

When the healer could use some healing



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

When I was a chaplain, one of the greatest challenges was helping others when I could use some help myself. I was constantly encouraging others to “hang in there” and “take care” of themselves, to believe they were good, worthy people who had valuable things to offer the community. At times this was about all that kept me going; hearing myself lifting another person’s confidence while my own inner chorus of voices was often whispering “Who are

YOU to be saying these things?” Trained in empathetic pastoral counseling I never forgot the wise words of the Nazarene when he was faced with criticism: “Physician, heal yourself.”

Any sensitive, reflective person in a helping profession has to be aware of their own limitations, weaknesses and needs, their own deep desire to be helped. During those years as a chaplain and minister, I was going through a painful divorce, difficult periods with my young daughter, a constant worry over funding that impacted my income and housing, and those ever-present self-doubts that pester and plague – these made it especially hard to assist others when I needed assistance, too. Add to these stressors the daily pressures of walking straight into the psy-

chic battleground of the justice system, homelessness, poverty, mental illness, drug abuse and each person’s intense inner conflict. When a chaplain (or any caring professional) walks with suffering people, some of that suffering has to rub off. After all, we pack our personal pain every day, at every step (as Emerson wrote of his inner life, in Self-Reliance: “My giant goes with me wherever I go”).

According to one study, a majority of pastors in America have counseled someone in their congregation who suffered from some form of mental crisis. A quarter of these ministers said they have “personally struggled with some type of mental illness.” One conservative pastor responded: “If you are in ministry and are struggling with de-

pression, anxiety or other mental health challenge, consider reaching out to those around you who are able and willing to support you through it” (“Why church leaders can — and must — address their own mental health,” Religion News Service, 10/10/22).

Through my own intense days of ministry I regularly turned to people I could trust who were willing to listen or offer guidance. I went to counseling sessions through my seminary, then saw a Jungian therapist, before seeing a counselor who specialized in men’s issues. Thankfully, there were colleagues I could be honest with and confide in – a Jewish rabbi, a Presbyterian minister, a Buddhist priest. And, perhaps not sur-

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prising, I often found great solace in sharing at least some of my struggles with members of my own unusual congregations. Some of the most compassionate people I ever met were locked in jail cells, sleeping in shelters or tents, or survivors of breakdowns or addiction – people well acquainted with suffering. There were moments when their handshake or hug meant more than they could ever know to one “walking wounded healer.”

Much has been said about “bound-

aries,” and I respect those; maybe I’m spilling a little too much of my personal story here, but I’ve listened to enough people over the years to sense these honest reflections (admissions, confessions?) can have an impact. Risking to speak the truth from our own experience can bend barriers. Yet, sometimes one word of unfiltered truth can do more than a scripture, sermon, or an entire seminary course.

The ancient Roman Stoic teacher Epictetus, who endured years of slavery followed by exile, instructed his students to focus on forming a virtuous character rather than being distracted by whatever was going on around them that was out of their control. The one

who learns the way of wisdom, the philosopher, can become a doctor or therapist of the mind/soul. Developing a virtuous character is “good,” not material possessions, or position or power.

My wife’s most effective work as a counselor and teacher connects her with the joys and struggles of what she considers “the spiritual journey.” Her work is similar to what I’ve done through the years – listening, encouraging, not trying to “fix” or “rescue” another. And our common work (or ministry) has consistently been centered on “being centered” – companioning another person through challenging times fully conscious of our own frailties, failures and the necessity for personal growth.

That kind of self-reflection shows integrity as well as wisdom, aspects of character that are forever in process and – hopefully – open to new insights. Rabbi Moshe Leib said he learned how to love others by listening to a peasant in a pub “to truly love others is to know what they need and bear their sorrow.” Perhaps each of us, from time to time, is a peasant in a pub.

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.