

Cracks in the ice: Sliding over thawing theology



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Someone asked me how I get fresh ideas for columns. I laughed, replying that almost daily I pick up stories or news items, or simply thoughts and questions that pop into my mind, to click my keyboard into action. When it comes to religion and humanism, I enjoy probing the potential interactions and possible collaborations in the world of faith and freethought. I engage the challenge to thaw the frozen ground between believers and non-believers, especially given the glacial speed in which change comes in matters of faith.

This icy analogy may not be so useful any longer. “Glacial speed” is, unfortunately, not as grindingly slow as it once was. In a BBC article on an Antarctic expedition by scientists and writers, the urgency to address our warming Earth is clear as polar water (“Elizabeth Rush on her epic journey to Earth’s ‘doomsday glacier,’” BBC Travel, 14, August, 2023). The article begins: “In 2019, 57 scientists and crew embarked on a 54-day journey to the farthest reaches of Antarctica. Their mission: Thwaites Glacier, a rapidly crumbling block of ice the size of Britain.” If this one mammoth glacier keeps melting at this rate, sea levels could rise by 10 feet or more. Near the end of the interview, Rush speaks of her concerns in almost religious language: “The thing that was so shocking to me was that this

collapse event could literally be happening in front of my eyes and I wouldn’t know it. It was so big I missed it, which is humbling. If you can’t see a glacier fall to pieces in front of you, then that means that the phenomenon is way bigger than you initially imagined and that your perspective is the wrong perspective to see it. I think that’s an excellent metaphor for climate change. It’s really hard for humans to see it ...”

These phrases froze my attention: “It was so big I missed it, which is humbling ... [it’s] way bigger than you initially imagined and ... your perspective is the wrong perspective to see it.” Once you re-focus your eyes — and imagination — to expand the view, you realize you were seeing only one tree and missing the whole forest. The grandeur and immensity of nature can blind us like the glare of the sun off a field of ice. We gaze at an ice cube and think we understand, that we comprehend, the glacier.

In youthful years I joined the Mountaineers in Seattle with my uncle and cousin. After many hours climbing to a peak in the Olympic Mountains, we enjoyed the exhilaration of sliding down a glacier on our backsides. This is called “glissading.” It can be a lot of fun to slip down a mountainside, cutting off hours from a long hike. That day, after the thrill of the glissade, we looked back up the glacier to see that we had unknowingly crossed a crevasse on the way down — a crack in the ice field, that could have been hundreds of feet deep. If we had fallen in, who knows if we would ever have been found. A few moments of glee became a stunning, humbling sense of our smallness on the mountain, and in nature. We began to see the Bigger Picture, and that filled us with wonder and a healthy

dose of fearful awe.

A few years following the wild glissade down the glassy mountainside, I caught the fever of faith. With the same kind of zip and zeal I felt sliding across the glacier, I became an evangelist for one mountain, one trail. It took a lot more hikes on a lot more trails into many more mountain ranges to look back to see the cracks in the frozen landscape. This might be a slippery analogy to use, but a personal thawing of faith gave me a wider perspective, a higher imagination that helped me see far beyond the narrowness, to be grateful I didn’t fall into the dangerous crevasses along the way.

Elizabeth Rush got a close-up view of one glacier and discovered a much larger truth that calls for greater thinking and more decisive action. Of that encounter with the massive chunk of ice, she described the experience: “It was so otherworldly. It does make me feel how precious and miraculous it is that we exist. I felt like it was close to touching down on another planet, and to see how difficult it would be to eke out a human existence on another planet makes me really grateful for ours.”

It takes effort to re-adjust our vision, to imagine other worlds, for one main purpose: to respect, even reverence, the world we have. Up close to nature’s frighteningly beautiful creation, we can see ourselves crystal clear.

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).