

A startling experience can begin deeper conversation



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Former Poet Laureate of the United States, Ada Limón, published a collection of her poetry entitled, “Startlement.” Since “startle” is one of my watch-words, paying particular attention to what startles me, the title of the collection gave me a bit of a “start” (startle comes from the word “start” – to “give a small jump or make a sudden jerking movement from surprise or alarm”). It can be a “wake-up call” or stunning moment that alerts you and causes a sudden reaction. These moments can be scary – a jump of fright – or a step back to take a breath and wonder at what just happened.

I used to believe that a startling experience was akin to a “spiritual encounter” of some kind. In a natural setting, such as a forest, mountain or ocean beach, a surprising experience became a super-natural event – a “spiritual presence” felt beside a river or while locking eyes with a bird or deer. Not only a transformative moment but a transporting encounter, when a very natural

experience brought me to a “higher” consciousness, an awareness of a being, or beings, in or around the wild place or face. Or so I felt; so I believed.

In her poem, “What it looks like to us and the words we use,” Ada Limón relates a conversation on a walk through a valley with a friend who asked Ada: “You don’t believe in God?” Ada replied: “No. I believe in this connection we all have to nature, to each other, to the universe.” Her friend simply said: “Yeah, God.”

When I hear someone respond this way to an honest statement of belief, I think it sounds a little disrespectful. Those who seem to require every person to use their religious language, defining everything with “God,” don’t appear to be listening very well. When Ada responds to the question about her belief, she simply replies with her sense that “God” isn’t a word or concept she accepts. She feels the natural connection to the world around her and doesn’t have to give that the name “God.” Her friend misses the moment, the opportunity to understand a different viewpoint of the world.

The poem goes on to describe the two walkers pausing to stand, as fellow creatures, “low beasts among the white oaks, Spanish moss, and spider webs.”

Ada senses her connection to her environment, including the other human beside her. With the original question, and the “Yeah, God” comment fresh, she is confident in her belief: “I refuse to call it so.” She refuses to use someone else’s term to describe what she feels and thinks. The poem’s conclusion offers the common experience of the two walkers as an even better response to the question. “We looked up at the unruly sky, its clouds in simple animal shapes we could name, though we knew they were really just clouds – disorderly, and marvelous, and ours.”

This was one of my favorite poems in the book. The creative turn of it “startled” me. A natural and normal walk of two believers becomes its own connection to nature and each other. One names a presence she calls “God,” and the other names the presence of nature they feel connected to – nature with Nature. The poet doesn’t tell her friend she can’t or shouldn’t call the feeling “God,” she just offers her own perspective. She doesn’t argue with faith, only gives her view. The “Yeah, God” response implies there is a right and wrong answer when it concerns beliefs. Wouldn’t it show more humility to allow another view, another belief?

My transition from faith to freeth-

ought happened over time, most of that time spent in Nature, with my own natural reasoning and contemplation. Eventually, instead of seeing divinity or spirituality everywhere, I came to see what I was seeing, hear what I was hearing, without the need to think or say, “Yeah, God.” A feeling of relationship with the natural world and the human community became central rather than constantly looking beyond the immediate world at hand.

The poetry of Ada Limón reminds us that it’s a good thing to have different beliefs, especially when they can be expressed and shared on the common ground of nature. Taking a walk with another person can bring us back to basics, the fact we all have to share the earth whether or not we believe in something more. We can be startled together. It may be true that the most startling experiences, when standing beside another person, can open deeper conversation that gives us pause. We can remind each other of the poetry of life, that we often turn to poetic language (sometimes cloaked in ancient worldviews) to tell the stories of our lives.

Chris Highland is a writer and humanist celebrant. His books and blogs are presented on “Friendly Freethinker” (chighland.com).