

Bearing the weight of the chaos in the world

Highland Views

Chris Highland

Guest columnist

I and Thou: Ukraine ... Israel ... Gaza ... so many more names, places, people – it can overwhelm with a weight too difficult to carry. Within and across each artificial line in the sand, countless people live settled or unsettled lives.

Too many masses to mentally manage, until they become individuals, faces, names; unless the many become one – one by one. Who might help us bear the weight, to somehow, someday, be present, human to human?

Fresh out of college, I slung on a heavy backpack and caught a plane to Europe. Carrying that pack through five countries, I hitchhiked as much as possible to save money and 'meet locals.' Stuffed in my pack was 'I and Thou,' a physically light but mentally heavy book I'd read as a Philosophy major. The author, Martin Buber (1878-1965), was from Vienna and what is today Lviv, Ukraine; he taught for many years at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. For a university course, I wrote a paper comparing Buber's ideas with the thought of Danish Christian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard. Though I didn't know it at the time, they were building a bridge from my theological castle to the wide-open landscape of freethought.

Reading the excellent biography, 'Martin Buber: A Life of Faith and

Dissent' by Paul Mendes-Flohr, I re-discovered this wise teacher, whose concepts I carried into chaplaincy and counseling. As I said, 'I and Thou' is not light reading. For example: 'The world does not participate in experience ... The world as experience belongs to the basic word I-It. The basic word I-You establishes the world of relation.' A difficult statement to get a hold of, yet a fundamental image to work with. We 'have experiences' but those don't always mean 'relationships' – serious connections with other persons. Most of the time, we have 'I-It' relationships, treating the world, or another person, as an object to experience rather than 'in relation' with them. When we connect in an I-You (or I-Thou) moment, it is so meaningful, so intimate, that there is only one word – I-You becomes a single word – and that word creates a world of relation. This is the only way to have true 'dialogue.'

For Buber, any sincere belief has to reveal this level of relation. The example he uses is a tree. You face a tree, name the species; you sense it's alive, but the tree remains an object – an It. 'But it can also happen ... that as I contemplate the tree I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an It ... What I encounter is neither the soul of a tree nor a [spirit], but the tree itself.' Encounter is important here, rather than experience. We touch the actual living thing called 'tree' just as we can touch the actual being, the person.

Buber describes God as 'the eternal You.' As a scholar of Hebrew, he thought the best translation for the divine name spoken to Moses in the Torah might be: 'I shall be present as I shall be present.' As his biographer Paul Mendes-Flohr explains, one can face the world as an It, or 'one may meet the Other as a Presence, as one who awaits to be related to as a Thou.' In his lectures on

'Religion as Presence,' Buber said: 'I ask you to grasp this as concretely as you are able, each of you from his own life.' He encouraged students to make this understanding of authentic religion deeply relational, present and personal.

Many have considered Martin Buber a Jewish heretic. His love for mystical Judaism, and expression of a Zionism not solely centered on a physical nation, cause some to criticize him. Though a strong supporter of the nation of Israel, he spoke out for the rights of Palestinians. His close friendships with Christians also brought tension. He could be in relation with Protestant theologian Paul Tillich as well as Abraham Joshua Heschel. He once suggested that Jews, in a deep way, know Jesus better than many Christians, and the dialogue of Jew and Christian can be 'transformed into a bond between Christian and Jew.'

My old friend and colleague, Jerry Winston, was a kind of 'Buberian presence' in my life. I met him when I was a seminary student and he served as rabbi of a synagogue gathering in a campus chapel. At times I felt an I-You relation with Jerry, as we led several Shabbat services together and co-officiated weddings.

Buber is one voice who might help us bear the weight of world events, whatever may be in our backpacks of belief.

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. His books and blogs are presented on 'Friendly Freethinker' (chighland.com)

