

Returning to our senses along common streams and paths



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

When speaking at a bookstore in Bellingham, Washington, some years ago I began by sharing “a little idea that’s been hiking around in my brain.” Here’s the path of reasoning, the stream of consciousness, I took that evening.

Some say there is only one path to God, the Great Spirit, Creator, Ultimate Reality. I sense some truth in that. Consider the common theme handed down through the centuries in the teachings of world traditions:

- In the biblical book of Genesis, humankind is crafted from the mud of the earth in a forested garden teeming with other wild creatures, thriving by a great river.
- The Chinese book of Tao tells us to look to water and trees to learn about the Universe as well as ourselves.
- The Hindu Upanishads say the Cre-

ator is hidden in the heart of every living creature.

- Gautama Buddha was “awakened” while sitting under a tree in an Indian forest.

- The radical Rabbi of Nazareth hiked around the holy land teaching parables about trees, water, animals, plants and birds.

- The desert Prophet Muhammad first heard the Qur’an recited to him in an Arabian cave.

- Native traditions honor the Great Spirit animating all life on Mother Earth.

All of these streams or paths seem to have one thing in common: they originate in a natural environment, and tell the Great Story of a wide and wild way to the Greatest Power in the Universe – Nature – with an array of faces and names. The pilgrimage and the destination are One, a living network of pathways or riverways to life, truth and happiness, crisscrossing a natural landscape sculpted by awe and great beauty. As we pass through, the journey begins again and again.

I concluded my remarks at the bookstore with this statement: “We are reminded by these traditions, as well as by naturalists and other explorers of the natural cosmos, that Nature holds the key to our highest hopes and deepest wonders as we seek a path of greening light in the temple of Nature.”

Admittedly a poetic spin there. But was I correct in my presentation? Is there one path to the “divine,” the “sacred” – to “god”? Could that trail be the most obvious, the most visible, trail woven with countless thoroughways? Might “The Way” actually be a myriad of interconnected Ways? Is it possible our historic religions have intentionally or unintentionally led humanity astray with the illusion there is only one passage forward led by the light of faith, or any specific sectarian faith? A “One Way” mentality leads to little more than what someone tells us we will find on that well-maintained and monitored track. There is no room for curiosity, exploration, discovery, question, and certainly little room for critical thinking. The divine destination is completely ex-

pected. Unlike wild nature and our own natural inquisitive sense, these “paved pathways of piety” or “boardwalks of belief” lead precisely to the predictable points we’re directed to. There really is no “mystery” when we’re told what we are to conclude before we even begin. “Follow this path and you will find [Allah; YHVH; Jesus; Krishna; Tao; God; etc.]” Where is the adventure in that? Sounds like someone telling us Who Did It before we even read the Who Done It. No suspense, let alone pleasure in trying to figure it out on our own.

Approaching this from another viewpoint, let’s say we are taking an exam, perhaps the most important examination in our lives. We want to enter the University of Truth (or the University of the Universe). There is one question to answer and we are handed the answer before we begin. We write down the “correct” response and are accepted. Now we’re instructed to “search” for that “correct” answer throughout our lives until we arrive at the “shocking” finale,

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coming face to face with the Great Answer we've known all along. Does that feel like an exam worth taking, a real education, a true search, a fulfilling and

meaningful life? That evening in Bellingham I read from John Muir and Henry David Thoreau. The wild Muir, of course, wanders and saunters all over the map. Then I picked a mouth-watering morsel of wisdom from Thoreau's fruitful mind, reflecting on how we can walk into a forest without truly being present to the forest, or even to our-

selves. "In my walks I would [be pleased to] return to my senses. What business have I in the woods, if I am thinking of something out of the woods." ("Walking"). The wise philosopher of Eastern forests called our attention to a sensible reflection: it is good to choose a health-enhancing track or tributary that consistently, and naturally, returns us to

humility and humanity.

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.