

Young Sheldon: The atheist goes to church



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

In an episode of "Young Sheldon" (one of our favorite shows) Sheldon is eating dinner with his family when his mother asks who will be going to church with her on Sunday. Everyone has an excuse but Sheldon. "I'll go," he says with some enthusiasm. His sister Missy looks skeptical. "You don't even believe in God." With a thoughtful expression he responds: "No. But I believe in mom."

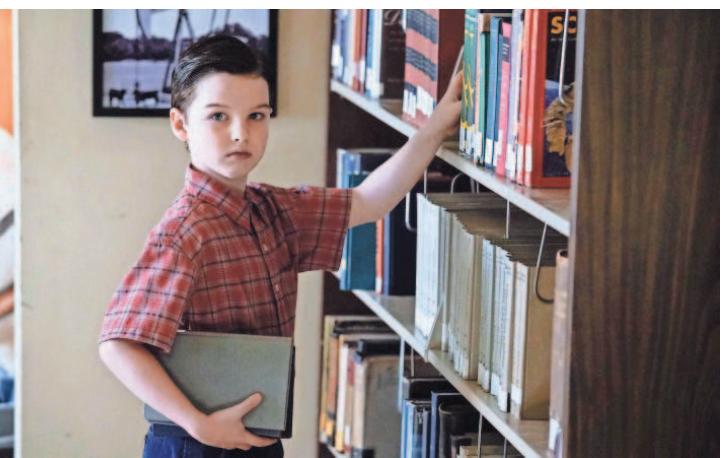
For many of us who don't attend religious services any longer but have family who do attend, the sentiment rings true. Maybe when we're most honest we

might even say that for a number of years that's the reason we went — out of respect for family and family tradition.

Then, at some point along the way, we may decide we can still love and respect family and choose not to participate in religious activities any more. Zora Hurston writes: "It seems to me that organized creeds are collections of words around a wish. I feel no need for such. However, I would not, by word or deed, attempt to deprive another of the consolation it affords. It is simply not for me" ("Dust Tracks on a Road").

When beliefs are simply not true for us any more, it makes sense to be true to ourselves and open with others. As difficult or risky as that can be, it might be best to let others know, as gently but

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Iain Armitage as Sheldon on 'Young Sheldon.' CLIFF LIPSON/CBS

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straightforwardly as possible, that we need to move on without carrying on family traditions that don't work for us now.

Secular people like me may still attend a congregational service from time to time. There are many good things happening throughout religious communities. I don't believe everything I hear and my "faith filter" is fully engaged, but a humanist can appreciate the human experience wherever it is celebrated.

My parents died many years ago but I well remember attending church with them. I think dad was more involved than mom though they both served as deacons. Dad enjoyed mowing the church lawn and helped create a garden by the sanctuary. I don't remember either of them ever requiring my sister and me to

go with them to services. They accepted that we were growing up and making our own choices where and when to go.

Like precocious Sheldon, a growing number of youth are choosing life without church, synagogue, mosque or temple. This doesn't mean they disrespect their elders or they "hate religion" of any kind. Young people throughout history often reach an age when they can't believe everything their parents believe or practice the faith of their ancestors (think of young Jesus or Buddha). This maturing decision can be a rejection of tradition or a positive affirmation of a more reasonable alternative — at least in their mind.

Sheldon believes in his mother. I did too. Since my mom suffered with arthritis for many years I was always protective of her. With hip, knee and wrist replacements, she needed assistance with some things, though she was a strong and independent woman. I attended church with my mother when my sister

was in college and dad was working. Whenever I sang in choir or gave a reading in the service, mom was there, smiling and supportive. Like Sheldon, I knew my mom loved me during those teen years and though we may have had different views or beliefs along the way the connection was enduring and endearing.

What do we do if our beliefs are not the same as our parents, if we choose a different path in life and faith? In a later episode of "Young Sheldon," the pastor is giving a sermon and Sheldon raises his hand as if he's in a school classroom. The pastor stops and calls on Sheldon who calmly and reasonably questions some of the statements the minister is making. Of course, Sheldon's mother is surprised and a bit embarrassed, but she allows Sheldon to go up and sit with the pastor in front of the whole church. Sheldon isn't trying to be disrespectful, he's just an inquisitive, intelligent young boy who can't let adults get away with easy assumptions when it comes to beliefs.

The pastor handles the situation fairly well, and so does Sheldon's mother. Whenever Sheldon accompanies his mom to church, the pastor expects he'll be interrupted at least once during his sermon, by a boy who keeps them all or their toes with anything pertaining to faith.

I often wonder how many Sheldons there are in congregations. How many people have questions or alternative viewpoints but don't have the childlike courage to raise a hand?

We have much to learn from young people like Sheldon, don't you think? *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. Chris' new book, "Broken Bridges: Building Community in a World Divided by Beliefs," is now available on Amazon.*