

Elegant incognito and the art of the wild



Highland Views

Chris Highland

Guest columnist

Did you see the magnificent art exhibit in Asheville? Carol excitedly told me about it so we went to see. An amazing display of incredible beauty – right outside our door. The bow of color stretching across the Blue Ridge. I don't think I've ever seen such a spectacular rainbow in my life. Nature's artwork. No museum could hold it. No painter or poet could do it justice. Taking pictures of it was a disappointment, as I expected it would be. As so often happens, I should have simply stood in the rain and gazed on the wonders. Why do we try to "capture" these wild things?

On one of my favorite podcasts, "The Wild," from KUOW in Seattle, host Chris Morgan travels to the small Central American country of Belize to see the scarlet macaw – a brilliant bird adorned in vibrant colors. He follows these endangered birds from nesting sites near a river over a mountain to a forest where they find plentiful food. There he speaks with a native man who cares for the forest, protecting the birds as fellow inhabitants. He manages a bed and breakfast in his home, leading tours up the mountainside to where the macaws feed on berries.

Morgan crosses another river to speak with the Mennonite community clearing land for their new settlement. They've cut down about 100 acres of the forest and the local people are concerned the macaws –

and other wild creatures – are losing their vital habitat. One Mennonite farmer and carpenter is asked if he considers the wildlife as he takes away trees. The man replies they don't bother the wild things deeper in the forest but God has given this land for their families. Then he asks Morgan if he believes animals have a soul. The host answers that maybe animals have a different kind of soul. The man chuckles: "No, they have no soul. You don't think there are animals in heaven, do you?" Morgan says: "Maybe." The Mennonite farmer is confident: "No, there are no animals in heaven."

Chris Morgan is very respectful in his conversations with the farmer (as he is with the indigenous people). Yet, he is troubled by the way some humans believe they are superior to their non-human neighbors. I'm more than disturbed by how religious faith can blind people to anyone or anything outside their small, insular community. Faith can certainly create community but it can also block out the greater community which includes the wild world.

In June 1831, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that belonging to any "religious party" is unwise and unnatural. He reasons: "A sect or party is an elegant incognito devised to save a person from the vexation of thinking." A stunning statement, especially in our inelegantly divided times! To be "incognito" is to conceal one's true identity. Or, said another way, it is a false identity. One not only hides who they really are, but they project something they are not. We say "two-faced" or "putting on a mask" (which, as we know from the pandemonium of our pandemic, can be a very sensitive issue).

And how does masking our true identity serve us? It is devised, invented, to save us from "the vexation of

thinking." We don't want to have to think too hard – it's so annoying, bothersome, inconvenient. So we go with the herd, tramping the well-worn paths, unaware of the harm we do, or the beauty in view.

I might push Morgan's questions to the farmer a bit further: To whom does the land – the soil, plants and wildlife – truly belong? No doubt the farmer would answer: "the Lord." But maybe the Lord gave the land to the people of Belize, a home for the animals too. He might respond: But the Lord sent us here and wants us to subdue this land for His purposes. I would reply: Isn't that just a little self-serving? Do you really believe God gave this land to you alone? What about the people of this country – if you spoke with them, listened to them, you may find they believe the land is a gift, not to conquer but care for, to protect the creatures who have lived here long before the Bible was written?

There are no illusions this conversation would change the farmer's mind. He and his community can believe whatever they choose. Yet, here is a current-day example of a religious sect whose beliefs assert dominance over everything – other people, other land, other beliefs. We could hope the farmer and his family will pause, listen to the macaws, and join the villagers who are even now planting new trees, not only for themselves, but for the birds, the earth, the future.

Chris Highland served as a minister and chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His latest books are "Friendly Freethinker," "Broken Bridges" and "A Freethinker's Gospel." Learn more at chighland.com.