

Bring nothing, take nothing: Dream or nightmare?



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

The dream, or rather the nightmare, I had one night, stayed with me through the whole day. The images were clear, and unsettling. In the dream, I had lost everything, which left me at a loss for words — until now. I could trace some of the sleep-time images to videos showing destruction caused by hurricanes, floods, earthquakes and tornadoes. It started with watching clips of the devastation in our own area after Tropical Storm Helene. So much loss; almost incomprehensible loss. Lives, property, forests. Scrolling YouTube for different stories, I noticed other disasters past and present. I was captivated by news reports from the 1989 earthquake in the Bay Area where I was living at the time. The footage brought back vivid memories of holding my young daughter as our home swayed in the quake, furniture falling, and the silence that followed. All the emotions of the moment returned, the tears, fears and gratitude we were okay.

I noticed a documentary about the

2011 quake and tsunami in Japan. Carol and I recall watching the scenes unfold in real time on that March day. I'd recently watched a video of the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean. Viewing those terrifying images of Nature's power, and terrible human suffering, reminded me of our human fragility, and the commonality of our helplessness in the face of natural disasters.

In the dream, I came home to my small apartment (I didn't recognize the place, but knew vaguely where it was). The door was already open, which was strange; entering I found that everything I owned was gone. I checked closets and each room, but nothing remained. It was obvious the whole unit had been repainted in white, clean and cleared of every piece of furniture, all possessions. Nothing was left. Stunned, I walked out the door to see the landlord in his car. Confused, I called out: "Where's my stuff?" He shrugged and drove away. When I awoke, the confused emptiness lingered. I thought of all the stories and images of loss I had viewed near and far — mental pictures of houses destroyed, people losing everything, whole families washed or blown away. A deep feeling of emptiness, something missing, and the gnawing question: What can you do when you lose it all, when you have nothing left?

On reflection, a verse floated back into my consciousness. It's from First Timothy: "For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out." A similar thought is found in the first chapter of Job: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will return." A parallel phrase is written in Ecclesiastes chapter 5: "As a man came from his mother's womb, so he will depart again, naked as he arrived." In the biblical context, I suppose the lesson is we should trust that God will provide, so we really don't need material things. Perhaps this was what Jesus meant when he said, in Matthew 6: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." What we cling to, what we value the most, will all be gone one day — in a moment, an hour. Does anything truly last?

Why did I watch all those disaster videos? Was I becoming a disaster junkie? Some of it was due to the way YouTube places similar clips side by side, but I think the main reason was going through a recent disaster, becoming more sensitized to what people around

the world have experienced. It gave me more empathy for their suffering. We only lost power, water, cell and internet in Helene, while witnessing hundreds of trees toppled in the incredible winds. Yet, our experience, even if much less a personal tragedy, brought a deeper understanding of the loss and lostness felt by others in the human family. In a sense, I think this also gave me more appreciation for those verses in ancient texts that call attention to our human-all-too-human propensity to tightly grasp "treasures," including our lives. We desperately hold on, unwilling to let go, but ultimately we have to — each and every one of us.

Whether we believe in "acts of God" or not, natural events can shake our belief in stability and security. We may find that we most treasure each other, confident that resilient humanity will endure, through both dreams and nightmares. The dreamlike disturbance of disasters can make us humbly aware that, sooner or later, we must leave it all behind.

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).