

The 'cruel comfort' of a 'better place'



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

We need to think about, and talk about, something that people often say when someone dies or tragedy strikes. I was reminded of this awful and thoughtless statement while reading about a family in Uvalde, Texas, whose young daughter was murdered at Robb Elementary School. The mother grew tense when someone assured her: "She's in a better place." Shaken, the mother responded: "No, she isn't. She should be here!" It was troubling to read this. That family has been through hell—they're still in hell—and, without thinking, a person says such a thing. Some of us would no doubt shush the careless person and usher the mother away.

Not everyone who voices these sentimental beliefs to a grieving person, or says them to comfort themselves, is thoughtless or mean-spirited. Many of our most common expressions during times of grief and loss are hollow words, spoken because people feel they have to say something, anything, to make sense of senseless loss. Words are spoken when spoken words are unnecessary, even empty. We feel the need to say something, though I think being consciously present is enough. Empathetic words can be okay, but not platitudes that are essentially meaningless.

It's possible some of this perfunctory speech is related to the old adage: "The grass is always greener on the other side." Problem is, I've never heard any description of a heavenly realm with grass, or any other

green and growing things (though the Qur'an speaks of a garden paradise). In biblical apocalyptic tradition, everyone ends up an urban dweller, living eternally in "The City of God." The Book of Revelation at least presents a touch of nature: a tree growing by a river. But there are no forests, mountains, fields, oceans, animals, insects or gardens. Even the sun is gone (God is the only source of light). Believers will pass through pearly gates and enter the celestial city on streets made of gold, though it's hard to imagine pearls and gold will have any value after death. Imagine living where there was no nature, no birds singing, no sea breeze or mountain snows, a never-ending existence with nothing natural at all. Sound like heaven, or that other place?

Is a place called "heaven" a "better place"? My youthful evangelical friends and I couldn't wait until the clouds opened, Jesus appeared and took us into our promised Sky-Home. Faith was fundamentally centered on anxious anticipation, expectation that the end of time, and our lives, was near—and thank God for that! We fervently believed in a better place where we could praise the Lord forever in better bodies, better churches and better homes ("mansions over the hilltop," we sang). And what made it truly better: no more unbelievers to worry about. Eternity with our friends, fellow believers like us, was the main attraction, other than being "in the Lord's presence" every second for infinity.

All of this seems so sad when young people are led to believe such things. On the other end of life—at the end of life—it's also quite sad, and disappointing. Disappointing because the mythological expressions and fanciful imaginations are often not only unhelpful and inconsiderate but sound intentionally evangelistic at best and perhaps unintentionally childish. The "better

beyond" mentality is based on strange beliefs, not all originating in the Bible (the Hebrew Bible paints no pictures of an afterlife). Much of our cultural beliefs about the afterlife seem to come from art. Apart from Hollywood films, depictions of Dante's "Inferno" or Pilgrim's Progress, memories of Sunday School walls or old Bible pictures, impressionable children carry these imaginative conceptual stories through life. When they approach their death, clergy or family remind them of those images of their heavenly home. "Remember, you're going to a better place."

I can't help but respond to these childhood beliefs with irritation. Why cheapen our lives here with dreams of something superior somewhere else? If a person believes they can be walking with the Lord in a better place right now, what's the use of life here? It casts a shadow over the beauty and goodness of our world, and the inherent value of every human life, to claim a heavenly upgrade, a higher destination, is the whole purpose, the entire goal of life on earth. My particular concern is this: It's fine for you to personally believe there's a better place, a better world, a better life somewhere else, but for the rest of us to truly experience a better life here and now, please keep those beliefs to yourself. If you find it comforting to imagine an eternal Sunday service with Jesus in the pulpit, I find that sad, but that's your choice.

One's faith should not be a practice of cruelty.

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).