

‘Answers we thought we knew,’ before taking a wider view



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

A poet friend sent me his latest collection of verse that included these perceptive lines: “So many answers we thought we knew, before we sought a wider view. Now in daylight, or on review, they might not fit the lines we drew, around the things we thought were true” (“Then Again,” in “Laconic Lyric” by Jim Gronvold). Some thoughts seem best expressed in poetry. Poets often say what needs to be said, and what needs to be heard, particularly in matters of faith. Was Religion born from poetry?

The poet seeks “a wider view. . . in daylight” to gain a more expansive understanding beyond former lines drawn “around the things we thought were true.”

This requires a fearless commitment to “review,” to literally think outside the boxes we seal and wrap with our settled opinions and beliefs. Do we dare question our “answers” in the light of day – the light of reason? Are we honest enough with ourselves to shift the lines around the truths once set in stone but now appear more elastic, moveable, changeable? What we thought was right, a final answer, becomes a question-mark instead of an exclamation-mark. Though we’re no longer so sure about our beliefs, we can approach them with more humility, perhaps poetically, to accept the limits of our knowledge.

The portion of the poem quoted above could be an

invitation to the wonder of lifelong education. The Education Director for the Center for Inquiry in New York is concerned that teachers present the relevance of science and math. She tells her classes: “Scientists do not try to prove themselves right; they try and prove themselves wrong. When you really feel strongly about a topic, you need to be extra aware that you will try to prove yourself right. Without even noticing it, you will look for evidence that proves you right and discount any evidence that proves you wrong. Let’s work on changing this.” Wise words. In a sense, she is stating the poem in another way. In other words, with other words, this educator encourages an acceptance of being wrong, because a recognition of error can motivate us to correct our sense of rightness (or righteousness).

In my years as an Evangelical Christian, I was convinced I was right. Since my faith was based on “the truth of the Bible” (as I interpreted “God’s Word” or was told what it meant), I could confidently claim I knew the truth. We sang, “Jesus is the Answer” though we weren’t old enough to face meaningful questions. It was like a teacher giving us the answer, the solution, to a math problem, without assigning us the task of finding the solution for ourselves. Or, it was like a scientist presenting the result of experiments without revealing the careful process she took to come to that conclusion. A personal faith has to begin with taking personal responsibility, responsibility to take the time to do the hard work necessary to discover what is true, right and good.

What is an “answer” anyway? Is it a solution to everything in life? Is it the final answer that can never

change? Or is it something that makes sense to us now, in the present, that helps us cope with whatever life brings, but isn’t a belief or opinion that works for us tomorrow? After all, problems of faith aren’t like math problems, with one correct solution arrived at by everyone. Yet, faith is indeed a problem to solve, or a process of solving life’s challenges. And this is quite different for many people. The joy of finding a solution to a math problem comes from the step by step work to achieve the goal. As I see it, faith isn’t always like that. It has to be more organic, a living engagement with daily life. Because of this, choosing a religious faith often seems to jump to the conclusion, the answer, the truth, before experiencing the joy of investigation, exploration, asking serious questions, without knowing where it will lead. We found that Jesus was “The Answer” before we considered whether anyone or anything else might be the answer we were seeking (and at that early age, I’m not sure we had done any serious searching).

Religious traditions do us a disservice when they don’t honor the magnificence of the mind.

If there is no poetry, there is no wonder. If there is no commitment to the educational process, or the scientific method of discovery, wonder is also absent. The boundaries we draw around the things we think are true – those barriers we defend so passionately – may need to bend, or break open, to trust our ability to face uncertainty in the light of reason.

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).