

Picking up, or taking down, the broken branches



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

Since last year's destructive storm, with the incredible loss of trees, we still see many trees bent, leaning, ready at any time to tip over in the next strong wind. I've also been keeping an eye on branches, large and small, that broke in Hurricane Helene. Some sway with every breeze, others rest precariously on neighboring trees. We've picked up small branches here and there, while watching stronger arms (including mechanical arms) gather the larger ones. Observing these dead or dying branches, barely holding onto their tenuous positions, makes me reflect on the broken branches of religious beliefs that keep holding on for "dear life" but don't have much life left in them.

It isn't disrespectful, but honest and truthful to say, most of the gods of history are dead and gone. Whole religions, entire faith traditions, have died out over time. Whether Babylonian or Persian, Greek or Roman, we have some records of their teachings and rituals, yet no one actually follows them any longer. Some indigenous religions, including earth-based or goddess religions, live on among a few. As for the Bible, we have very little manuscript material from ancient cultures. Sometimes fragile fragments, like brittle leaves or twigs, are all we can hold and perhaps delicately decipher. Fragments of faith past. There are no living people to give us firsthand testimony of what those parch-

ment pieces tell us. Religions based on long ago stories remain, but it's not always clear how true they are to the original believers of those distant times. I often wonder, if we could actually speak with Moses or Jesus, Buddha or Muhammad, would they even recognize what became of their lives and teachings?

Returning to broken branches, there are many fractured parts of faith that still try to cling to the "mother tree." With religion, there are many trees in the forest, each with a host of branches, but which ones still have life in them, which still bear fruit? When is the time, the season, for pruning away the old or diseased? Or do we simply wait for them to release their hold and crash to the ground?

Would some trees of religious faith be healthier if the dead or dying branches fell, or were severed to fall away? Could a religious tradition be lighter and perhaps more life-giving if it dropped the dead-weight of the lifeless and broken elements? What if those branches are harming others? Remember the childhood response to name-calling: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." As we grow, we learn that words, and beliefs, like sticks and stones, can hurt very much. Families, communities, can break apart when beliefs divide and damage relationships. When some believe their branch of belief is superior and should point the way for everyone else, connections can split asunder. We may find that preaching to children, or other vulnerable people, with a message of sin and judgment can be very damaging. Though some say those are just words, bones may not be broken, yet one's spirit (self-respect) may be snapped like a stick. Some minds may be susceptible to superstitious beliefs, leading to more destruction,

even violent actions and reactions. The dead-weight of self-righteous beliefs, that judge others as unworthy, sinful or evil, ought to be cut off for the sake of the tree, and the health of the wider forest of compassionate communities.

As I suggest, there are traditions that rather naturally break and fall. Maybe more often, one branch merely sprouts another branch, which potentially draws greening new life. A reformation may occur, a new denomination may form, a fresh creed may be written. The great trees, towers of tradition, nurture many creative endeavors. Perhaps a piece of fruit falls, planting a seed for new growth, even as the old tree dies.

Now, every windstorm brings the dreaded memories of the Day the Trees Fell. We wonder if our roof is safe, the road is clear, or whether more branches or whole trees will topple. I used to climb trees whenever I had the chance, joking that I climbed my own holiday tree for my Christmas birthday. One of those trees fell in a fire. And the tree of faith I once climbed, making my home in its branches, also toppled over. It's symbol is a dead tree. Some say its branches are stained with sacred sap (blood), hanging empty while the crucified still lives on. Yet, it remains a dead tree, cut from a living forest, branches and roots splintered and rotting. This may sound like a take down of trees and saviors, but it is merely an observation — like watching broken limbs sway and swing in the winds of each new day.

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).