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Life of landscape architect Olmsted teaches faith lessons

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I just finished reading a fascinating biography of Frederick Law Olmsted, "Genius of Place," by Justin Martin. The incredibly imaginative mind of America's first and foremost landscape architect gave us Central Park, the U.S. Capitol grounds, the campuses of Stanford, Amherst and American University and much more.

In fact, Olmsted designed more than 30 major city parks and lent his visionary ideas for iconic public spaces spanning across the country as far as Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. His commitment to open spaces as community treasures open to all continues to inspire architects including Peter Walker, who designed the World Trade Center memorial site.

I was surprised to learn that Olmsted was a correspondent for the earliest issues of The New York Times. The series of articles he wrote about the South, first published in 1861 as "The Cotton Kingdom," reveal the horrendous practices of slavery. Though he initially felt a gradual end of the institution was best, he changed his mind when he witnessed first-hand the inhuman abuses.

During one of his assignments he took a stagecoach through North Carolina. His experiences made him a "red-hot abolitionist."

Olmsted's social consciousness is reflected in his natural designs. Think of the long, winding and wild entrance to the Biltmore Estate, welcoming to any and all, enticing and teasing until the final gift of the spectacular view.

And the view is much more than the massive house. The forest, rolling green hills, streams, lakes and distant Smoky Mountains — it's America the Beautiful. The Biltmore Estate, like Central Park, was "intended to furnish healthful recreation for the poor and the rich, the young and the old, the vicious and the virtuous."

I imagine one day, when the estate becomes a national monument, accessible and affordable to the masses, Olmsted's intent for his landscape will be even more pronounced and appreciated.

I wasn't too surprised to discover that Olmsted wasn't much of a religious man. Born in Hartford, Connecticut, young Frederick was pressured to "get converted" in the fiery revivals of the 1820s and 30s. He prayed hard, felt "God's fever" and had a strong physical reaction to the hours of preaching.

"In the weeks afterward," Martin writes, "he concluded that it was simply a headache."

The biographer goes on to say, "Like his father, Olmsted appeared constitutionally unable to fall 'under conviction.'" Frederick didn't reject religion completely, but "he found himself unable to meet a strict standard of faith in a highly organized setting. The revival didn't stick."

For those of us who have experienced revivals and evangelistic "crusades" or even the dramatic passion of a bible-waving preacher in the pulpit, Olmsted's early story is both familiar and affirming. For a young person to "feel the spirit" and "accept the Lord" before hearing of any reasonable alternative options does a disservice to both belief and brain.

It can also be a kind of right-of-passage for us to choose faith with youthful exuberance but later in life to choose, with a great sense of relief, to "let go and let good." To accept an earthly love instead of a heavenly Lord, to take responsibility for rational decisions rather than merely assent to a "just believe" mentality, can bring a great feeling of liberation and contentment. The landscape architect from Connecticut seemed to sense that, and it showed in his creative thought and work.

Olmsted went on to become a "scientific farmer" in upstate New York, Connecticut and Staten Island. His intensely close work with the land and his significant and interesting friendships (including with Charles Brace, who studied at Union Seminary in New York and then in 1860 introduced Henry Thoreau to a radical new book just arrived in the New World — Darwin's "The Origin of Species"), made Olmsted into a reformer with ideas as well as landscapes.

It may be important to keep that reforming connection in mind, since this reformation in freethinking, unlike religious reformation, thrives on a revival of reason and a deep love of nature.

I recently took a West Coast friend to Biltmore. We parked down in the gardens and walked up to the estate through the lattice path, then wound up the hill to the terrace where the expansive scene rolls out before you.

We both felt the beauty of the natural world and could almost ignore the mammoth structure Vanderbilt called home.

We did go in of course, but it was the garden, the forests, the twisted vines, the budding of early spring that caught most attention. Sure, the house is magnificent. But Olmsted's radical freethinking vision is still at play, in the living, greening genius of place.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com

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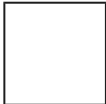

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