

# The Coffin Confessor and doing something we have to do



## Highland Views

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Guest columnist

One of my favorite podcasts is "This American Life." A recent episode was a string of stories on the theme: "Well, Someone Had to Do Something!" A man in Seattle picks up a stranger's stolen bike from thieves who listed it on Craigslist. He takes this risky action for many others, simply for the satisfaction and appreciation. Polish families leave strollers at a train station for arriving Ukrainians. A Lithuanian man sets up a website for Russian-speaking expatriots to call random households in Russia to explain the realities of the war. Staff in a Ukrainian zoo move their families inside to care for the animals during the conflict. One even sleeps in with an elephant sensitive to nearby explosions.

Hearing these stories of people doing extraordinary things in extraordinary circumstances is both emotional and inspiring. We see the height of humanity in the midst of inhumanity. Responding in the face of fear, when crime and war expose the best and worst of our world, is a powerful testimony to our ability to do

amazing things, or simply do what must be done, in the name of our highest ideals. People step up to help by stepping into the tension, terror and turmoil that potentially causes us to give up and give in to our fear or despair.

On the podcast we hear the story of the "Coffin Confessor," a man who was asked to read a eulogy written by someone who was dying. After the man passed away, his "confessor" stood to read the words in the memorial service. Some were startled and upset by the pointed remarks to family and friends, blunt words the dying man chose not to confront them with in life. Others thanked him for reading the eulogy and word got out what he had done. He became known as the "Coffin Confessor," often requested to perform this risky, uncomfortable task. One tattooed biker guy wrote in his eulogy that he was gay though he hadn't told anyone. Those who attended his service were surprised but it felt liberating to speak, and hear, the honest truth the biker was hesitant to reveal.

"This American Life" opens the door to invite our own humanity to come out and flourish, to be seen, heard and felt. We constantly see the low-water marks of our nature, the "ethical drought" in a threatening world, so it's good to show the high-water marks as well. In many instances, it's our free choice to "go low" or "go high." Our worldview, our sense of where we fit in the larger picture, can make all the difference how

we act, how we respond to the heights and depths, the best and worst of society. Overwhelmed with a barrage of information that may or may not contain truthful and useful knowledge, we need to ask ourselves: Do we possess a fundamental wisdom to discern what is good and right for ourselves and others? The Roman Stoic philosopher Lucius Seneca wrote: "The first thing philosophy promises us is the feeling of fellowship, of belonging to [humankind] and being members of a community" (Letter V). The pursuit of wisdom is no dry, detached endeavor; it is a wise search for what may be best for our community. The philosopher of nature, Henry Thoreau, was on his deathbed when, it is reported, a pastor asked if he could see the promised land. Henry drew a long breath and replied: "One world at a time." If only this sense and sensibility could be practiced by more people of faith. If we are distracted by narrow, parochial thinking, we imagine an American life is more valuable than any other life, that another world is what really matters, not the messy, uncomfortable, challenging world we face here, now, together.

When we turn to the Wisdom Traditions of the world, religions or philosophical outlooks, what are we seeking and for what purpose? Is it for a relation with something beyond the human, or a way to live well?

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How might we step up to speak truth, to be “confessors” revealing what others may not feel free or safe to say? Leaving a stroller at a train station, anticipating the arrival of strangers in need, is a self-less act of conscience and compassion. Caring for and calming vulnerable animals are also very human – and humane – actions to take.

What do we have to confess? (keep in mind, this is not about confession of sins). What truths do we sense are necessary to bring to light? We resist confessing our true nature, and the nature of others, yet, we may be the “someone” to do something while others choose to stand silent.

*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](http://chighland.com).*