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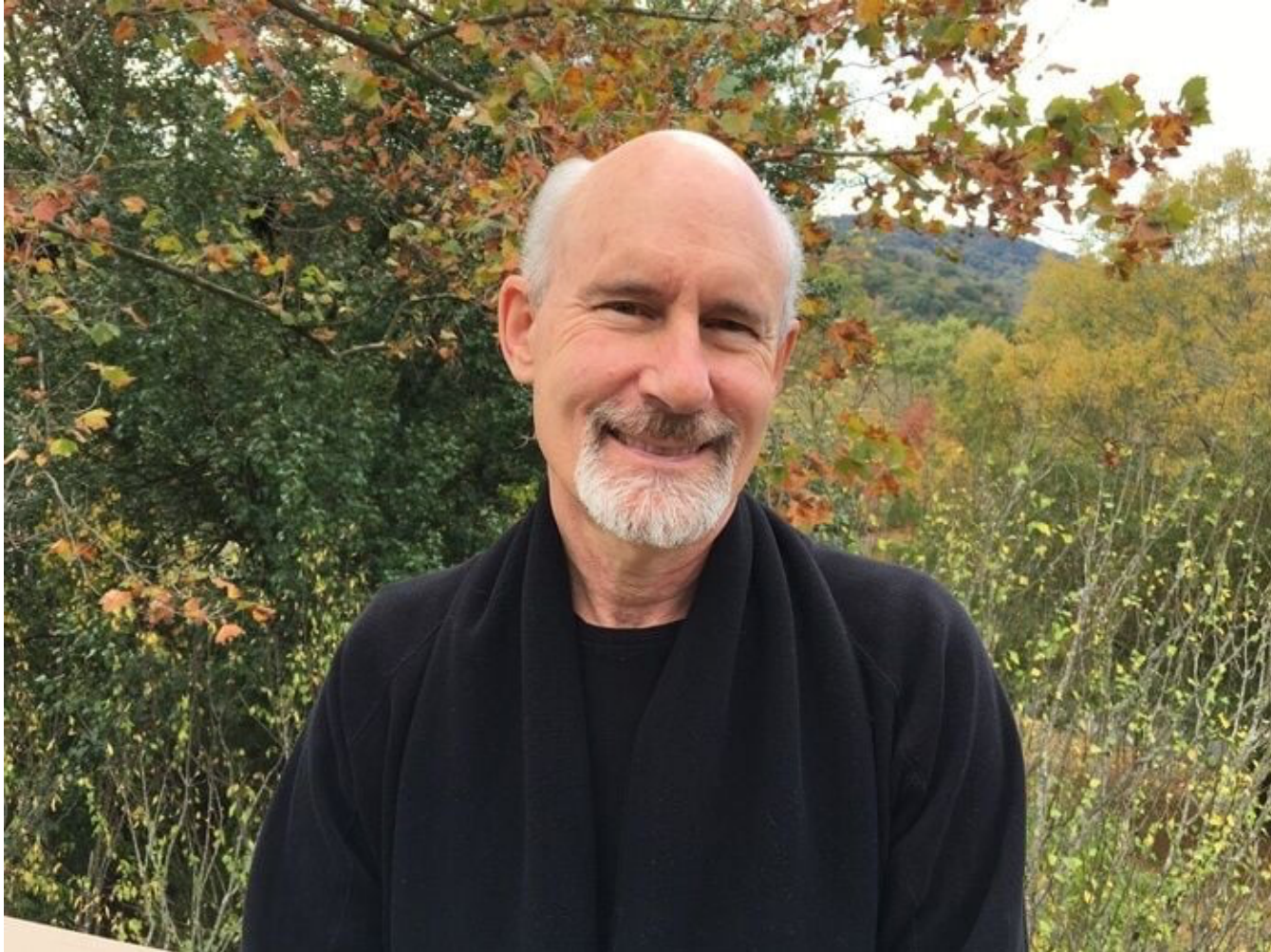
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Friendly Freethinker: Drawing Inspiration from Women's Voices

