

Old hats, new trolleys and National Days of



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Traditions are handed down generation to generation, sometimes century to century. Some traditions become "old hat," something worn so much you forget you have it on your head (I've worn many over the years). Rote rituals can become so automatic we don't even

think about what we're doing and may not remember doing it — brain on automatic. This is true for religion, and also daily life. A relative is an alert and responsible truck driver, yet he told me on long hauls he can pass a number of exits and not recall anything about those miles of highway. Closer to home, I might have to stop and contemplate now and then: Did I brush my teeth an hour ago?

Concerning practices that involve faith, there are regular events we do as a community or nation that can seem rather unmindful, even the antithesis of

the stated purpose. I was reminded of this while reading about the National Day of Prayer. Though one national organizer says the NDP "exists ... to mobilize the Christian community to intercede for America's leaders and its families," I know there are gatherings where leaders intentionally seek to be inclusive of various traditions. Nevertheless, as I see it, most of these prayer programs appear to be by Christians, for Christians — at least Christians who wear one kind of hat. A recent local gathering appeared to invite people "of all faiths" yet, from what I could tell, the

event included only Christians offering Christian prayers. Was this the original intent of the NDP established by Congress in a nation of many colorful hats of faith as well as bareheaded nonbelievers?

Contrast this with an impressive event in Chicago this spring during the convergence of many religious holy days. Called "Interfaith Trolley," passengers were taken to diverse sacred spaces around the city. Hearing presentations from Sikh and Jain representatives, the

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trolley also brought visitors to a Christian chapel, an Islamic mosque, a Jewish synagogue, a Hindu temple and a Buddhist center. Participants enjoyed a common pilgrimage of understanding and education. "This is an incredible opportunity to come together," organizers announced, "to educate our communities and shape the public narrative about what it means to live well together amidst our religious and cultural diversity and difference" ("Religious Ride," USA Today, May 7, 2022).

In my way of thinking, this would be a perfectly appropriate alternative to National Days of Prayer, Congressional Prayer Breakfasts and other attempts by our secular government to direct the religious activities of citizens. What if more communities hopped aboard something moving in a more enlightened direction, like Chicagoans did in April? And what if the "Trolley" carried people to humanist spaces where passengers could learn about the ethical values and community commitments of their secular neighbors

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— while bringing indigenous voices onboard too? Doesn't that begin to sound more like America? Imagine how that radical inclusion could enrich the experience for everyone.

A friend recently asked me what I say when someone asks to pray for me. I smiled and said if the offer seems sincere, I have no problem with that. Then he asked what I would say if someone asked me to pray for them. I would respond that I don't pray, but I would be happy to sit and listen to their concerns. This was a common practice over my years as a chaplain. As I see it, to ask for "prayer" is actually asking for another human being to "be there," to listen and care, maybe, when appropriate, to "do" something. I understand what prayer means in some traditions, but that can end up being "old hat," you say something expected and expect that another person shares your beliefs.

But what if the request comes from a Catholic believer and you're Evangelical, or a Hindu and you're a humanist? What if the person asking doesn't really believe in God at all, but they are in crisis and asking for some assurance they aren't alone? This is exactly my point. They are not alone — you are with them!

This is not to deny there may be value in a personal prayer no matter how sectarian. The issue becomes the old personal-or-public problem. Is it truly "talking to God" or "talking to God so others will hear"? Or worse: "My prayers are better than yours." Unfortunately, some folks forget: not everyone prays or understands the divine in the same way.

Here's a thought: Perhaps people could grab their old hats, or try a new one, and climb on the H.A.T. — the Human Assembly Trolley. Think how that could transform our communities.

Rolling forward as an open, welcoming assembly makes sense. It seems to be a good thing to do.

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.