

I'm not certain this is true, but I think it is



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

We called him Lee of the Trees. We could have named him Lee of the Creeks or Lee of the Freeway Underpasses. Once, I called him "Our Friend, Lee." A friendly guy, a gentle man with piercing blue eyes, long, stringy blond hair and scraggly white beard. One of my favorite people living as an "urban refugee," as we sometimes referred to our community of the streets.

Lee would silently enter our chaplaincy office, sit on a chair and say: "I'm worried, brother." I'd stop whatever I was doing and ask him what was troubling him. Lee was sensitive and easily frightened; he would see and hear things, especially in the dark places he found to sleep at night. "I find a spot where 'they' can't see me," he would tell me. After I learned that Lee had a mental illness, I understood he feared being seen by the police, homeowners or ... surveillance planes.

Being out among vulnerable people

living on the edge, I saw more clearly there was truth in some of what Lee told me. I took his worries and fears seriously.

Feminist and suffragist, Helen Hamilton Gardener, wrote: "Truth is not afraid of reason, nor reason of truth." There can be layers of truth. It may take some digging to find it. With humans this means listening to what is being said, and what is unsaid.

Where do you get your news? Whom do you trust to pass along truth? Do you ever question your "authorities"? As Lee used to say, with a glint and a smile: "Let's give it a look-see."

Whenever I hear or read a news item and I want to tell someone, usually my wife, I often begin with: "I don't know if this is true, but ..." I suppose I'm a skeptical person by nature; I try to withhold judgment, suspend a conclusion, until information is verified, or at least until I've had time to think about it, talk it over with others, check other sources.

We live in a time of "breaking news!" The intent is to startle, to get our attention, and it usually works. If we don't take a deep breath, sit back, and engage our curiosity, we can get swept up in the "news" – the new things we're hearing

or seeing. One caveat I keep in mind: repeating something over and over for two days, or 2,000 years, doesn't make it so. If something is "new" to us, why wouldn't we question the source, check it out, give it a closer look-see?

Our fears sometimes make us jump, and jump to conclusions. Maybe we need to face our fears first, then we can have clearer heads to decide what is true, what to believe. The Buddha said: "People driven by fear go to many a refuge, to mountains, to forests, to sacred trees and shrines." (I think of Lee). Buddha teaches that people ought to find safe refuge in truth, and truth is ultimately found on a path beyond fear, beyond suffering ("the eightfold path").

Essentially truth is a path, a journey, not a destination. When Jesus said he was the path and the truth and the life, he was telling his followers to walk in his teachings, emulate his example of living. Both Buddha and Jesus instructed people to find refuge on a trail, a path of truth-seeking. This is much different than the traditional focus on the Teachers themselves, and the Books (they didn't write). Truth is not a text, written in stone or ink. Books can point us back to the path of truth, but we shouldn't

mistake a map for the trail. Maps can be helpful, but sometimes using our senses and reason is wiser.

When Lee silently showed up at my office door he would ask if there was anything he could do. He'd even ask me if I needed a few dollars from his monthly check! Since I knew Lee needed something to occupy his time and his mind, I would sometimes hand him a broom. He liked to sweep the pine needles from the entry way. As I'd see him out there, greeting others walking by or coming in, I smiled with the knowledge that at least for an hour of the day Lee didn't have to feel fear (and others didn't have to fear him). Watching him through the window, I'd see him pause now and then to gaze into the trees. At those times I was reminded what a good man Lee was, and that his work sweeping a walkway, "was" his work. He was helping himself while helping us.

I'm not certain this is true, but I know him, and I think it is.

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.