

Kitty Hawk, curiosity and an 'ethic of care'



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We're freshly back from a stunning drive to the Outer Banks, up through Virginia and down the always spectacular Blue Ridge. We love the endless beauty of nature, and we're also drawn to historical sites to learn more of who we are as a nation.

I always wanted to visit Kitty Hawk and see the place where the Wright Brothers first turned humans into birds. My father built 747s in Seattle for many years, so this felt like a pilgrimage honoring his memory.

To walk the 120 feet of that historic first flight one December morning in 1903 was emotional. The 12-second soar from Kill Devil Hill opened the skies to the reach of invention and imagination.

At Kitty Hawk I picked up a copy of David McCullough's book, "The Wright Brothers." Reading the early life of Wilbur and Orville I was delighted to find that their mother supported the boys' inventiveness and their (United Brethren Bishop) father encouraged wide reading of books, even the works of Robert Green Ingersoll.

As McCullough puts it, "It was the influence of Ingersoll apparently that led the brothers to give up regular attendance at church, a change the Bishop seems to have accepted without protest."

Many years later a friend said the brothers were examples of how people without special advantages can do great things. Orville said that wasn't true. They did have an advantage. "The

greatest thing in our favor was growing up in a family where there was always much encouragement to intellectual curiosity."

This kind of curiosity leads me to continue my "series" asking local clergy how they view secular, nonbelieving people ... those who may not fly with the flock.

I asked the Rev. Marcia Mount Shoop, pastor at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church in Asheville, how her faith tradition views nonbelievers. She said there is no "monolithic view of nonbelievers" because there are "viewpoints all along the theological continuum between the extremes."

She explained that "Christ is unique" but there is a "mysterious and expansive grace of God." She went on to say, "The nature of actual relationships with nonbelievers probably tends to lean in a 'let's not talk about the hard questions' direction with people who don't believe."

Pastor Mount Shoop says her congregation "embraces mutual learning" and that personally she has "learned a lot about my faith from my relationships with people in other faiths and with people who do not understand themselves as believers." This seems quite hopeful as a step across the sands and shores of belief.

I asked if she sees secular worldviews as a threat. "I believe religious extremism is a threat," she responded. "Secular worldviews I do not encounter as a threat."

This seems reasonable. Then she spoke of science as one secular worldview. My ears perked up here. She feels that science has a lot to teach, "however, there is a danger that science is seen



A monument in Kitty Hawk honors the Wright Brothers.

as an infallible source of answers when it positions itself as a secular alternative for certainty" that some religious people claim.

"I don't think science has all the answers," she said.

Here is where I would offer a balance. The scientific method is not about certainty or being "infallible" but seeking to find evidence of what is true about the universe. In fact, science is not really a "secular worldview" (there are many believing scientists) or a worldview at all. Scientists don't claim they have final answers to questions

outside their particular field of investigation (biologists don't claim they know astronomy).

Thankfully, Rev. Marcia said, "Science does not threaten my faith," and, "Science and my faith together help me discern healthy, life-giving ways of being in the world."

She went on: "The belief that science is all we need or can answer all of life's questions ... does at times diminish our public discourse." I would agree, if this was the case. But once again, I don't hear these claims about science.

However, science and philosophy (reason) are fairly fundamental tools to understand our world. "Life's questions" are open-ended. Faith is one response yet certainly doesn't provide "all the answers" or "certainty" either.

It was good to hear her acknowledge that "nature is our teacher" and "our home," and since "creation is sacred" her faith informs an "ethic of care [and] interdependence."

The last question I posed concerned dialogue and cooperation. She said, "cooperative action is at work in Asheville" yet "there are divides ... that need healing." I appreciated the invitation implied by her final comment: "The relationships between people of faith and [nonbelievers] may well be one [divide] that I have not seen yet."

Perhaps the inventive imagination of Kitty Hawk will encourage further soaring across any divides.

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