

Natural drama: Broken branches of belief

**Highland Views**

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

Nature's drama can be quite a show, each act delightful or dangerous, humorous or harmful. For me, one of the best things about the natural world is

that it doesn't need us, doesn't require any human presence. One of the silliest trick questions we used to hear asked: If a tree falls in the forest and there's nobody there to hear it, does it make a sound? Ridiculous. Do humans have to be there for something to happen? The joke is a great reminder for less-than-humble humans that we aren't center stage, the star of the show. Nature, in countless costumes on endless sets, is constantly active in the play of Life,

whether we are there or not, whether we notice or not.

While writing a response to a reader's reflections on religion and faith, there was a strong gust of wind and a huge branch broke from a tree just outside my window. The crack and thump startled me to my feet. Thankfully, it missed our house and fell across a corner of the neighbor's driveway when she wasn't outside. Apparently I was the only human to hear it, so I alerted several neigh-

bors and arranged for a tree service to come.

The reader I was writing to when the branch fell is a former professor of theology. He heard me speak in South Carolina and read one of my books. His email was deeply thoughtful, and he appreciated that I helped stimulate his thinking about subjects that he's wrestled with for years. He explained there was a

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theme woven through his years of teaching: “As a full-time academic theologian, it was one of intellectual humility in matters of belief, and generosity in matters of ethics.” As he has grown older, he has chosen to stay connected to his church community. “I’m not sure that leaving the church behind completely would serve any worthwhile purpose. But finding ways to combat superstition, religious bigotry, irrationality and hostility toward science, and cultivate a generous spirit in matters of traditional Christian morality (e.g., the LGBTQ community), these are areas where I may still be able to make some meaningful difference — at least as long as people of faith will put up with me. And I view you and your work as a helpful ally in this endeavor.” In that context, I certainly affirm his choice to remain in relation with the church.

In his letter, the professor referred to a question I sometimes use to invite conversation: “How do you regard secular worldviews?” His stated response rang true: “I welcome the opportunity to dialogue with fellow strugglers and to

learn and share what I can.” He makes a good point with the next line: “While this sentiment is absent from many communities within the church, that is certainly not true for all.” He’s sensitive to the imbalance evident in some congregations, something that might be corrected with more dialogue and willingness to learn.

The next topic our theologian presents concerns “the foundations of ethical decision-making.” Reading the neuro-scientist Sam Harris, the professor finds some disagreement with the notion that science can offer that foundation of ethical values, that historically we have looked to religion and philosophy to provide. This leads to questions about the origins of a belief in human worth and dignity. Is this something that arises from “intuition” or from scriptures and revelations? The theology professor suspects science, by itself, cannot give us “an overall compelling worldview and a way of understanding the human condition.” In response, I wrote that maybe science can’t present all that, yet the way of thinking, studying and learning about our world, guided by a scientific method that seeks evidence, may indeed be the best thing we have. However, I do agree with his further reasoning: “We need our shared

narratives and our communal reflections, many if not most of which are handed down through the ages, as resources to prompt our reflection and to give birth to ever new generations of responsible human agents.”

I think we do need to share narratives from the past, and yet our own contemporary stories are really all we have for plain truth. And, as I see it, the best evidence may continually be those two qualities of character — the guiding themes the professor directs attention toward: humility and generosity. Whenever there may be broken branches of belief, fractures of faith, perhaps these can often lead us back to firm roots to grow and guide us.

We can’t push the analogy too far, but after the tree fell, my wife and I were standing in the window, and noticed how much more light was streaming in. There’s probably some lesson there, in the drama.

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).