

# Space to play, pray or say what you think today



**Highland Views**  
Chris Highland  
Guest columnist

Naturalist John Muir once scribbled these words while sauntering in the High Sierra mountains: "Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where Nature may heal and cheer and give strength to body and soul alike" (see "Meditations of John Muir," selection 52). Only someone with deep experience in wild places – like a mountain, park or garden – could write that description of our basic, essential human needs. An appreciative relation to natural beauty can lead us to ask ourselves: Where do I find bread? Where can I pray (meditate, contemplate)? Equally as important as these things, we might ask: Where can I play? Where can I let myself loose, be myself, jump into the joy of being alive? Each place of dis-

covery can become a sacred/secular sanctuary providing just what we need for body, mind/soul.

What strikes me about Muir's scribble note is the way he includes prayer (or contemplation) along with play, and soul/mind as well as body. Roots in his family's strict Scottish faith were evident. Yet, when he transplanted those roots, something radical – rooted – happened. Church was replaced by mountain "temples." The Bible was replaced by "scriptures in stone," and God, though not replaced, blended in (quite naturally) with Nature which contained virtually everything traditional religion offers, including beauty and bread, healing, cheer, strength, and open sanctuaries for the playful and prayerful alike.

These images came more alive for me while hearing a friend describe his sauntering "spiritual journey." This was in response to my request to learn more of his story. I sensed there were parallels with my own journey. While we may use some different words to describe our experience of faith and the life beyond faith – at least traditional faith – the similarities became clear. He began by presenting an indelible image from

childhood. Growing up in a small Southern town where his father was the pastor of a local church, he remembers riding his bike all over town feeling free and secure (a boyhood memory I had almost forgotten). As strong as that memory is for him, he recalls something that also gave him the sense of freedom and security: "I grew up literally playing in the sanctuary alongside my friends and my dog, building forts and hideouts in it, and having free run of it not only on Sundays, but the rest of the week as well."

Play with that image in your mind. A child playing in the church sanctuary feeling free, unafraid – being a child. As my friend continued his story of faith I kept returning to that delightful picture. He mused about the thoughtful way that sanctuary was set up by his father, with the pulpit on one side and the communion table in the center, so people "could look into the faces of others who were there rather than at the backs of their heads." That left a lasting impression: "Whatever my notion of spirituality was to become, it would al-

**See HIGHLAND, Page 4C**

# Highland

Continued from Page 3C

ways be deeply and solidly grounded in the soil of freedom, security and play, as well as in the lives of those (both two-legged and four-legged) with whom I shared community.”

He felt driven or drawn to ministry and, much to his “utter and complete astonishment,” found himself in seminary. He thought theological education might offer a “spiritual milestone” but it signaled his “exit from it.” Like me, he tried his hand at parish work but made the decisive choice to leave the church and leave ministry. He gave up his ordination and “though my exit was not graceful, it was completely necessary and profoundly liberating.” He felt drawn to be “present in those relational spaces where people were trying to explore their lives in honest and meaningful ways” (maybe learning to play?). What he discovered in clinical work, counseling and working with youth, I discovered in chaplaincy. As in that small town sanctuary of his childhood, he knew looking into the eyes and lives of the people held more significance than focusing on church, clergy or creeds. The church he was raised in “never felt big enough” and he searched for new sanctuaries, spaces that “embraced questions.” He has found that welcoming in “the presence and power of nature” and in the fellowship of like-minded folks including local Unitarians.

My friend’s honesty is compelling as he shares snapshots of his journey. I was particularly struck by a later comment: “I am becoming more deeply aware that nature is a fundamental and profound part of what makes me come alive.” I can picture him riding bikes, walking and playing in the great sanctuary of nature with John Muir. I imagine we could join them.

*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.*