

Faith and fantasy through the eyes of a child



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

On an episode of the podcast “This American Life”, a story was told about two little girls walking home from school. One excitedly tells her friend, “I know who the Tooth Fairy is!” Her classmate anxiously asks, “Who is it?” The girl responds, “My Dad!” (she awakened in the night to see her father putting a gift under her pillow). Her friend runs home to tell her parents their neighbor is the Tooth Fairy! With a smile, they tell her to keep the secret.

I’m not comparing God to the Tooth Fairy, yet it can be a helpful exercise to consider what children believe and why. At a later stage of life, a person may realize what they were told or taught in childhood may not be true. Those earliest stories deserve to be questioned from a reasonable adult’s perspective.

No child is born religious. Faith is taught. The same episode of “This American Life” includes a story of a father with a curious 4-year-old daughter (what 4-year-old isn’t curious?). She asks about Jesus and her dad explains Jesus lived a long time ago, teaching lessons about love and treating others as we want to be treated. The daughter wanted to hear more stories. One day they passed a local church and the girl saw a crucifix on the building. She wanted to know who that was. Her father explained that mean people killed Jesus by hanging him on a cross. Of course the girl was confused

and sad. Later, they were watching television and saw pictures of Martin Luther King. The child asked who the man was, so her father told her about the civil rights leader and his message of love and treating people fairly. “Did they kill him, too?” she asked.

Young people form views and opinions from the stories we tell. In the eyes and imagination of children, parents may be the first “gods.” Later, teachers, coaches and others are all-powerful Big People. They watch over them, keep them safe, and teach them basic, essential lessons of life. They create and destroy, comfort and punish. They seem to control the whole world, the child’s world. As a child grows up, they come to realize they are now the Big People, the “gods,” who control the world. And maybe they understand that no one is in control.

I find it rather strange there are parents who want their children, along with every other child, to learn lessons of their Lord in public school. Apparently their children aren’t learning all they should at home and at church. They ask (or demand) that teachers and administrators include Bible lessons, prayers and other religious activities during the school day. It seems these parents want a public school to be an arm of their church (similar to believers imposing their faith in the halls of government). Are they afraid their child will be exposed to ideas and information that might be different from the family faith? (complaining about “indoctrination,” they respond by pushing their own doctrines on others).

In Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus invites children to come to him, and says, “Let the little children come

to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” Matthew 18 reads: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Then, in Mark chapter 9, Jesus does something rather remarkable, maybe very unusual for him: “He had a little child stand among them. Taking the child in His arms, He said to them, “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in My name welcomes Me, and whoever welcomes Me welcomes not only Me, but the One who sent Me.”

Is this simply about innocent, childlike trust and belief? Or is it about being curious, having a delightful – perhaps wild – imagination, having an open mind to listen, learn and grow to maturity?

If I told you I saw Bigfoot in the forest, heard an angel in the wind, or God spoke to me in a dream, would you believe me? A child might, before they learn the value of curiosity, skepticism, and reasonable questions.

There are times in life when we might take a child in our arms, let them know we value them, that we are listening to them, that what they think matters. Then we might pass along a wise and humble message: “Your mind is a wonderful gift of nature; not everything you imagine is real; not every story you hear is true – so think about what you hear; don’t be afraid to ask questions; it’s OK not to believe everything adults tell you; trust yourself.”

Imagine the stories they could tell.

Chris Highland’s books and blogs are presented on “Friendly Freethinker” (chighland.com).