

A freethinker's mantra: 'Ego de lego humin'



Highland Views
Chris Highland
Guest columnist

There are teachers and there are preachers. Those who have thoughtful lessons to convey not only pass along knowledge but helpful ways to handle knowledge. In other words, teachers may use images and illustrations, field trips and guest speakers, many different modes of making knowledge interesting and practical. Those who preach, in the classic sense, are proclaiming, attempting to convince and perhaps convert listeners to beliefs or a set of doctrines to affirm and accept on the authority of the preacher.

Preachers have followers, teachers have students. Teachers and preachers present required reading to explore knowledge from past and present thinkers. Preachers, at least in some religions, traditionally offer one primary book. They preach from that book with the expectation the words that are heard will be accepted as divinely inspired. Thus, the preaching is "expounding the Word of God" or "proclaiming the Gospel" with the intent to foster belief in the authority of God, the Word and the Preacher. Teachers, on the

other hand, may also utilize ancient writings yet the intent is to ignite energetic engagement with the texts, and with everything the teacher teaches, to develop skeptical minds that question and search for rational answers; a good, competent educator "teaches students to teach themselves." At least we would expect that's the goal, though it may be unspoken or unconscious.

I'm obviously oversimplifying and I acknowledge there are teachers who also preach and preachers who also teach. Yet I think it's wise to consider the intentions, what the speaker expects from their class, audience or congregation. We still hear preachers who say or imply "God told me to tell you this" or "Here's what God thinks or feels about that." And, we sometimes hear of teachers who get preachy about their own biases. When that's admitted, it might be alright, but sometimes students may not be ready or able to discern if they are being asked to accept what the teacher knows as the "whole story." Fundamentally, a critical question is: How do we know?

Here's where I'm going with this. During a retreat at a Buddhist center, I began reading a collection of scripture entitled "Thus Have I Heard." These are the teachings, sayings and stories of Gautama Buddha from the original text of the Pali canon. Passed down for thousands of years, the intent is to invite us

to hear what they heard in ancient days. From the Teacher to the student-disciples, to villagers throughout Asia and beyond, down through the centuries. Once we've heard, we encourage others to hear, and so the listening link to the past connects to the present and on into the future. This is the "hearsay" that generates traditions in all cultures and religions. "Say, Hear!" is often the demand of hearsay, those who want us to accept or believe something just because they heard it, and believed it, themselves.

In his lecture on a Judean mountain-side—sometimes called The Sermon on the Mount — the Teacher of Nazareth addressed some of the most enduring and endemic concerns for the human community (see Matthew 5-7). Though it may be hard to dig under centuries of supernaturalizing and sermonizing these teachings, I think it is still possible for our inter-religious and secular world to draw up some ethical guidance and wisdom from the well of time.

I suggest we learn this one phrase from the Greek language: "Ego de lego humin." It means "But I say to you." Jesus spoke Aramaic, but in the Gospels, written in Greek, the Teacher of Nazareth uses this phrase a number of times in his outdoor lecture. It usually follows "It is written" or "You have heard it said." This one Greek phrase may be one of the most important teachings in history,

certainly religious history.

It's a powerful style of teaching — a kind of freethinker's mantra. "You've heard that ... but hear this." A quite radical thing to say. In essence it makes an astonishing claim: "You have heard your (scriptures and religious preachers and teachers) say ... but ego de lego." It is written ... but now here's something to think about. Notice this assumes his hearers know the ancient texts; the words were familiar — they had heard or read these things before. But now, they are hearing a new twist, a fresh interpretation they may never have considered. The Hebrew scriptures offer instructions regarding human relationships. This Teacher has a new lesson plan, not to throw out the old, but to restore its relevance, bring it into the present and make it personal, practical.

Of course, 2000 years later, we are in need of other voices, other teachers, who startle us with their own, "Ego de lego humin."

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.