



Highland Views
Chris Highland
Guest columnist

The pleasure of discovering you are wrong

The writer Norman Maclean, son of a Presbyterian minister, author of the book "A River Runs Through It" (made into a film directed by Robert Redford), was born in Iowa and grew up in Missoula, Montana. He worked for the U.S. Forest Service and then became a professor of English at the University of Chicago. He died in 1990, just before another book was published, "Young Men and Fire."

Maclean was fascinated, perhaps haunted, by the tragic deaths of 13 Smokejumpers who died in August 1949 fighting a fire near the Missouri River in Montana. These young men parachuted into a narrow canyon—Mann Gulch—and were caught in a fast-moving firestorm. As they tried in vain to outrun the fire on a steep slope, three made it over a ridge to safety, several others survived for a short time, and the rest fell before the power of the flames.

In "Young Men and Fire," Maclean tells the story of what happened that terrible day, tracing the historical record, speaking with the survivors, and hiking into that burned over ground. The storytelling compels the reader to keep searching, continue investigating with a curiosity for the truth. As he sees it, the official reports were written too fast and there were too many unanswered questions about what the Smokejumpers really did, why they were trapped, what the actual conditions were and why only a few survived. It's a real mystery story.

In Maclean's intriguing narrative, I picked up the trail of one fire behavior scientist he refers to, Harry Gisborne. Gisborne had theories about the cause of the Mann Gulch "blowup"—the explosive wall of flame. In Maclean's words: "He was to discover in Mann Gulch on the last day of his life that both his theories were wrong." Gisborne was a competent researcher so "to his credit, he was the first one to point out his error and was happily preparing to wake up the next day to correct his theories ..."

Gisborne didn't die from the fire, or any fire. He died of a coronary while studying that mountain canyon to see if his views of the fire were accurate. Once again, Maclean: "This is the death of a scientist, a scientist who did much to establish a science. On the day of his death he had the pleasure of discovering that his theory ... was wrong ... For a scientist, this is a good way to live and die, maybe the ideal way for any of us—excitedly finding we were wrong and excitedly waiting for tomorrow to come so we can start over." For a time, in his own search for truth, Maclean followed Gisborne, then found other trails, other theories to follow.

What lessons are found on the fiery paths of faith, or in our own search for sparks of truth? We are dropped into unknown lands (ancient Palestine, India, Arabia, China) and immediately face decisions, even dangerous choices. If we choose an alternative trail, or mountain, could we lose our family, community, sanity (or fear we might)? The fires we face, or run from, might kill us, or prove to be brighter insights for new paths forward. Will we survive if we no longer believe the literal truth of scriptures, or the "divine authority" of clergy or creeds? Are there dangerous ideas to contemplate? Is it worth challenging those who warn us away from healthier, more liberating viewpoints?

Later in his extended analysis of what happened that fateful day in Mann Gulch, Maclean wrote: "Coming to recognize you are wrong is like coming to recognize you are sick. You feel bad long before you admit you have any of the symptoms and certainly long before you are willing to take your medicine." A wise observation. Many times along the way, Maclean had to admit he was on the wrong track, maybe close to being accurate, but a correction in direction was necessary. This is of course good science, not religion. Yet why not religion—good and better religion?

Can religious faith handle the fires of freethought, the swirling questions that chase those who try to break free of restrictive environments? If you are a person of faith, how do you measure the risk? Most importantly, at least in my way of thinking, what do you do when your theories, beliefs, opinions about matters of faith, are wrong, or at least inadequate to life's challenging situations? Is there a clear path of escape, a way to freedom?

If you are a secular person, are you able to face the fires of failed theories? Can you find pleasure, a kind of deeply felt satisfaction, discovering you may be wrong?

Maclean's observations offer lasting lessons to illuminate our imaginations.

Chris Highland served as a minister and chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Learn more at chighland.com.