

A log across the bog: Balancing natural bridges



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

On a drive along the coast we passed through the Great Dismal Swamp. An early surveyor from Virginia called it: “a horrible desert, the foul damps ascend without ceasing, corrupt the Air, and render it unfit for Respiration.” But George Washington referred to it as a “glorious paradise” (see dismalwetcomecenter.com). Wild nature presents diverse experiences.

In Yellowstone National Park we endured the sulfur smells walking on the boardwalks over bubbling volcanic mudpots. A surreal landscape where the world is created and shaped before our eyes. When I was building trails through a forest on an island in the Pacific Northwest, one path opened out on a meadow that transformed to marshland during the rains.

All of these natural environments have a certain beauty, a touch of mystery, and however unexpected and invisible, teeming life. It's not difficult to understand how we can be “swamped with emotions” or get “bogged down” in places like these.

Here I'm concerned to connect the swamps and bogs and marshes to the places where every step can be challenging, where we might sink in deeper into slippery stuckness. Isn't this true with spiritual swamps, boggy areas of belief, full of mud, muck and decaying things like theology, dogma and ritual? What do we do when faced with these impassable obstacles in the path? Do we find a way around or over?

In some old jungle movies like “Tarzan,” people get stuck in quicksand that sucks them down the more they struggle to get out. The primal fear of being swallowed by the earth centers on the instinctual sense that we must avoid dangerous regions and be on the defensive. A creative alternative may be to find a crossing, a safer passage, though there will always be risk involved.

One of the most helpful analogies I use at the edge of the quicksand or swampland dividing the secular and spiritual is building and crossing bridges (or letting them crumble to dust when they aren't helpful any longer; while some might burn them to break from their former “faith family”). While reflecting on times I've balanced on a log to cross a stream, river or marsh, it came to me – this may be a more natural and fruitful image.

Several years ago, in a California State Park, I walked across a towering

redwood that had fallen over a creek. So many creatures with four legs and two had hurried or scurried across the fallen giant that the top had been worn almost flat. But a person still had to watch their step to carefully balance to the other side. Precarious, precipitous. Not a time for panic but deeper attention. The perspective from up there, standing in the middle, 10 feet over the trickling creek, was exhilarating. Looking up, surrounded and sheltered by massive redwoods, there was a feeling of grounded protection. But looking down, the awareness returned that losing balance would meet a nasty fall into cold wet stones. The balance was actually between “heaven and earth,” that is, the reality of where you stand, and the lofty, leafy gaze toward the sky.

When climbing up to waterfalls in Scotland there was no path, no way to avoid what the Scots call “boggy ground.” Each step took effort as my boot sunk into thick clumps of grassy mud. The hike seemed twice as long, and it probably was. I'd compare the experience to snowshoeing in deep powder. A similar thing happened when I ignored a “Danger! Hazardous Area!” sign while sauntering near the coast. The trail was washed out in some spots, with lots of squishy ground and tangled roots, but I found my own way around, though I came away mud-caked, sweaty

and soaked. Sometimes the danger can be our own fearfulness. Then again, there may be “signs” that others have passed the same way and have knowledge and cautionary words to share. Obviously we need to look, listen and decide to proceed or turn back. The way may be slow, but that just calls for more patient effort, more deliberate movement, to gain some ground, or a better perspective. A good lesson when faced with boggy beliefs.

We could summarize the log-and-bog image in this way: though the ground between people of faith and freethinkers may not be solid, it doesn't have to mean there are no opportunities for progress. It isn't necessarily about getting to one side or the other; the intent is to allow for an unhindered flow of freethinking, open space for balanced discussion and potential throughways for positive change. I don't imagine this as simple or easy. It may be a true balancing act. Yet, worth it.

There's no reason to feel dismal, or to get swamped.

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.