

We don't know, but we have to know



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

In a class discussion concerning online misinformation, one student grew serious: "We don't know what's true anymore! There's no way to decide the truth." I sympathized, then replied: "But don't we have to? It just might take more time, effort and questioning." Since the class included discussion of the scientific method and skepticism, I called attention back to the essential value of determined investigation. Knowledge comes through a learning process—not an information dump or download. As we're aware, much of what's passed around on the internet is "info" that often isn't very informative, "knowledge" that really doesn't help us know very much. A lot of it is opinion disguised (or out in the open) as "true knowledge" that "must be shared!" How frequently we see a post that looks like an advertisement: "Stop Scrolling!", "Wait for it!", followed by some ridiculous picture or video that wasn't worth stopping or waiting for.

Truth, like wisdom, isn't shouted to demand attention, it doesn't need to be loud and flashy. Do you ever wonder

why Buddha, Moses, Jesus or Muhammad didn't show up in the 21st Century? Think of how many more people could see them and hear from them directly, instantly with the internet, radio, television—"Wait! Stop Scrolling!" Maybe good teaching allows for long reflection rather than immediate answers. Perhaps it's best we don't have the Founders of Faiths all over our screens every day. Then again, that might be more effective than old languages in ancient books?

When I hear someone say, or imply, there's "no way to know" whether something they see or read is "truly true" or "really real," I normally respond (with an air of confidence): "Yes there is." There is a way to know what's true; actually many ways. Once again, we have to be willing to put in the time and effort to discern and decide based on factual data rather than mere opinion or assumed "authority." And, this is critical to remember: we may not be able to definitively discover the accuracy of a claim, with a high degree of certainty. This is why suspending final judgment, holding "tentative conclusions," is a crucial aspect to the constant pursuit of wisdom (assuming a person seeks such a thing).

I came across an academic journal whose editors described their intent in this way:

"We hope that this journal will show

the value of embracing controversy as a means of getting closer to the truth, advancing knowledge, and reforming social and cultural paradigms." They think that "even when mainstream views are true or justified, if they are never challenged, they risk becoming dead dogmas rather than living truths."

Now, imagine if you will, a religious tradition, group or organization presenting their intention, their reason for being, in similar language: "We hope our faith community will show the value of controversy as a means of getting closer to the truth, advancing knowledge, and reforming social and cultural paradigms. We believe that views and beliefs have to be challenged or they risk becoming dead dogmas rather than living truths." Imagine that.

The journal managers followed their description with another line that would be fascinating to come from a religious group: "[We] do not support any beliefs or doctrines other than freedom of thought and expression." Certainly a controversial thing for any group or organization to say.

I've been reading about the life and philosophy of the 16th Century skeptic, Michel Montaigne. Montaigne was the one who tried out a new kind of writing, one that came to be known as the "essay." The more he experienced in his life, and wrote about those experiences, the more he expressed his own ignorance.

"If others examined themselves attentively, as I do, they would find themselves, as I do, full of inanity and nonsense... We are all steeped in it... but those who are aware of it are a little better off—though I don't know." Refreshing honesty.

When I responded to my student's concern about knowing what's true, that it may take more time and effort in our culture right now to ferret out the accuracy of things we hear and read, I also was thinking: this is all fine and dandy, IF we truly care about truth, gaining knowledge, learning something worthwhile. That's a big IF.

"Truthy" opinions can be passed around like a pack of candy. If we're not careful with information intake (sloppy with our skepticism), we might get more than bad nutrition and a bad stomach ache. There may be no healthy value in what we consume, and of course, that's probably why it's a good thing we don't consume everything we see or read, especially online, or in religious traditions. A suggestion for better digestion.

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His books and blogs are presented on "Friendly Freethinker" (www.chighland.com).