

Ministry of the mountains: lookouts, whiteouts, hangouts



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

Several decades ago, while still a chaplain in the low-country of the San Francisco Bay Area, I grabbed my pair of snowshoes, picked up my pastor friend Todd, and we headed for the highcountry – the Sierra Nevada mountains. Our destination was Robb's Hut, an old fire lookout refurbished as a rental cabin. As fire lookouts always are, the hut was positioned high on an open ridge-top with a 360-degree panoramic view of the "Range of Light," as John Muir called it.

After a beautiful four-hour drive across the Central Valley into higher elevations, passing through the granite walls of the pass, I parked the old Pathfinder on a backroad deep in the forest. Todd and I pulled on our boots, bundled up in warm clothing, unloaded our gear and buckled our snowshoes, preparing for a long trek over deep powdery trails. Though the sky was clear and blue, the five miles up to the hut took all our energy, pulling a small sled with our food and other supplies. With great relief we arrived later in the afternoon. Heavier

flakes were falling as the wind was picking up. We settled in for a quiet night in the mountains. Five glorious days and four star-lit nights were ours, and ours alone.

With Todd's long days of pastoral ministry and teaching and the intensity of my chaplaincy work, we were two clergy in desperate need of a break – but not just any break, a break-out into Nature far from the demands of ministry. And honestly, we couldn't wait to be as far from people as possible.

Awakening the next morning, after a windy night, heavy snow was falling along with the temperature. Thinking we would wait out the storm, we played cards, told stories that made us cry with sadness or silliness, cooked some tasty meals, all the while peeking out the window at the darkening skies and deepening fields of white. Eyeing our snowshoes, we were anxious to explore. One of the great joys of hiking into the mountains is to be an explorer, to have adventures, seeking what you've never seen before; it's a delightful, nearly insatiable feeling.

As the day passed by, it became harder to see beyond the snow piled against the windows. The irony was apparent: we couldn't look out from the lookout! And we couldn't even go outside. Not

only were the doors frozen (we could barely squeeze out to the igloo-cold outhouse), but the blizzard was like a thick blanket wrapping us, trapping us. A futile situation. Funny and frustrating.

We didn't see any people that week, or animals. I'm not sure we even saw a bird. Just snow and more snow. We may have wandered out a few times just to check the surroundings and see what could be seen. But our "explorations" didn't last long. We weren't prepared for these extreme conditions. In fact, after several days we began to wonder if we would be able to make it back down the mountain.

Though Todd and I had very different ministries, we shared similar concerns for people in need, a common love for our kids, and a taste for good wine. We were making the best of the situation, adjusting to the unexpected isolation, confident the circumstances were Nature's way, not ours. We chose to put ourselves at the mercy of the mountain and weren't suffering. We had food, shelter, heat and companionship. We always respected the power of Nature. In our wild and heretical view, Nature was a creative divinity, alive with lessons and music, presenting endless wonders to behold – when we could see them!

On the final morning, we awoke to

sunlight pouring in. Ice was melting off the windows. Not a snowflake to be seen. Once we packed up and stepped out, the scenic serenity was spread before us. We could finally look out over a hundred miles of wilderness. Every tree was completely white – covered in "robes of white" brighter than our church robes. We emerged into an expansive cathedral of light and silence. We could hardly speak; words weren't necessary. It was slow going on the snowshoes as each step sank into the soft powder, but it didn't matter. Each step was a wonder. We'd never seen a world so pristine or witnessed a sky so blue.

Hanging out in any kind of sanctuary may not sound exciting. But when that "sacred space" invites you to be encompassed, to imagine the embrace of Nature, there is a kind of ministry that happens. Even ministers need ministry, those who manage sanctuaries need sanctuary, to absorb and be absorbed by crisp clear air, higher views and the glistering garments of towering trees.

Chris Highland served as a minister and chaplain for many years. His latest books are "Friendly Freethinker," "Broken Bridges" and "A Freethinker's Gospel." Learn more at chighland.com.