

A dream of sharing songs of joy

BY CHRIS HIGHLAND

It was a strangely vivid dream. A family gathering in someone's home, but not my family and not my home. Young and old were standing and sitting around a living room, and they were looking at me. I started leading everyone in a song, an oddly familiar song I didn't recognize until I awoke. In the dream I made up the song as we sang: "Everybody needs a hug" with the echo "Everybody needs a hug." Then each verse was "Even-a-bug(jug, mug, Pug, rug, tug) needs a hug." A silly song to get everyone together, sharing smiles, laughter and hugs. I picked up a small child with a giggling squeeze.

I saw a social media post with an elderly woman holding her hand over her mouth as if giggling. The caption read: "I have many regrets; making people smile and laugh isn't one of them." With that honest-

ty in mind, a humorous thought took me back to family gatherings as a child when my father and his seven sisters and brothers would make us kids smile, laugh, giggle and groan.

Over the years when I served as a chaplain in a jail, shelters and a residential school, music was a traveling companion. I'd often pick up my shiny six-string to strum a song everyone could sing. Many of those songs were religious and serious (two words that often go together). But many other songs were more uplifting and joyful; pop songs and folk hymns which invited ordinary folk like me to light up with laughter; community-building kinds of songs.

The tune to my dream song was something we taught children in summer Vacation Bible School: "Everybody's got to know...that Jesus saves!" We made it fun with guitars, hand-claps and a drum or tambourine. Children love these boun-

cy melodies that fill the room with joy and bubbling enthusiasm for the faith. On reflection, my dream presented a nice balance. The same tune, but a different message. Not a gospel but a giggle to share; not a hymn but a hug. Something to sing in a circle of family or friends where we show appreciation for each other and celebrate our shared humanity. It's not about believing but belonging.

Truth is, not everyone wants to be touched, let alone hugged. Yet, I suppose in a dreamy sort of way, I do think each individual needs a hug now and then, an affirmation, an acknowledgement, that they are seen and valued.

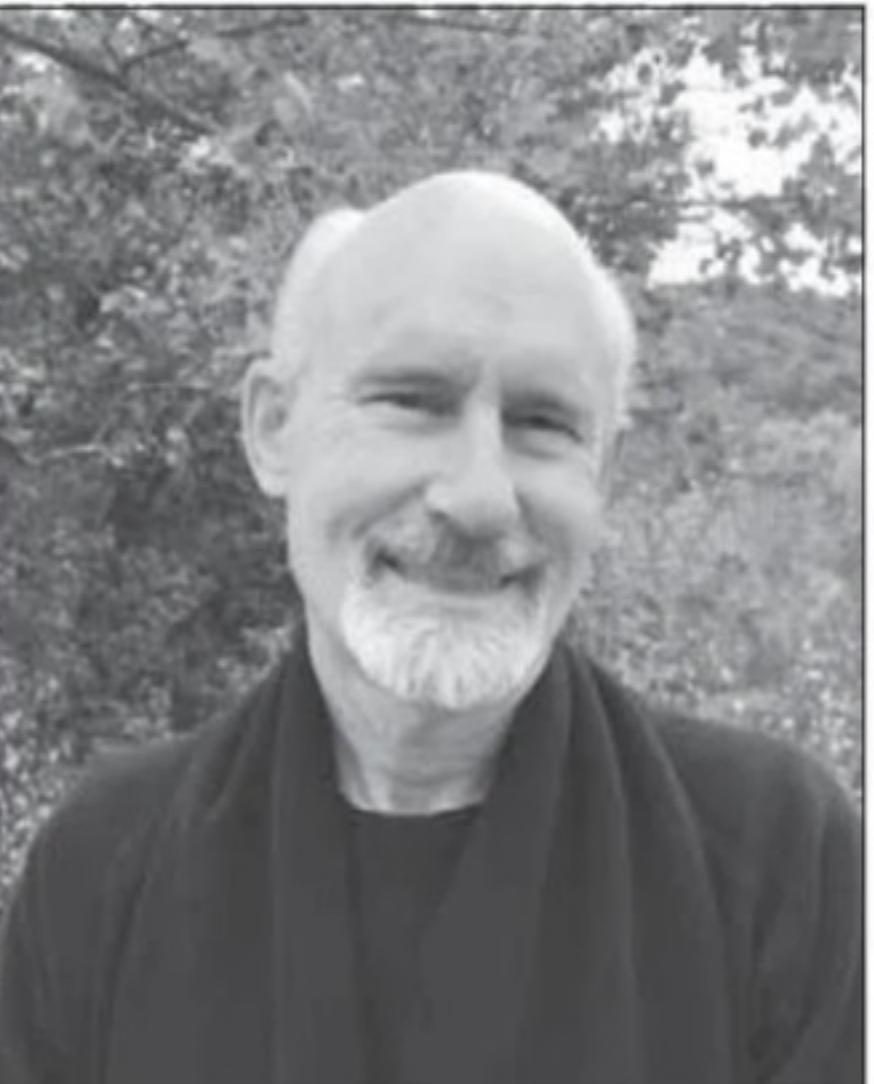
Another interpretation of the dream is that people seek evangelists; not the kind who preach at them about their sinfulness and soul-deficiency, but evangelists who sing for human contact, joy and lifting up the goodness of the human family gath-

ered together, singing together. This would be genuine "good news" to share, regardless of different backgrounds or beliefs. A shared song can make life a little lighter, show us that harmony is possible without expectations that every voice is on key. The image, or the actual experience, of people singing together is inspiring, from concerts to congregations and the enduring popularity of mass choirs and the flash mob craze.

Recently asked to suggest a song for a group sing-a-long, "The Hammer Song" came to mind. Our youth groups often sang this, with accompanying hand motions—swinging a hammer, then a bell. The final verse is a kind of call to collective and individual responsibility: "Well, I've got a hammer, and I've got a bell, and I've got a song to sing all over this land; it's a hammer of justice, it's a bell of freedom; it's a song about love between my brothers and my

sisters, all over this land." The song entered my unconscious; I woke at night or in the morning singing or humming it. Not only a catchy tune, but a meaningful message, both fun to sing with others and a call to action, to reflect on and respond to a universal need for a just, free and loving society. This is one reason "The Hammer Song" was so popular in the jails, shelters and the school.

In the fading memory of that hugging dream I joined the people in that house as we waded through water on a walk along the beach. Maybe my subconscious was stirring up memories of another song we used to sing with kids: "Wade in the Water." Then again, I don't think so. The dream scene was a community walk—children, youth and adults setting off on a fresh-air hike in the beauty of the natural world. I didn't get the sense there was anything super-natural about it.



People loving each other, loving the earth, and maybe now and then singing together, perhaps dreaming together, happy to embrace the goodness of life.

Chris Highland was a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years before becoming a humanist celebrant and author of many books. He lives in Asheville, North Carolina. His website is www.chighland.com.