

William James' lesson from Western North Carolina



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

One of the great minds I encountered in college was William James (1842-1910), the famous professor of psychology and philosophy at Harvard. Born in New York City, his oldest brother was the writer Henry James, Jr. and his godfather was Ralph Waldo Emerson.

James is well-known for his book, "The Varieties of Religious Experience" (1902), based on lectures he delivered in Edinburgh, Scotland. This was an influential book for me in university and seminary as I began to understand faith not only as personal experience deeply related to psychology, but as a very diverse human experience worldwide. This helped me to discov-

er that my Christian faith was one of a variety of faiths and that an experience of God could be quite different even among other Christians.

Confidence in the absolute truth of my own beliefs was shaken by William James' pragmatic understanding of truth. Truth has "cash value" – you can take it to the bank – it "works" in the real world.

In "The Meaning of Truth" (1909) James asks:

"What concrete difference will [an idea or belief] being true make in any one's actual life? What experiences [may] be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? How will the truth be realized? What, in short, is the truth's cash-value in experiential terms?" The response is clearly stated:

"True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those that we cannot. That is the practical difference it makes to us to have true ideas; that therefore is the meaning of truth, for it is all that truth is known as."

A sensible, yet radical statement.

In his book, "Talks to Teachers," James relates the

story of a journey he took through the mountains of North Carolina. He describes it in these words:

"I passed by a large number of 'coves,' as they call them there, or heads of small valleys between the hills, which had been newly cleared and planted." James was disturbed by the living conditions of the settlers and the apparent "havoc" on the environment caused by the inhabitants, stumps littering the landscape. "The forest had been destroyed; and what had 'improved' it out of existence was hideous." He could not see "a single element of artificial grace to make up for the loss of Nature's beauty."

As he traveled through the hills he couldn't comprehend how anyone survived in such poverty. He asked a mountaineer to explain. "We ain't happy here unless we are getting one of those coves under cultivation." James realized his mistake. He only saw the stumps, the clearing of the forest, while the settlers saw the success for all their hard work in creating their home

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with “honest sweat, persistent toil and final reward.”

The altered perceptions in this story offer insights on faith and the invitation to think a little harder, beyond our own coves of consciousness.

While reading James in philosophy and religion courses, his approach to truth made a powerful impact. As he learned on the journey through the high country of North Carolina, we can never say that people who live or think differently than we do live meaningless lives. We need to “tolerate and respect” those who are “happy in their own ways” because, “neither the whole of truth nor the whole of good is revealed to any single observer.” This leads him to conclude that we should “make the most of our own blessings, without presuming to regulate the rest of the vast field.”

I started out by saying that William James was one of the significant minds I encountered in undergraduate studies. Upon reflection, this hints at what was eventually to guide me into pragmatic chaplaincy and other nonprofit service where I discovered religious faith no longer worked for me, it had no more “cash-value” in my life.

Listening to more ideas from a chorus of other minds helped me move forward, first toward a more honest and balanced faith perspective centered on the pragmatic, and then toward a non-theistic worldview. It was only a small, almost gentle, step across the gap to conclude for myself: there is no God because there is no God big enough. The only adequate replacement seemed to be the natural universe – Nature – but not a universe with a human face.

The wisdom gained from people like James that I not insist on my own way. “Truth” can’t simplistically mean “my own truth.” It no longer “worked” for me to believe, but I see that for many others, faith still seems to work for them.

Like the people in the coves and hollers, we are all “settlers” tending or clearing our land – and sometimes even stumps can have beauty.

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