By Chris Highland
Mar 24, 2026



In my mind, I imagine I wear a bracelet of influential women, strong and memorable women, who have walked with me through life. Some of these women were instrumental in my growth and development as a man, a human being. My grandmother Olive, my aunt Agnes, and particularly my mother Mabel, gave me the grounding and nourishment essential to making me who I am today. Each woman, with their "old" names from times past, presented me with fresh ways of seeing and experiencing my world. I will always honor them. Like some childhood teachers, women in my family passed along both a tough and tender attitude toward life's challenges.

Growing up with Sunday church, I unfortunately saw no women pastors, but most Sunday School education was offered by women teachers. Jean was a youth group leader, along with her husband Dave, hosting our raucous group of teens in their home, with our late night singing, prayer and silliness. Jean encouraged my leadership, once telling me, with tears in her eyes: "I wish I could pray like you." I was humbled by this humble woman's sensitive and sensible demeanor. A gentle, loving, competent woman I've never forgotten.

Emerging from high school as a fervent Bible student, I couldn't wait to take courses at a local Christian college to increase my biblical knowledge. An early course on Classical Greek was taught by Christine, a diminutive lady with a large mind. Her instruction deepened my appreciation for the Bible, including its historical context among Classical writings. I had to face the fact the Bible is one text among many, and written in languages other than English (!).

Another professor, Jean, introduced me to great American literature. We read Thoreau, Emerson, Whitman, Hawthorne, Poe. Yes, these were all male writers, but when presented and interpreted by Jean, they came alive as representative human beings, whose thinking inspired a lifelong love of reading literature from keen and curious minds. Alongside my studies in Philosophy—pursuing the great ideas of wisdom—great books became the boat that ferried my faith forward into uncharted waters of the mind.

Out of college, I worked for a Senior Services agency managed by women. One day each week I drove a van to pick up seniors from low-income apartments, escorting them to local grocery stores. This became a rolling education for me, as I interacted with some amazing individuals. Several women “drove” my interest in wider knowledge and imagination. One was a Native American artist who made me a wool hat and sweater that I wore for many years. Driving her home on the reservation was a consistent reminder of rich and diverse cultures. Another frail lady needed assistance carrying groceries into her small apartment in town. She showed me the manuscript of her book and let me borrow it—my first time reading an unpublished book.

In seminary, I was surrounded by women as classmates and professors. I expanded my understanding of faith, ministry and equality in leadership. As a seminary intern, I served with Joy, an associate pastor in a large church in a college town. When entering ministry, I asked my colleague, Janie, a national leader for LGBTQ rights, to give the homily in my ordination service. Without Janie's encouragement, I'm not sure I would have completed the ordination process. We shared a common commitment to serving those who are often outcast from the church.

As an instructor of adults with developmental disabilities, my director and supervisor were both women. When working as a housing manager for low-income seniors, our board chair Carla became a valued and trusted colleague.

In recent times, my “hall of feminine fame” has to include my mother-in-law Janet, who showed a strength and courage reminiscent of my mother, while facing difficult physical challenges. I could only hope when I go through the hardest periods of life, I can take heart and tap into the well of inner fortitude Janet and mom exemplified. My wife, Carol, carries that strength forward, modeling a caring and competent style of leadership I admire, while my daughter Sharel is another compassionate human being to honor and respect.

Due to all this “feminine energy” throughout my life, I'm a strong supporter of women's rights. One small contribution I make is volunteering at a women's clinic. I stand for women's voices in the public square equally with men. This is the foundation of my long-held belief that all these women, and more I encounter today, offer something greater than the wisdom of their voices—they continue to be paragons to listen and learn from, to respect and emulate in my personal journey to be a better man, a more balanced human being. I'm grateful to them all.

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