

Highland Views

Troublesome Pigeon-Holes and Secular Clergy

In her memoir, “Dust Tracks on a Road,” African-American writer, Zora Neale Hurston writes: “Grown people know that they do not always know the why of things, and even if they think they know, they do not know where and how they got the proof.” There is great wisdom packed into that sentence. She goes on: “Hence the irritation they show when children keep on demanding to know if a thing is so and how the grown folks got the proof of it. It is so troublesome because it is disturbing to the pigeon-hole way of life.”

Sit back and read those lines again. Through my years as a chaplain among people often pigeon-holed by their community (those with mental illness, suffering from addiction, living with a criminal record or without stable housing) I listened and learned; I got schooled. As I used to say, my real education began in “the seminary of the streets.” I learned a whole lot about human beings, the best and worst things we do, and I learned quite a bit about pigeon-holes.

According to The Cornell Lab (“All About Birds”): “City pigeons nest on buildings and window ledges. In the countryside they also nest on barns and grain towers, under bridges, and on natural cliffs.” In other words, pigeons find someplace to settle wherever they are. They don’t just live in “holes.” They can be creative, inventive, trying new places to find rest and make a nest.

As a secular clergyperson I’m interested in those places people find to nest, to settle. I like to find out where someone comes from. I also like to know where someone is “coming from” in their thoughts, ideas, beliefs. When we’re open to learn, not threatened by diversity of beliefs, the world can be a fascinating place for all of us pigeons!

In my experience, secular clergy can do things and go places where many religious clergy cannot—at least they can’t in the same way. For instance, as a humanist celebrant (with a seminary degree and many years in interfaith ministry) I can officiate at life transitions such as marriages and memorials for anyone, respecting their faith or non-belief. While I’ve enjoyed sharing leadership alongside colleagues who didn’t mind co-officiating (Jewish rabbi, Catholic priest, Progressive Christian minister, Hindu priest), when religious professionals conduct these ceremonies, particular religious teachings shape the form and feel of the experience. That’s entirely appropriate. Scriptures are read, prayers are said, blessings are given.

When a secular clergyperson is invited to participate in these intimate, emotional moments, we take our professional role seriously. We’re often asked specifically because we are secular, even by people who consider themselves “spiritual” in some way. They may believe in something

supernatural but don't feel that belief has to be emphasized in a celebration. Freethinking clergy are comfortable with that.

Non-theistic celebrants can be welcoming to everyone, creating ceremonies that are inclusive, intentionally non-offensive. Does this mean there can be no "language of faith"? Of course not. Wedding vows or memorial readings may use some God-language. People may select a few words that have meaning to them though perhaps not to a non-believer. When there is a request to read a poem or other selection with a religious message, we can suggest they ask a friend or family member to read. This way a secular leader does not act as a representative or preacher of one tradition.

As Zora Neale Hurston reminds us, we may think we know why things are the way they are, or why we believe what we believe, but if we're honest, we don't really know where or how we settled in our particular nest. But we can't pass on our chosen perspective, our way, our tradition, if we can't admit our pigeon-holes—where we've chosen to roost. Is it right to expect the next generation to carry forward our unproven knowledge when we're not able or willing to meet their demands for candor or truth?

One amazing fact from The Cornell Lab: "Pigeons can find their way home, even if released from a distant location blindfolded. They can navigate by sensing the earth's magnetic fields, and perhaps also by using sound and smell. They can also use cues based on the position of the sun." Is there a lesson in that for humans? Can we find our way to a natural place, in mind and body, that makes sense for us, without requiring others to follow the same path, protect the same nest? Can we navigate our way through life guided by the best of nature and our own nature without getting "pigeon-holed" into a belief that becomes a troublesome cage?

Chris Highland

2020