

A harvest of happiness without hope of heaven



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

In his scribbled journals from the mountains of Alaska (1890), naturalist John Muir wrote: "We find in the fields of Nature no place that is blank or barren; every spot on land or sea is covered with harvests, and these harvests are always ripe and ready to be gathered, and no toiler is ever underpaid. Not in these fields, God's wilds, will you ever hear the sad moan of disappointment, 'All is vanity.'" Muir, raised in a severe Scottish home, forced to read the Bible and go to church, found his beloved wilderness to be a great and good sanctuary. For him, "a single day in so divine an atmosphere of beauty and love would be well worth living for, and at its close, should death come, without any hope of another life, we could still say, 'Thank you, God, for the glorious gift!' and pass on." Even without a promised land in the sky, an awesome day in Nature would be enough to live, and be thankful for.

Muir was a man of faith, but in my view, his kind of faith was not at all oth-

erworldly or distracted by the supernatural. He was content to set up his tent on the old brown earth (though he preferred to sleep in the open air) instead of pinning his dreams on a "mansion over the hilltop" (a song we once sang in the Baptist church). As I read his writings, he was a believer in a Lord who was very much like Nature herself — creator, provider, artist and expansive enough to absorb a person into the forest, meadow, mountain or ocean. With no fear or fantasy of death and an afterlife, Muir could saunter the wild world with a pure joyfulness in the gift, the present of the present moment: "Indeed, some of the days I have spent alone in the depths of the wilderness have shown me that immortal life beyond the grave is not essential to perfect happiness." He experienced "a kind of terrestrial immortality." Why wish for a happy home in the heavens when there is so much available here, such a bounty of beauty? When life is a gift, why imagine something better — an "after-life"?

From his wild wanderings, Muir exclaims: "After days like these we are ready for any fate — pain, grief, death or oblivion — with grateful heart for the glorious gift as long as hearts shall endure. In the meantime, our indebtedness is growing ever more. The sun

shines and the stars, and new beauty meets us at every step in all our wanderings." He's fine with the finality, with death and no guarantee there is anything beyond death, because his heart is overflowing with gratefulness here, now, at every step. "New beauty" holds deeper meaning for Muir, since elsewhere in his journals he wrote that Beauty was another name for God, and perhaps God was another name for Beauty.

From nothing we come, to nothing we go. As a child, Muir would have memorized verses such as: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will return" (Job), "As he came forth of his mother's womb, naked shall he return to go as he came" (Ecclesiastes), "For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it" (First Letter to Timothy).

Though we have our "blank and barren" times, the wandering naturalist stops us in our tracks to point out the vistas, the all-encompassing beauty where harvests are always plentiful. We're "well paid" for our efforts, walking in the fields and forests, or in a park or our own backyards. It's all worth living for, to glean the bounty of the earth without a thought for another land, other crops in the clouds.

Someone sent me an article on "heaven and the afterlife." I took a quick look and found nothing particularly new. Since my days as an evangelical youth, through years of ministry and later years as a teacher and writer, I've heard countless theories and opinions on what may or may not come after death. I still find Muir's sun-filled sensibility superior to any beliefs. And I've never heard even one description of heaven that sounds like a place or a state I want to see in the "hereafter." We didn't exist before we were born, so not existing after we're dead isn't any different.

I would rather listen to the perspectives of people who immerse themselves in the natural world, who search and study to learn all they can from this world, the only world we have, the only world we know anything about. Speculation can be interesting, but, like Muir, there is so much beauty to experience here. Who has time for heaven?

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).