

I'm right, you're wrong....think again



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

On an episode of the TED Radio Hour podcast, the organizational psychologist Adam Grant was interviewed. The topic was changing your mind, and I was interested in his description of three “modes” of thinking: Preacher, Prosecutor, Politician. As he understands it, thinking like a preacher is “defending a view you already have.” Thinking like a prosecutor is “attacking someone else’s views.” Thinking like a politician is only listening to people “if they already agree with your views.” All three of these modes “make it hard to think again” (Adam Grant wrote the book, “Think Again”). Whichever attitude and approach you take with these mindsets, your mind is set, “you’ve concluded you’re right and others are wrong.”

Obviously not every preacher, prosecutor or politician thinks like this, but it might be wise to reflect on the kind of mentality that resists hearing other viewpoints, or can’t imagine ever changing one’s mind. When it comes to religious opinions, especially beliefs that impact the health and wellbeing of

a person or their relationships, the way a person thinks can have serious consequences. A willingness to listen is critical, but so is having an openness to altering beliefs or even changing them.

A personal example from my college days makes this point clear to me. Still a convinced believer that Jesus was the only way to God and heaven, I took a course in World Religions and discovered there were other views I’d never heard before. I found that some Christians accepted there were other faiths and Christianity was just one of many religions in the world. There are Hindus who accept that Jesus was divine alongside Krishna, and Buddhists who honor the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth as well as Buddha. It was probably during this period of time that the truth sank in: Jesus was not a Christian, and the essence of faith was not following the way TO Jesus but the way OF Jesus — his concern for others, his service to the most vulnerable in our communities. I couldn’t see how he would get in a fight with Buddha, Krishna, Muhammad or any other wise teacher. This is when I first began to formulate a wider worldview that includes and appreciates the value of wisdom regardless of its source. I was emerging from a competitive perspective of religion to one that was more cooperative. What a relief to realize I no longer had to convince ev-

eryone around me that I was right and they were wrong. As Adam Grant states: “The goal is to improve myself, not prove [my opinions or beliefs are correct].”

This can be a major shift in thinking and believing. How does any kind of education happen without a commitment to being educated, welcoming the learning of new things, gaining knowledge we haven’t had before? How can we learn anything without a sense of curiosity, asking ourselves: What do I not know and how can I know more? Again, I find Adam Grant’s comments instructive: “Don’t make ideas your identity,” since “What I believe is not who I am.” Can we be honest enough about that? If we try so hard to hold tight to our cherished beliefs that we become identified with them, even in our own minds, do we become unwilling to seriously listen any longer, to truly hear the thoughts of others? Are we willing to risk making adjustments to our thinking, allowing room for the evolution of our views based on new information, new evidence? How else will we be able to join others in figuring things out for the benefit of all?

I’m not the best at any of this, but I seek to be aware of when I’m defending my position as a preacher, prosecutor or politician. What good does it do to simply spend time defending my own views, or attacking the views of others,

or merely listening to those who agree with me? This takes time, effort and the fundamental decision to do it, to practice it, to continually ask what the “it” is, that I feel the need to grasp so tenaciously.

Teaching another course on our virtually forgotten freethinking founder, Thomas Paine, I was reminded once again of his useful analogies. One of his arguments for America declaring independence from England was that an island can’t rule over a whole continent (“Common Sense,” 1776). It is the “natural right” of a people or a person to enjoy liberty as individuals, in government, and in religious belief. Freedom of conscience was essential to Paine as he imagined the new nation must defend that rightful liberty. Just as natural was his strong belief that “there should be diversity of religious opinions among us.”

A good reminder for our preachers, prosecutors or politicians.

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).