

What in the world is a freethinker?

BY CHRIS HIGHLAND

How do you identify yourself to others? By nationality, ethnicity, gender, town, religion? All of the above? In my lifetime I've been a Washingtonian, Californian and North Carolinian, though always an American. A resident of planet earth. I've been a Christian minister, an Interfaith chaplain and shelter director, an Ecumenical senior housing manager and a Humanist celebrant. I've been a teacher and writer, a husband and father, a son and a brother. All of these roles make me who I am. In the last ten years or so, I've called myself a freethinker. I'm often asked to explain what a freethinker is.

What does it mean to be a "freethinker"? Isn't everyone? Unfortunately not. We want to believe we are free, but are we? Here's how I define a freethinker: having the freedom

to think for yourself, to freely choose what you believe and what you don't. It's as simple, and profound, as that. It means having the ability to think rationally, skeptically, of anyone who asks you to "just believe" or "think as I do and don't ask questions." A freethinker doesn't accept hand-me-down beliefs. A freethinker can be an agnostic, a humanist, an atheist, or a person of faith who has an open mind, willing to face the facts of faith, being honest when there are no facts. Are your beliefs truly and freely chosen, and chosen from real alternative choices?

Freethought has a long history. Consider all the "heretics" in history, those who walked away from the established orthodoxy of the dominant faith of their day. Think of all the Founders of Religions. Each of them stood in the river of their tradition and essentially said, "I can't flow this

way any longer; I choose a new path, a different direction." I look back as far as the Greek philosopher Socrates who taught to "know thyself," the Roman Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius who wrote, "If it is not right, do not do it, if it is not true, do not say it." The Nazarene said, "The truth shall set you free." Centuries later we hear the freethinking voices of Thomas Paine and Walt Whitman, Charles Darwin and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass, Rosa Parks and John Lewis. So many who courageously stood their ground for the higher cause of conscience.

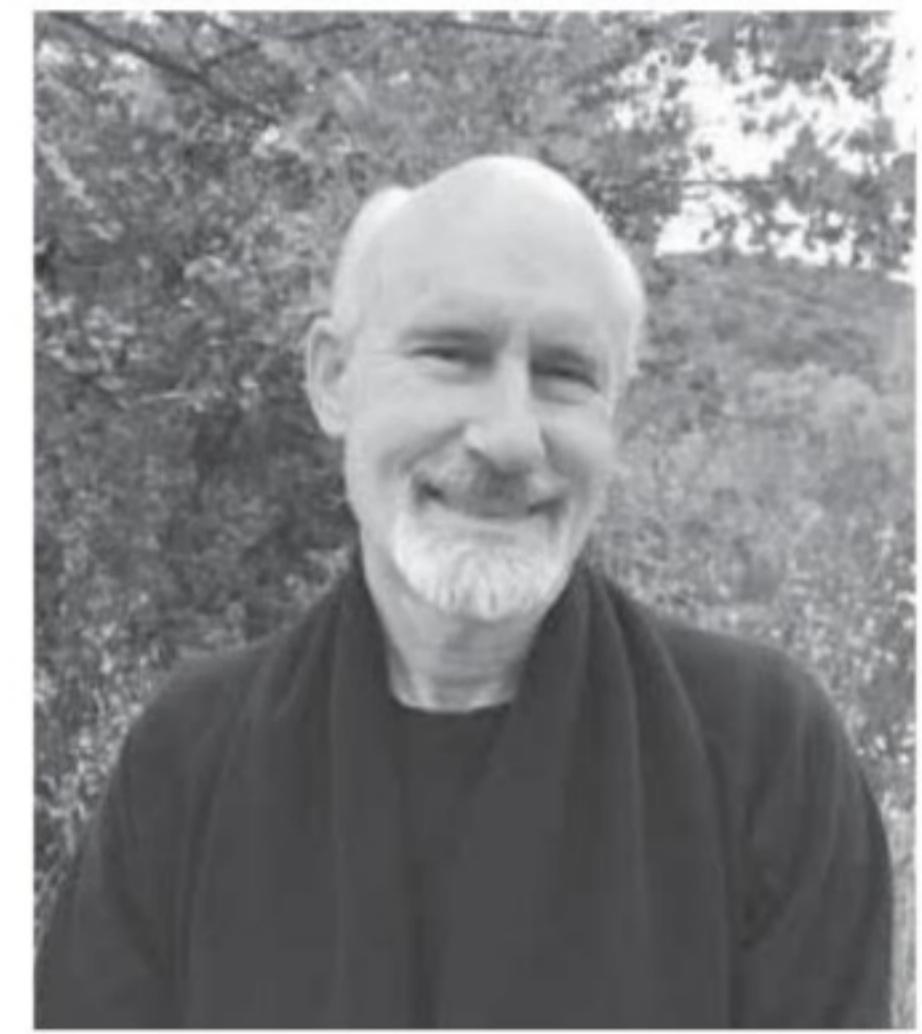
Freethinking crosses all boundaries because to think free is quite literally liberty of conscience, and conscience cannot be fenced in by any other authority than oneself. This raises an important element of freethought. What or who is our authority? The

great abolitionist Lucretia Mott said, "Truth for authority, not authority for truth." A good motto.

I mentioned choosing from alternatives. This is critical. I was raised in a Christian home, in a predominantly White Protestant Christian culture. There was no choice to make. I didn't choose to be born in a Christian family, but as a teen I chose to become a Christian and later to become a Christian minister. As the creed says, "One Lord, one faith, one baptism." I was presented with one scripture, one church, one fundamental worldview—Christian. I never knew there were choices. It took years to learn there were other viable faiths, and ... that I could choose no faith at all. Once I knew that I could make a personal choice from diverse options, I became a freethinker. I made the conscious decision—and it wasn't a light decision—not to accept

anything beyond the natural world, nothing super-natural—above, beyond, behind, beneath Nature. Sure, there is so much I don't know and may never know. Is there something or Someone outside of Nature? I don't know, which makes me an agnostic. But since I see no evidence of a supernatural, I choose non-belief, a-theism. Yet, I prefer to identify as a freethinker, because I don't wish to be identified with negativity, what I "don't" believe or think. My concern is to practice an ethical humanism that values the goodness of humanity, seeking to work with anyone of any belief who values that essential goodness. After all, I have good friends and family who are believers, and my wife Carol is a minister!

Truth is, we hold tight to personal opinions which can rob us of our freedom to change our minds. Out of fear or uncertainty, we grasp for stability, things we've been



told are firm and lasting. We are afraid to let go, or simply to question and be open to changing direction; we hesitate to trust our common sense, our reason, our intuitions, that something is right, or wrong.

A freethinker takes responsibility for what to think, what to believe and how to act. However, we freely choose to live, fearless freethinking is an essential tool for wise living.

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