

If I can't explain it, I don't understand it



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

While teaching classes on Freethought I read and re-read books and articles that help me explain the subject. Whether the course is about a specific Freethinker such as Thomas Paine, Lucretia Mott, Robert Ingersoll, Walt Whitman, Carl Sagan or other representative thinker, or focuses on a central theme such as Humanism or Freethought itself, my intent is to be well prepared. Each time I dig into materials to learn and re-learn the subject, I'm reminded how much I know, and how much I don't know. Sometimes I stop to wonder: Do I know enough to teach this? I consider what the purpose of teaching is, what education fundamentally means. The teacher is always learning, a perpetual student, and there is much to learn from students. I don't pour what I know into brains like buckets, I float ideas in the air of the classroom for all of us to bat around like balloons.

The title of this column comes from a quote attributed to physicist Richard Feynman (some say Albert Einstein). The full quote is possibly: "If you can't explain it simply, then you don't under-

stand it well enough." Whichever is correct, the meaning is the same: know what you're talking about, especially when you're claiming to pass along real knowledge. If you can't explain something because you don't really understand what you're saying, you shouldn't be trying to convince others to believe it. This has major implications for Philosophy, Science and Religion.

Do you ever come across an online posting that proclaims "The Internet says..."? I always skip over those. We hear comments like "X says" or "Google says," which often means a loose collection of anonymous people posted their opinions on that platform and for some reason we're supposed to seriously accept it as true. I choose to be choosy about what or who pleads for my time and attention. The same goes for religious claims, especially when someone wants my attention ("Stop scrolling and look at this!"). Can anyone explain theology or spirituality in a quick and easy way, or confidently explain how an ancient book commands authority after thousands of years? "This pastor or priest says ...," or "My religious teachers tell me ...," "I watched a video about this," or "These books explain everything," just isn't good enough. "The Bible says" isn't much different than "The Internet says." People "explain" (mimic?) but often don't really understand whatever they want us to accept. Not only is

this unwise, but it's certainly not educational; more an exchange of opinions, and that's fine, as long as we understand that's what we're doing. It's more honest to say we don't fully understand something so our explanation may not be very accurate or adequate. In my view, a good teacher is clear about that, which might encourage students to think for themselves and perhaps come up with a solution, or perhaps a better explanation. A competent and conscientious teacher would be pleased with that.

I have an uncomfortable memory of a disastrous day as a substitute teacher in a middle school. I thought I could slide by handing out papers or showing a film, but students started asking for help on their math assignment. I was pretty good with math when I was their age, but then calculators were invented. Stumped by their questions, I simply deflected the conversation to some other assignment, and couldn't wait for the period to end (I'm sure the students felt the same way). I couldn't explain something because I didn't understand it; I couldn't remember how to solve a problem — in middle school mathematics! That's my confession, but now I'll deflect attention to the greater life lesson: If you don't know, admit it, and move on; understand the process of learning is a humble endeavor enhanced by various viewpoints and diverse ideas. How

much healthier would faith traditions be if this understanding guided their practice?

After describing how his approach to teaching some courses didn't work well, Feynman reasoned: "I think that there isn't any solution to this problem of education other than to realize that the best teaching can be done only when there is a direct individual relationship between a student and a good teacher — a situation in which a student discusses the ideas, thinks about the things, and talks about the things." (Preface to "Six Easy Pieces"). That rings true for me. In my experience, standing stiff behind a podium to lecture can be a barrier to healthy engagement with a subject or students, hindering a delightfully relational environment. I'd rather present myself as a learner alongside learners, ready, willing and welcoming, inviting more knowledge.

I hope I've done a good job explaining this, because I'm not sure how much I understand it.

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).