

Review of Chris Highland's The Universal University: Notes From the Greatest Classroom

by Jackie Ralston

As I write this review, we are less than a month into the “Trump–Musk co-presidency,” as some are calling it. Despite being warned of what would happen, many of us are shocked and dismayed by the damage already done and the utter stupidity of those behind it. Some of our allies are just starting to realize what’s ahead in the fight for our democracy, while some of us are already longing for a break. Just a little breather — a chance to recharge our batteries and reflect on what we’re doing and why — before returning to the fray.

Chris Highland’s new book may be just what we need. Highland is a former minister and chaplain, now a freethinking humanist, and also a writer and educator. *The Universal University: Notes From the Greatest Classroom* is a collection of columns previously published in the *Asheville Citizen-Times*. As one might expect from the title, the loose theme is what one might learn from nature, including thinking critically about it and ourselves.

Highland’s topics are wide-ranging and include: musings on perceiving and perspective; holidays and holy days; freedom and faith; critical thinking; atheism, secularism, and humanism; science and reason; afterlife issues; and effective communication. With 50 essays in *The Universal University: Notes From the Greatest Classroom* some subjects get repeat attention, yet Highland’s approach is fresh each time. As the very first essay (“Lessons From the Treetops”) makes clear, it’s a worthwhile investment to seek out new perspectives... sometimes literally.

The Universal University: Notes From the Greatest Classroom is clear and easy to read. While that means that one could breeze through it in an extended sitting, I don’t recommend that. With each column, Highland provides the reader a starting point and invites them to consider some ideas and feelings. Investing some time in doing that would be quite rewarding. Choosing one column a day to read, almost as a homily, would be a good pace, especially for those who like to journal their thoughts and reactions to such pieces.

The columns appear to be unorganized; if they’re organized chronologically, there’s no context to make that clear. One column uses British spellings, which was a bit jarring for this editor. Including the date and its original publication source under each column title would be very helpful to the reader at little cost to the author. Having someone with fresh eyes check the manuscript before publication would be helpful too. There are a few inconsistencies that most readers might overlook, but one column contains two incomplete sentences that close their respective paragraphs; it’s frustrating to be left guessing what Highland meant. That said, these are minor quibbles for what is overall a very good book.

I’ll admit to having some trepidation about reading *The Universal University: Notes From the Greatest Classroom*. My experiences with formerly religious people have been mixed at best, with both of us usually being responsible for

the failure to break through our stereotypes and suspicions so that we could talk honestly. If he had been one of those people, the chip on my shoulder would have melted faster. Highland does throw a couple of jabs, but in fairness, they are well deserved, and he targets both communities. In one column, he mentions his desire to “thaw the frozen ground between believers and nonbelievers,” and the book’s sincere tone bolsters that claim.

As we enter another period that is trying our souls, I wish I could be more optimistic that Highland’s efforts will continue to make progress toward that goal. With interfaith tolerance and cooperation declining (as he points out), progress requires mutual respect and good-faith effort from all parties involved. Without the former, the latter is impossible.

A closed fist will not open to grasp an offered helping hand. I hope we secular humanists have the sense and discernment to communicate with those within faith communities who are similarly equipped.

The Universal University: Notes From the Greatest Classroom:

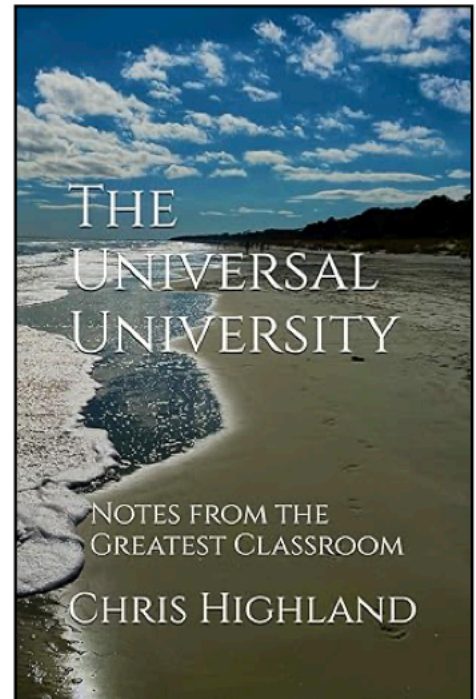
<https://www.amazon.com/Universal-University-Notes-Greatest-Classroom/dp/B0DL33SLNZ/>

For those who prefer to support independent booksellers, this list is a great resource:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_independent_bookstores_in_the_United_States

Highland’s website:

<https://chighland.com/>



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