

Processed words, thoughts, foods and beliefs



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

I was watching an episode of "Young Sheldon," the brilliant kid who goes to college but still has a lot to learn about interpersonal relationships. His old computer reminded me of my first word processor. My mother gave me her electric typewriter to use throughout university and seminary years. I didn't get my first computer until I graduated and entered the ministry. Like most of us, I suppose, the amazing new machine was primarily for entertainment – video games – then became indispensable for work. Now, it seems, all types of computing devices have become essential for most of humanity (we can almost imagine AI smiling somewhere).

"Compute" means "to settle an account together." It originally referred to calculating and describes a person, a human being, who makes calculations. That has never described me, but that's why the invention of electronic calculators made life easier. Seeing Sheldon on his rather obsolete machine from decades ago got me thinking about what we process, and what helps us process

pretty much everything in our lives, including beliefs.

Some progressive (processive?) Christians seem fascinated by "Process Theology" – a belief that God/the Divine is integral to the creative processes of the universe. Strictly speaking, this God does not have a personality but participates in the order of things. In my view, this is similar to Pantheism – that God is essentially one with Nature. It also leans toward Hindu or Pagan concepts of the divine embedded in the natural world. Process Theology is not something we can find in the Bible unless we squeeze the book so tight a few drops fall out. Traditional Christian belief in a Creator God who inhabits the super-natural realm outside Nature doesn't fit well with the notion of a God-in-process.

Leaving the technicalities of process theology to professional theologians, I'm concerned here with how beliefs themselves are processed. What stages of evolution does faith go through, or should it go through? Over time, our personal beliefs and opinions have to go through processes, a kind of procession of processes. In other words, there are rational stages of reflection and contemplation necessary for us to arrive at sensible decisions. If we keep in mind this is a personal process of growth (our own "search engine" for knowledge), we don't have to defend our choices, or

push them on others.

Some of our process of faith and thought may be very difficult. We may have to come to terms with irreconcilable contradictions, or come "face to faith" with more reasonable ways to believe, or leave believing altogether. All part of the calculations that computers can't do for us. Though we may need to process words, it's the thought processes that matter. If I say my opinions and beliefs haven't changed in a long time, maybe it's time for a fresh re-boot; I might need to refresh the process and re-consider conclusions based on new investigation, new data, new information.

I grew up on processed foods (regularly served with fresh fruits, vegetables and berries from our garden). Somehow I survived. Everything we consume – whether in our bodies or minds – has to go through different kinds of processes. To "process" is defined as either a mechanical action "in order to change or preserve something" (clothing, food, or a computer program), or it can mean to "come to understand or accept something over the course of a period of time" ("I'll have to process that thought for a while"). Of course, a machine, let alone another person, can't always direct us to the correct outcome, or tell us where the process will take us. Over time, I chose to avoid as much processed foods as

possible, while being mindful of the process of how healthier food is provided (trying to enjoy more farm-to-table produce). I've learned to value the time and energy of the workers, the hands that plant and harvest, transport, manage and sell the foods I consume. I'm also more aware of who handles the ideas and beliefs I consume. My process begins and ends with calculations of what is good and true, with a willingness to hold those "products" in my mind lightly, in order to carry on the continual process of learning.

Our minds are not computers, but we have to compute – to "settle accounts" – when it comes to processing issues of faith. We can't find the answers we need on a screen but in our own reasoning minds – incredible living processors as they are. It's good to pass along older computers to the next generation, though newer technology – advanced hardware and software – may lead to discarding obsolete programs, or even beliefs. The healthiest upgrade may be an enhanced capability for computing, and a serious commitment to the process of creative change.

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).