

Highland Views: Peeved goats and the faith of children

I have some pet peeves, and I know you do, too. I have no idea what a “peeve” is, but I know some have been my pets for a long time. Some of my pet peeves “get my goat” if you know what I mean, and I think you do.

A “peeve” is apparently from peevish and means “a cause of annoyance.” When I am confronted by someone’s pet on a trail and their owner lets them bark at me, jump on me or even nip at my leg, I’d say that was certainly an annoyance.

The Urban Dictionary tells me that “get your goat” can be defined as “annoy you to the point of getting [upset].” The UD goes on to explain, “The goat is a metaphor for your state of peacefulness. When your goat is with you, you are calm and collected. When your goat is stolen, you become angry and upset.”

I’m having some fun with these ways of expressing displeasure, but I’m actually serious about something here.

Reading through some writings of school kids, I was both impressed and troubled. Young people like writing about nature and their families, sports teams, animals and whatever delights them. There is a wondrous sense of imagination, humor and some very deep thought.

What children say or write about their religious faith should give us pause. One fifth-grade girl states, “The first person I love is God.” She goes on to mention her family but then ends with this jarring line: “Without my faith, I would be giving up all the time and I wouldn’t be happy anymore.” To hear a young child be so self-assured that without her faith she would be unhappy and give up — that’s hard to hear.

Where did she learn that?

A sixth-grader said the three most important things in his life were his favorite football team, his family and God. He says that God is important because “he gives me someone to pray to and love,” but goes on to say, “He also tries to protect me from the fires of hell.” I find that sad.

Who teaches that to a child?

One more example that caught my eye. A little girl writes that she loves her dog, her grandmother and her God. She believes “He is the creator and he made me along with all of the people in the world.” Not too alarming. But then she states with confidence, “He is our savior and the one that saved our lives from eternal sin.” According to this young mind, people “just need some faith!”

I wonder, will this child learn from others, hear other voices and find there are other ways of understanding the world?

Thank goodness she ends with these words: “The world is perfect to me, and I love the things in it. I am excited to discover new things that are important to me.”

What a relief. I needed to hear that. There is hope in the next generation.

Isn't that the fertile promise of childhood blooming into adulthood — to discover new things that are important to us, to others, to living in a world full of playful, inquisitive children who grow up to be curious, wondering adults?

What really gets my peeved goat is when children are not given the opportunity at an early stage of their development to really use their minds — when kids are discouraged from valuing their own critical thinking at the same time they value the joy of pure fun and exploration of the bigger world out there.

Rote repetition and ritual can disrespect a child's “god-given”

intellect. Someday they'll ask questions. Then what?

Have you ever seen those videos of very small children reciting passages of the Bible or the Qur'an? Have you seen children praying together or singing religious songs? In my opinion, there is nothing inherently wrong or destructive about these things, if a child is respected enough to allow them the opportunity to see and hear and experience alternative expressions of faith and be presented with the choice to have no faith.

When a young person is taught that there is only one faith, one way to view God, then how will they ever learn to appreciate other faiths and other viewpoints? When a child is taught they will be punished for eternity if they are not a "good little believer," how is that not a fear-based faith?

Of particular concern to my goat: how will a child have respect for a secular person who doesn't believe?

I may be an old goat with a small herd of pet peeves, but I'm not sheepish to chew on these things. What about you?

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Spring at Lake Junaluska. (Photo: Courtesy of Chris Highland)