

# About this thing we call tradition



## Highland Views

Chris Highland

Guest columnist

A subject I regularly think about and struggle with is tradition. I guess it's a traditional theme for me. Some things are "old as the hills," as people used to say, and tradition can be like a mountain range dividing the human family. People fiercely defend traditions, and some are even willing to die for traditions. What are they and why are they so important? Is "religion" just another name for "tradition"?

In Latin, "tradition" derives from terms meaning to "give across," so it refers to passing down beliefs, rituals and such from generation to generation. Other words that describe tradition include custom, practice, convention, rule and principle, as well as an "unwritten law" or "heritage." This can obviously run deep in the psyche, and while some may hold tight to their traditional ways, others might not be aware they are carrying forward customary practices with long historical roots in their family, community or culture.

In a chapter entitled, "That's Not the Way We've Always Done it," Adam Grant talks about his work with NASA and the Gates Foundation. He encourages "learning cultures" where "the norm is for people to know what they don't know, doubt their existing practices, and stay curious about new routines to try out" ("Think Again"). Sounds like a direct challenge to the ways of tradition. Questioning our own assumptions and beliefs is uncomfortable, and we might be embar-

rassed to admit we don't know something or that we made a mistake. However, the consequences can be serious. He uses the example of the tragedies of space shuttles, when people who had doubts either didn't speak up, or were ignored. The point he's making is that we have to take the risk to speak up and, on the other hand, we have to risk listening to things we don't want to hear but need to.

Adam Grant quips that tradition can be defined as "peer pressure from dead people." That sort of nails it for me. We become so comfortable with the way things have always been done or the way people have always thought or believed, and don't want to rock the boat. When it comes to religious beliefs, this can also have critical consequences. Handed down beliefs may not work well in the present time, either because they aren't relevant any longer or they simply neglect to respect current experience. When we feel "peer pressure from dead people," we have a choice to make: either think like they did long ago, act like they did in the past, or choose to think for ourselves and act according to what we think is good and right today. Not every faith can handle that.

One of the most persistent traditions is using scriptures to set standards for ourselves and others. Everyone picks and chooses which scriptures, and which verses, to obey and pass along. It's clear that in many "culture war" issues today, strict believers choose strict passages that fit their particular sensibilities. Other than the questionable statement, "The Bible says," we might hear a person confidently claim, "My congregation says" or "My [clergyperson] teaches," expecting others to accept the authority of those sources. Tradition always leans back, falls back, on what someone else says, and tends to forget that those

sources look backward themselves. Wisdom, like reason, and perhaps common sense, draws tradition into the bright light of day — this day — and doesn't let a belief from the dark and shadowy past get by without thought and inquiry.

Adam Grant concludes his perceptive chapter on commonly accepted ways of doing things with these wise words of caution: "It's a mistake to follow traditions because the status quo is familiar. We're better off questioning whether past routines are serving us well in the present and guiding us toward a better future." Notice he isn't saying — and I'm not saying — there is no place for any tradition. Some traditions can be helpful, if held lightly rather than tight-fisted. The concern is to not simply follow a belief or practice because it keeps things the same, familiar, and maintains our confident comfort. This is one reason I've said for years that Jesus (like others who have challenged traditions) has been molded into a comfortable deity, one who never disturbs the order; he's often imagined as the exalted Lord of faith and belief, not a troublemaker for compassionate justice. As Adam Grant urges us to ask, is our tradition, our faith, our practice, our life, serving us well and leading to a better world? If not, traditions can and must change; while some do, others are better left in the past. They may have served people then but not now.

Where are our traditions leading us? Do they lead, or do we?

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