

Freethought, faith, freedom and finches



Highland Views
Chris Highland
Guest columnist

I often eat lunch with the birds. Not that I share their seeds and bugs, but I stand near them as they scratch, peck and nibble. I observe them as they observe me. We have food in common, the nourishment of Nature. And, as Whitman reminds us, we "are" Nature. I watch what the feathered feeders do, how they act with each other and with others of different flying species. I have a lot to learn; I'll never learn all they have to teach. Old, wise teachers, some very young, inexperienced, yet probably

more attuned to instinct than I.

Keeping my eye on the diversity of wild birds, I notice the behavior of colorful finches seems to differ from other birds. Like most feathered friends, they are quick to fly in all directions when they detect the slightest movement of shadow or light; I have to stand very still to fool them (or are they making a fool of me, freezing me in place so they can feel safe?). Either way, like all birds, finches are easily frightened, yet close observation reveals a calmer side. At times I see one or two sitting on a perch of the seed-feed, still, alert, awake, appearing to have all senses wide open to their surroundings, though apparently unconcerned.

It's true, at times I see a cardinal resting. The contemplation of a cardinal is beautiful. But I rarely see a nuthatch or

chickadee, titmouse or towhee, settle down for even a minute. Don't even mention the doves. Supposedly symbols of serenity, doves seem among the most nervous of birds. Yet the finch can, now and then, sit still. A finch may not flinch, at least for moments or minutes. It takes a break, a rest, looks around without the quick jerk of the neck, seems to take in the world, but not in an anxious, distracted way.

Finches can be good models for free-thinkers and faithful humans too. Do we have to be constantly on guard, defensive, looking for the next best way to fight or flee some predator, real or imagined? Those who hold tight to the perches of religion, feeding on their daily bread, may soar in on wild wings, hoping to scatter others who glide in for other sustenance. They may discourage

others of their species or variant species from stillness and contemplation, when deep and sincere questions may arise and emerge about the Great Provider of Seeds. They may resist those who speak of Nature, or other forms of divinity, as Providence, and may insist these are untrue or harmful to the soul. On the other hand (or wing), there are those among the freethinking "free spirits" who aren't so attached to the perches, or to one seed-feeder. They may fly alone or with small flocks searching for natural nourishment wherever it may be found.

Then, there are the finch-like fliers who enjoy landing here and there, who find their own branch, where they can sit still, read in silence, share new

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thoughts, while letting old fluffy beliefs and opinions float away. They are sensibly satisfied with expanding knowledge in wider landscapes of discovery, while at the same time they are dissatisfied with the restraints and restrictions of “caged” thinking. They won’t be caught in “flights of fancy.”

Opinions can change like our environment, or they can stay relatively the same, depending on how relevant and rational those opinions truly are. For freethinkers, and the freethinking faithful, what we choose – our chosen trees or chosen forests – form the ecosystem of our lives, our worldviews.

Observing the birds is only the beginning of our open-air classroom education. We are on a continual field trip, visited by the wild things, earthbound and airbound. Naturalist and bird-lover, John Burroughs, once wrote: “The birds are pioneers that begin the world anew about us each season, and their lives touch and cross ours at new points at all times...Like Nature herself they are endowed with immortal youth, and always present to us an endless field for fresh observation” (“Field and Study,” 1919). What Burroughs saw, any of us can see, when we take the time to follow the finches, to find our own perches and “just sit.” Does that sound too lazy, boring, worthless? Only to the person who has never learned a crucial lesson of what some have called “the most ancient religion.” The wisest of history have been those who not only stopped to observe the world around them, but looked and listened for wisdom in the most unexpected places, in human and non-human faces and facts.

In close proximity with the animals, we are not merely observing Nature, but, like Burroughs, “we feel a kinship with her works ... that relates us to all living things.”

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. His books and blogs are presented on “Friendly Free-thinker” (chighland.com).