

# Old friends, faith and the journey forward



## Highland Views

Chris Highland

Guest columnist

A friend I haven't seen since high school posted a video of a small white boy who tells his mother he is going "to find God." He packs his lunch, takes a subway into the city and walks into a park. Sitting on a bench to eat his lunch, he starts to take a bite when he looks over at an elderly black woman sitting on the other end of the bench. He hands her part of his lunch, they talk and laugh together. They hug and wave goodbye. Arriving home, his mother asks, "Did you find Him?" He replies, "God is a Woman, mom. And she has the most beautiful smile." Back in the park, the woman sits on the pavement by her homeless friend. "I just ate with God!," she tells her. "He's much younger than I expected."

This modern parable helps me understand my high school friend's current beliefs.

I hope to discuss those with her some time, to find out how her faith has changed since those early days.

Another friend from those youthful years re-connected with me this summer. Rob and his wife still live in the Pa-

cific Northwest near where we grew up. As we've exchanged updates about our lives, our mutual curiosity brought us back to those years when we were active in church. We were leaders in our youth group at the Presbyterian church, singing in both the adult and youth choirs, attending Bible studies and prayer meetings, going to Christian concerts and conferences. Trained by Campus Crusade, we became youth evangelists before "receiving the Holy Spirit" and speaking in tongues as part of the Pentecostal movement. A meaningful, memorable time.

I asked Rob how he would describe his faith experience back then. After explaining it was an "emotional roller coaster," Rob said he thought he had faith figured out, that he "knew what Christianity was." Like me, he "did not have others around, bringing up ideas that contradicted" his beliefs.

What changed for Rob? Both of us went to Christian colleges in Washington where he studied Sociology and Religion while I studied Religion and Philosophy. We both had profound experiences in college that caused our faith to evolve.

As Rob describes: "The first major 'awakening' came in 1976 when I traveled to San Francisco." A university program exposed him to the diversity of the inner city and he heard speakers with "vastly different life experience" and di-

vergent views of faith. "My firm black and white beliefs started to crumble." In a similar program at my college I spent time with kids who had physical and mental disabilities. Something was crumbling for me as well.

One further part of that crumbling for Rob was a trip to Central America where he was "exposed to a world view that challenged my Christian faith and my faith in the U.S.A." He learned about "Liberation Theology," an engaged faith perspective that centers on social action among poor and oppressed people, accepting them as the educators, since their voice often goes unheard by both governments and religions. About this time, I was entering seminary and I too was reading Liberation theologians. A parallel moment that, as Rob says, "shaped my political and religious philosophy more than any other single experience in my life."

Comparing his faith in the 1970's with now, Rob is very honest. Then, his faith was "well defined and easy." He didn't "interact with people who might have conflicting perspectives." How true is that for many of us? Since that time, Rob has "sought out people who would challenge my faith and my worldview." That takes humility as well as courage. What has been the result of this commitment to truth? "My faith encompasses a wide array of beliefs ... I am confident that every person will find their own spiritual

path" – he doesn't feel the need to convert anyone. "I am still on my journey," he says, and affirms my journey too.

Rob vividly remembers what a "huge part" church played in his youth. Now, he's very sincere in his thoughts and feelings about what church means. In his mind, church has become a "should" – something expected but not satisfying. It feels both demanding and hypocritical. He rarely attends, but feels some guilt about that. I know the feeling. Expectations have power in religious culture. And when traditional faith becomes too restrictive, it's not easy to find a more inclusive, liberating community.

Before those faith-formation years, Rob and I played on our Junior High basketball team. I think that's when we first became friends, going to each other's homes to shoot hoops.

The basis of our friendship remains. Though we have a few divergent viewpoints, we share pages of a common story.

*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.*