

What lies ahead down the green trail?



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

On a hike near the Blue Ridge Parkway, Carol and I were enticed to explore new trails. Entering the portal of trees, the moss, ferns and full carpet of flowering plant life gave us a sense of walking in a World of Green — and so we were. I paused several times on our walk to take a photo of the winding path, each time curious what lay ahead, “just a little further.” This regularly motivates us to push on down or up the trail to see what’s there. I’m reminded of the tune we sang as children, of the bear who went over the mountain “to see what he could see.” That fairly describes the sense of adventure we pack along every outing into the woods.

As an explorer of ideas, particularly relating to religion and secularism, I’m consistently curious how others respond to the topics and questions I publish. In that spirit of curiosity, I sent the draft of a column to several old friends from high school days. One lives on the West Coast, and one in the East, near where I live now. In our younger years,

we were deeply involved in Campus Crusade evangelistic activities. Both of these friends are still connected to churches, though one has grown skeptical of narrow religion. The other one remains connected with an evangelical congregation; he’s very thoughtful, so each time I raise questions, he responds with more questions. Our exchanges can get a bit heated at times, but the foundation of friendship and the history we share grounds us in fundamental respect.

Speaking recently with the friend on the West Coast, we were sharing our concerns for the future of the nation, particularly with the rising threat of Christian Nationalism. We used to share concern for the afterlife, but now the present state of the world occupies our minds. I told my longtime Christian “brother” I’m optimistic our secular democracy can withstand attempts to erode separation of religion and state and imposition of extremist views on all of us through their “biblical” legislation. Yet, I’m realistic that the situation may get worse, and I’m confident the common sense of thoughtful people will prevail. My friend felt encouraged.

My other friend, here in the East, responding to my suggestion that a “religion of love” might be what Jesus was actually calling people to practice, ques-

tioned whether becoming a “martyr” was the “ultimate demonstration of love.” My friend acknowledges that people all over the world, and not just Christians, die for their faith. As a Christian, he feels that no matter what part of the Body of Christ a person is, “we all have limited skills and abilities, which we should strive to deliver as completely as possible.” He doesn’t think there is a “high level” of loving service — each believer does what they are able to do for the faith. In response, I stated I can respect anyone — of any faith or no faith — who devotes their life to service “in the name of [Love].” This doesn’t necessarily mean someone has to sacrifice their life to that service.

My sincere friend and former “brother in faith” often expresses an honest willingness to wonder along with me. In this latest exchange, he responds: “You’ve raised a good question...which unfortunately doesn’t have an obvious answer...at least for me.” I have an appreciation for his integrity. It seems to me, if more people of faith would “walk the path” of co-questioning, and more seculars would do the same, there might be very good results. The shared path could be even greener with growth.

As I was meandering the trail of this column, I received an email newsletter from Seattle University’s Center for Ec-

umenical and Interreligious Engagement. There was an interview with Diana Eck, founder of Harvard’s Pluralism Project. Dr. Eck says the inter-religious community is becoming more open to including those with no particular religious faith. She describes the difference between “seekers and belongers”: “The seeker culture is increasingly pervasive in the U.S. That means you don’t necessarily feel settled or that you belong in just one place; you may still be looking, still thirsting in some way. Perhaps we should say that the numbers of seekers has multiplied, rather than indicating that people no longer want to belong.” There is a growing edge of people who are “self-identified groups of atheists and humanists” and they deserve a place in the progress of religion in society. As she explains: “What defines a movement is that it has energy in a particular direction even if it may not have one central leader or one main organization at its core.”

Like an open trail in the forest, the path simply gets greener.

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).