

Song of ourselves: Roads we travel, questions we ask



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

In his classic poem, "Song of Myself," Walt Whitman wrote: "I tramp a perpetual journey ... Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you, You must travel it for yourself." These lines I read in high school (in a poetry collection still on my bookshelf), planted seeds for my own perpetual journey on the private and public road of faith and beyond.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus of Nazareth says: "I am the road (path or way)." I used to know exactly what he meant – that is, I was sure I knew. He says he's not only the road, but truth and life, and that no one comes to his Father but through him (John 14:6). Yet, I really had no idea what this meant, except I was told Jesus was the only path to God. Without him, I would be lost on dark and dangerous pathways leading only to death. Now I wonder, was Jesus giving us his own song of himself? Was this a poetic expression echoed by Whitman many centuries later?

Whitman says he can't lead anyone to where they should go. He writes, "But each man and each woman of you I lead upon a knoll, My left hand hooking you round the waist, My right hand pointing to landscapes of continents and the public road." This sounds honest as well as respectful. He's on his own life journey and can only assist another person to get a wider view of

the many possible roads and journeys available in life. The way is open; the choices are expansive.

If I said to you: "I am a road," what would that mean? Would it make any sense? Is it an invitation to live my life instead of your own, to go where I go? Where would the road of my life, my person, lead? Can you "follow" a road, like a person, like a teacher, hoping it leads where you want, or need, to go? Or, was Jesus hooking us around the waist, leading to a hilltop, and pointing to the higher viewpoints and public roads? Was he saying, or meaning: "Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you, You must travel it for yourself"? This reading might nudge some believers to understand Jesus wasn't merely pointing to himself, to keep the focus on him. Instead, he may have been a "pointer" like Whitman, calling for a more down-to-earth mission: "Follow my way of life, serving others with love and compassion, and you will see what God (or Good) really is"?

Walt Whitman continues his road analogy: "It is not far, it is within reach, Perhaps you have been on it since you were born and did not know, Perhaps it is everywhere on water and on land." This seems to suggest a wiser, healthier alternative to the belief in "one road." Maybe the journey has begun and we're not aware of it; maybe it's been inside us the whole time. We just have to unfold the inner map, to make reasonable decisions about which directions to go. This will surely lead to many serious questions. Yet, as Whitman writes several lines later: "You are also asking me questions and I hear you, I answer that I cannot answer, you must find out for yourself." Jesus himself didn't answer every

question he was asked, and some of his responses would naturally lead to more questions, though the gospel writers didn't record any extended Q and A sessions.

Could the life of Jesus (and other religious teachers) be understood as an active "pointing" rather than demanding a set-in-stone – or pavement – faith? Unless we're stuck on exclusive-sounding verses like John 14:6, we might find a more poetic, as well as practical, meaning to something we could call a "gospel of the road," or a "gospel of the perpetual journey." Once the rough and rustic path is paved, set in concrete and steel, the trail becomes less a personal journey, and more someone else's journey. This is where religious teachings and teachers can take control and direct – or drive – people where they believe everyone should go, how they should live and believe. Whitman provides the poetic solution: Choose your road, travel it yourself, ask questions, but don't expect anyone can answer them. Search and discover for yourself. Guides are great, but we can't surrender our vision, and the responsibility to think and act wisely.

Sometimes we need to stop and ask for directions. Yet, if the roads pointed out by Jesus and Walt were paths crossing wide-open landscapes inviting to all, perhaps we can travel onward and forward with curious wonder, singing our own songs of the journey.

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).