

Are we nomads searching for the unseen nearby?



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

In his adventurous book, “The Wild Places,” Robert Macfarlane, a Fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, walks the countryside in England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales. He climbs, camps, swims and saunters through the bogs, barrens, hills and “holloways,” drawing us deeper into wild nature and the history of our relationship with the land.

The author quotes his friend and fellow Briton, Roger Deakin: “There is wildness everywhere, if we only stop in our tracks and look around us.” Deakin is described as “an explorer of the undiscovered country of the nearby.” This thought has been a constant mental companion through years exploring the wild edges of both nature and supernatural faith. What are we not discovering in the “country of the nearby”? Have we been looking in the wrong places? Are we even looking at all?

Robert Macfarlane refers to the painter Paul Nash who was interested in “the unseen landscapes” which are “not part of the unseen world in a psychic sense. nor are they part of the Uncon-

scious. They belong to the world that lies, visibly, about us. They are unseen merely because they are not perceived; only in that way can they be regarded as invisible.” I take that as an invitation to re-visit the landscape of religious experience.

Tradition, theology, ritual, scripture – these are well-worn trails in human experience that lead away from our innate wildness. Re-connecting to the wild opens us to an honest investigation of the unseen nearby. While many are intent to seek the divine, the sacred, the spiritual, what or who remains truly unseen?

Carol and I just watched the poignant and provocative film “Nomadland.” Francis McDormand’s character Fern loses her husband then loses her home when the local industry fails. She fills her van with things she needs, lets go of the rest, and sets off in an uncertain search for work and peace down the road of her disrupted life. Fern discovers a new community of other nomads living on the edge, vulnerable yet resilient, fragile yet free. She faces loneliness, fearfulness, precariousness. The film brought up embedded memories from my chaplaincy among nomads, unsettled people who present unsettling challenges to a privileged American lifestyle. Each displaced urban refugee called attention – uncomfortable atten-

tion – to the unseen nearby. Yet, by necessity they were The Unseen, who could never risk exposing their secret status as “houseless” nomads, except to a trusted few.

Kathy lived in a small, beat-up trailer positioned in a dark, discreet alleyway. Jackie lived in her small car, packed with all her “worldly” possessions, moving around at night to find a safe place to park in the shadows. Angela lived in a tiny tent tucked in the thicket of a city park – at least I think she did. Even a chaplain isn’t always privy to the private “address” of hidden people. I was, however, honored to get to know Kathy, Jackie, Angela and many others living in the wild places nearby. If and when I earned their trust, I might learn where they lived, and they became my teachers of what it’s like in nomadland. When Kathy felt threatened by men walking by at night, she came to sit with me and cry. When Jackie’s car was towed, she walked up to whisper her fears and I drove her to the tow-yard to pay for the release of her “home.” When Angela lost her tent in a “sweep” by city workers who threw out everything she owned, we gave her a new tent and sleeping bag, suggesting safer places to camp (though there are no “safe” places for nomads). The reality is: nomadland is no-man’s-land, no-woman’s-land ... there is no land. no place to settle. for landless hu-

man travelers sheltered only by each other.

Many of these unseen nomads held sincere religious beliefs. Yet, the faith they carried with them could be heavy extra baggage, or a lighter dream of a home in heaven. I understood how their beliefs gave them comfort and a sense of security. I sympathized with the need to believe a divine presence was with them in the loneliest times. My sensitivity to these feelings didn’t mean I always supported the faith I found among nomads. When I heard someone say, “God is punishing me for not being a good mother,” or “Prayers will protect me from the police,” or “I don’t deserve to enter that church,” I would gently offer another viewpoint. Often, simply a reminder of immediate concerns: “What do you need right now?” “What are you going to do for yourself today?” “Is there any way I can help?”

In our wild land of nomads we can make visible the invisible, discovering the unseen nearby.

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. His latest books are “A Freethinker’s Gospel” and “Broken Bridges.” Learn more at chighland.com.