. Terry will learn to distinguish a nickel from a quarter when he buys a soda at the mini-mart. Jenny will look people in the eye when she talks. Alice will practice writing the alphabet. Mary will change her blouse every day and clean her glasses by herself.

Most of us learn these basic tasks in our childhood. Many in my class were quite childlike and still learning elementary lessons as older adults.

Teaching "special education" takes patience and compassion, but it also calls for another way of viewing people in general and people with disabilities. I had to learn during those six years as an instructor that I could perhaps learn as much about life, and about myself, from my students as they learned from me. How "able" was I to face my own limitations?

That was never in the lesson plan. I couldn't chart my own special educational development too well. Yet, I think I made some progress, because I was learning day by day that "improving" another person by changing their behavior was not a wise goal, at the school or in the school of Life.

John and Jean were two of my classroom assistants. They were both limited intellectually in some ways though you couldn't tell by looking at them. And they helped teach me that we all have limitations, we each lack abilities. We were tasked with assisting students to learn skills to potentially function (blend in?) with the wider community. In fact, our program was named Community Living Skills.

My education came from people like Stan, an elderly Jewish gentleman with impaired vision, from Jackie, an elderly lady with limited physical movement, from Ruth, a young woman with Down syndrome and a contagious giggle, and from Mike, a big guy who lived in one of our group homes. Each person became my instructor as I was slowly learning how our society ignores their valuable contributions, teaching how important it is to slow down, to be aware of obstacles that confront the most vulnerable, to address our own impairments that tempt us to hide those individuals we don't want to see.

Several times a month I would take

my class to the Big World Outside—the forest, the mountain, the beach. Students looked forward to these days as I did too. Sometimes my young daughter would come along. We would share a picnic and take walks where my "lesson plan" could be as simple as asking Linda to stop and listen to the birds, songs, nudging Tom to be quiet and look up at the trees or leading Kelly over to the stream to show him he didn't need to fear, he could put his hand in the cold water to feel refreshed. This was the open-air classroom where everyone was a student.

What does this story, that comes from the clouds in my mountain mind, have to do with religious faith or a humanist practice? How we respond to this question reveals something about our abilities as well as our disabilities.

There is more to say, more stories to tell. But I think of my student, George, who couldn't speak, but taught me more than I taught him.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrating Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com. Chris' new book, "Broken Bridges: Building Community in a World Divided by Beliefs," is now available on Amazon.