

On the right path, not quite far enough



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Carol and I enjoyed another excellent trail-walk off the Blue Ridge Parkway. A fairly new sign pointed up to a knob summit, so up we went. At the top we were surrounded by trees and the only view was a sign that pointed back down to the parking area. Though it was a little disappointing, we saw another trail continuing down the other side of the knob. Winding down the hill we kept

thinking we might have to go back up unless we crossed a trail that looped us back to the car. Down and down, but no junction appeared. Reluctantly we turned around and retraced our way back up to the knob and down to the car. Another sign marked the MST (Mountains to Sea Trail) that looked inviting so we finished our lunch and set off again. It was a more pleasant trail and we only saw a few people so we kept walking a few miles. Reaching a small waterfall we turned around. While heading back, we paused at a side trail that angled uphill. We stopped, wondering if this was where we would have come down earlier. We had been so close to intersecting this main trail, yet turned around too

soon! But did we? We just didn't know.

On the trail of beliefs, there are many who follow paths, uncertain where they will lead. Some turn back, others take a deep breath and move forward. Maybe more people stay where they are and see no reason to walk on, to risk more effort, and perhaps get lost somewhere, losing their bearings and the will to progress. Some follow a well-marked trail that leads to a church, a sanctuary, a particular religion or tradition. There they make their home. They have discovered their destination, their community, all they need. But did they go far enough? Why not continue the search for something that may be greater, better, healthier, more fulfilling just a bit further?

A good question might be: Did I, did we, go far enough? There is more than one trail up the hill, down the hill, around the hill. They connect like a web, like rivers flowing together, and each one offers a new perspective to enjoy and explore.

As some wise teachers have told us, the trail itself is the destination. Perhaps some elements of religious faith are way-stations, rest-stops, or even motivation centers. Maybe they are doorways, gates, passageways toward . . . who knows? What if this was the original intent of the pathfinders, the founders of faith? Let Buddha (and Moses,

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Jesus, Krishna, Muhammad) go, don't get attached to him, his teachings, books written about him, stories told about him. Learn, and move on, keep going. Rest and refreshment are good, but there is much more ahead. It would have been nice if they explicitly taught: "Go beyond my words, let them go." Maybe they did but we're reticent, we resist.

There's an intriguing verse in the

Gospel of John where Jesus says: "Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father" (14:12). Whatever happened to that? The Son of God essentially says he has to go away so that his followers can do what he did and even greater things! "Good-bye, it's your turn now. And do a better job, will you?"

A Buddhist fable from India: Someone searched many trails in the Himalayas looking for an herb that could heal multitudes. They finally discovered a source hidden under tall grasses high in

the mountains. They brought the herb to their cabin and cultivated it in a tub. When they died, the healing herbs were left to wither, and the source remained hidden.

What are we searching for? What are we hiding that could help or heal others?

Wendell Berry's essay "Getting Along With Nature" presents "a bad reason" to go out into wild places. It shouldn't be to "escape" the human world because that's an illusion. Besides, Nature and Humanity are not opposites. Our nature is inescapable. Guided by this wisdom, we might reflect on the path we're on, the paths we choose, and ask ourselves

why we're there and if we're seeking to escape something. Are we on a good path for a "bad reason?"

As Robert Frost wrote: "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood." What Carol and I found was the convergence of two trails. We had to try them both to learn a valuable lesson: Why choose just one? Take both; they may come together; we may find that other paths intersect sooner or later.

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