

Island faith, mainland mind: Sand, spirituality and secular education



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

In his book, "The Diversity of Life" (1999), biologist E.O. Wilson wrote: "Earth is biologically still a mostly unexplored planet." It's as if we're living in a large house and we've never been inside a majority of the rooms. Every rocky trail or sandy shoreline presents something new and wonderful.

While on Daufuskie Island in South Carolina, I picked up a copy of Pat Conroy's "The Water is Wide." Having taught high school in his hometown of Beaufort, he felt drawn to teach on Daufuskie in the late 1960s. Conroy knew it would be a challenge, primarily because he was a young white man seeking to teach in an all-Black school. But he was also about to set foot on sands shaped by the troubled winds of Southern history. "It is not a large island, nor an important one, but it represents an era and a segment of history that is rapidly dying in America." Young people were leaving the island, along with the oyster industry, and the endangered Gullah culture was disappearing. What Pat found on the island was too much Jesus

and too little genuine education. The children in his classes barely knew how to read and write, and hardly anything about the world beyond the island. They answered Conroy's question in unison: Who was the greatest person who ever lived — "Jesus." And in the kids' minds, the second greatest person was Jesus' brother — "Jesus Christ." Sounds almost funny, but the new teacher was learning fast his students had been deprived of any serious education.

This can also describe when a religion becomes its own protective island, fearful of letting someone in who may disrupt the insulated comfort. It takes less than an hour to cross over Calibogue Sound from Bluffton or Hilton Head Island, but one Black teacher told Pat Conroy they considered Daufuskie "overseas."

Secularism and religion meet on these kinds of shorelines. At best and healthiest, both wander into unexplored areas where every step is a potential discovery. What islands await those who feel the need to teach, and learn by teaching? Where can we go to come back to the age-old rule of educators: Be a student? When humanists or people of faith forget to listen, island to island, person to person, the opportunity to cross the barriers of water or mind is missed.

As he grew to know and value his students, Conroy learned what their true religion was: "James Brown is the Yahweh substitute on the island. The kids...have memorized his songs as though they were the Gospel according to Luke." Their teacher introduces them to Beethoven and other classical composers who captivate the kids. He takes them to the mainland for a Halloween party, a basketball game and a museum. None of them had been that far from home before — a whole new world before them, yet still not ready for them. They thought the first president was JFK. "They had never been to a movie theater or to a ball game...or a museum, never looked at a work of art, never read a piece of good literature, never ridden a city bus, never taken a trip, never seen a hill...never learned to swim, and never done a thousand things that children of a similar age took for granted."

At the end of his year on the island, Conroy was fired, but not before he won a minor victory. The county school board granted him money for gas to power his boat. "The victory strengthened my belief that a man could speak the truth to his elders, to the new scribes and pharisees, and not be crucified..." Sad to lose his job and relationship with the children, Conroy knew it was his own ego that doomed him. Yet, those

who dumped him shared the blame. "They had rule books and Bibles...They were deacons in their churches... they had quoted the Bible liberally and authoritatively and felt the presence of the Savior...The only thing they could not control was their fear." Terrified of change, innovation, integration, these people in power couldn't allow the Conroy's of the world to bridge the wide gap to the island.

In the end, Pat Conroy felt he didn't change much in the lives of the kids. "I felt much beauty in my year with them. It hurt very badly to leave them. For them I leave a single prayer: that the river is good to them in the crossing." Remaining on Daufuskie, or choosing to venture off and out, perhaps they at least had a glimpse of what the wider world offered across the troubled waters, and what they might contribute to the island, known and unknown, named America.

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).