

Saying the quiet part (of beliefs) out-loud



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

No one likes to hear uncomfortable truths, especially about beliefs we hold dear. We don't like to be told there may be unspoken aspects to our beliefs that, if spoken, may cause changes in our views and opinions. When it's possible we could be stunned or shocked by learning some things, maybe thoughts or ideas we have never considered — we resist, we get defensive, perhaps angry. How dare someone reveal or bring to the surface, into the light of day, what we don't want to see or hear. Shouldn't some things be kept out of sight and mind — maybe they're hidden or avoid-

ed for good reasons?

Along with the rise of social (or anti-social) media, and more aggressive, anxiety-fueled political rhetoric, discussions over religious disagreements can get quite heated. I'm not one for debating, yet an exchange of different perspectives can be — at best — constructive, even educational. Learning the reasons why another person thinks or believes as they do can help me become more empathetic to their views. Angry arguments rarely lead to changed minds and often hinder or harm relationships.

When it concerns religious beliefs, "saying the quiet part aloud" might well shake one's faith, yet need not uproot it. Some "quiet parts" may include:

— We discover a religious leader doesn't personally believe the same as we do. They may even keep some thoughts to themselves while preaching or teaching more palatable lessons.

Many new faith leaders coming out of seminary might learn this lesson in short order. Their dilemma: can I be completely open and honest about what I really believe, or should I just keep the peace, and my job?? It's easy to judge these decisions, but perhaps the differences aren't so serious, they may simply concern "non-essential" theological viewpoints, divergent understandings or interpretations.

— We learn our sacred scriptures contain parts we never hear about or talk about. Why? Are they disruptive to our accepted beliefs, or embarrassing? Maybe inappropriate for public reading or for the eyes and ears of children? What would happen if some of these "sacred secrets" were openly discussed? For instance, polygamy, slavery, the brutal military campaigns of Joshua and David, the executions of children by King Herod, or the fiery torments of hell.

— We discover there are viable alternatives to our religion. Though I attended a conservative Christian college, I met students from different Christian traditions and various religions. I asked sincere questions, read the scriptures of faiths other than my own, and it was both eye-opening and mind-opening. Being exposed to other beliefs didn't cause me to lose my faith. In fact, I think that exposure, and the relationships formed, deepened and enriched my faith. Even years later, when I walked away from supernatural beliefs, I still valued what I learned from diverse perspectives, and I continue to value a wide range of outlooks and beliefs. Though my Christian upbringing never said the quiet part, that there were other choices available, eventually I was exposed to the hidden truths outside my bubble of

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belief.

— We learn there are fulfilling alternatives to Religion itself. We find out choosing to be agnostic or atheist won't make us a bad person, immoral or anti-religious. The quiet part isn't spoken out of fear, a worry that religious faith is essential for a happy life. When we learn it isn't necessary, we take a sensible step

beyond the leap of faith.

Many defenders of a particular belief don't want believers to think about the quiet parts, the difficult, uncomfortable parts of the story of faith. It's a deflection of attention. Averting the eyes, or consciousness, is a self-deception, but once we know someone doesn't want us to see something, we can simply choose to see. Perhaps what someone is trying to protect us from is actually the most important thing to pay attention to. There may be hard questions ahead, but the path is positive if it leads to growth

in understanding.

It may not feel safe to share doubts regarding our beliefs. We find people to trust, but we fear sharing our true feelings aloud. That's natural, but may not be healthy in the long run. Saying the quiet parts could draw out the honest feelings from others who share similar fears of being "found out." As I see it, unless there is a real threat of losing a job or a relationship, it seems worth the risk to speak up. A wise person isn't afraid to express what many fear to hear. "Wisdom is at home in the mind of one who

has understanding, but it is not known in the heart of fools" (Proverbs 14:33). It may be foolish at times to keep quiet when we have an opportunity to practice and proclaim freethinking fearless wisdom.

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).