

## Can secular people also have devotion?



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**A** curious homeless woman sat by me at a free dining room one day and asked what religion I believed in. I smiled and told her I was an ordained minister but in my role as a chaplain I was representing the compassion of the faith communities, the care of good people in the county.

She was puzzled but seemed to appreciate that. I was curious too: "What is happening in your life — can I help somehow?"

My wife Carol and I have been deeply involved with interfaith work for many years. Both of us have been ministers and chaplains. Between us, we have served as a nonprofit director, a shelter director, a teacher, writer and housing manager. We have seen first-hand this simple truth in action:

When faith communities and their friends practice the central ethics of their religion — love, goodness, a sense of justice — when they communicate and cooperate for the greater good, wonderful things can be done.

For many members of faith traditions, "devotion" means whole-hearted commitment to one faith, one church, synagogue, mosque or temple and

one "true view" of God. A "devotional" can be a reflection on our lives too, can it not? Some might say the best prayer is action. Or, we could say,

"doing unto others as we wish they do to us" is the whole point of any devotion.

We live in confusing times (understatement!). Culture wars and moral battle lines are drawn. It's much easier to build walls and defend them than it is to build bridges and beautify them. Does it always have to be Us and Them?

There's so much to be done in our communities. As neighbors we can work together to do what is needed. We can, we often do, and we can do better.

The secular community cares about our shared world too, since it's the only world we know for sure (secular means "this present world"). Seculars are not all anti-religious. We are already your neighbors, and maybe your friends and family. We are Americans too. The growing number of those

who are unaffiliated with any one faith group (the "nones," including atheists, agnostics and freethinkers) don't wish to silence those who believe in

other worlds — we simply want a voice at the table here and now, in this world.

Take for example that here in North Carolina someone like me is forbidden from holding public office. Our state constitution (Article VI, sec 8) says,

"The following persons shall be disqualified for office: First, any person who shall deny the being of Almighty God."

Did you know, six other states also bar nonreligious folks from public office? Does that sound fair? That doesn't sound like America, does it? Naturalist John Burroughs (friend of both John Muir and Teddy Roosevelt), offered this curious bit of devotional reflection: "If we do not go to church so much as did our [parents], we go to the woods much more, and are much more inclined to make a temple of them than they were."

Naturalistic thinkers remind us of the great temple of Nature, the cathedral of the wild spaces open to all, where folks of all creeds and none can gather to listen to a new "voice in the wilderness" calling out beyond our sectarian firewalls — the boundaries in our brains. Think of our National Parks.

Most of us who have left the "faith of our fathers and mothers" are not angry, anti-faith people who want to "take God out of schools," close churches, steal Christmas and ban the Bible. We have a curious devotion. We are devoted to curiosity and investigation, to seeking solutions to problems and issues that face us all, faith or no faith, this political party or that, this race or that, this gender or that.

We know that freedom of thought, like freedom of religion, also means freedom to choose no religion. Truth is, I'll defend your right to believe as you choose. Will you defend mine?

Like that "housing challenged" woman in the free dining room that day, my curiosity is piqued — I wonder what would happen if people of faith peeked

over the walls; I wonder what could happen if nonbelievers helped build those bridges that connect rather than divide; I wonder what might happen

if we were more devoted to each other, and our higher principles, than proving our point or winning an argument.

You see, I'm curious! Aren't you?

*Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and Interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and freethinker. Chris and his wife, Carol, a Presbyterian minister, are new to Asheville, but not new to the issues common in all communities. Contact him or learn more via [chighland.com](http://chighland.com).*

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Fri, Aug 25, 2017