

Thunder and lightning – Are the giants bowling again?



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

Standing out in the rain, listening with fascination to thunder claps (applause?) and crackling flashes of natural electricity, I thought back to childhood fantasies. As a child growing up in the greater Seattle area, I was frightened every time there was a thunderstorm. Do you remember those days, hiding under the covers or calling out for parental comfort during a loud storm? For some unknown reason, our Dad would always try to calm us with an image I've never forgotten. With a smile he said: "The giants are bowling." I think he also may have said when they get a strike there is a bright flash. Maybe that was comforting, but I suspect it was my Dad's presence in the room and reassuring voice that made those scary times less terrifying. The fact that Dad was a regular bowler made the story believable.

As we grow up, we're told by well-meaning adults (we assume) that our heavenly Parent will take care of us; He's watching over, whispering words of reassurance to calm us through the stormiest times. Using ancient stories from the Bible, the divine forecast tends to be fair weather ahead.

I wonder if my childhood fears would have been soothed a little more if my parents had explained the physical realities of natural atmospheric events like thunderstorms. Then again, I wonder if my faith would have been shaped in a more positive way if I had been taught my heavenly Parent looked down upon me favorably no matter what I did or didn't do. Instead of "Thou shalt nots" and the threat of a torturous hell await-



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ing bad children, if I had been told a different "fundamental" to the story of faith – for instance, that "God is Love" is the central point of the whole story. Instead of confusing add-on doctrines and theologies, if the message was "Believe whatever you will, living a good and loving life is the guiding principle," how much different would the journey have been?

I speak of the journey in the past tense because, after years of "faithing it" in devotion and ministry, the thunderous story made as much sense as giants in the clouds. Those of us who lost our fear of Sky Deities while growing a healthy curiosity of the natural world, may still hold some beliefs about the "sacred" things. When we discover we are free to let go of myths, legends and

childhood tales, we feel liberated to choose from a whole spectrum of viewpoints to try to make sense of our world. What we aren't so free to do, in my opinion, is to frighten children with fanciful stories that either terrify or pacify without guidance from the most useful barometer of reality – our sometimes foggy faculty of reason.

Another childhood memory is sinking deeper into my sleeping bag in our family's tiny camping trailer. While visiting relatives, we were spending the night in a park near Billings, Montana. An intense storm came through that night with loud booms and blinding, crashing light. In the morning I remember someone speaking with my parents about lightning blasting holes in the ground nearby. Once again, Dad and

Mom comforted me by distracting my attention to the fun we would have with Uncle Paul and Aunt Vera.

The Japanese god Raijin is the god of thunder and lightning. "He is considered a trickster who can bring both good in the form of rain, and destructive storms as well" (mythopedia.com). In Roman mythology, the sky god Jupiter is called "Light-bringer," and "all places struck by lightning were made his property and were guarded from the profane by a circular wall" (britannica.com). (While in Scotland, I stood by a sculpted stone thought to be an altar to Jupiter built by Romans in Britain).

Of course we can't overlook the great overseer of the Greeks – Zeus, with his companion Hera, Queen of the Heavens – the Olympian god who gave us the dramatic image of a deity sending down punishing bolts of lightning on mortals (see theoi.com).

Whether or not we believe in this or that divine being, fact is, weather happens. If we view the world as the playground or playground of forces who control everything, or who sit back on a heavenly throne to observe our fearful frailty, truth is, atmospheric phenomena generally affect all human beings across the ever-changing planet. Religions of ancient times tell us weather events are caused for blessing or curses; if we choose to accept that, we might consider who suffers the most – usually poorer, more vulnerable people exposed to the elemental forces of nature.

Light-bearers or fright-bearers, perhaps we can let the bowling giants remain in childhood dreams.

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.