

Strangers on the road, a parable



Highland Views

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Guest Columnist

Some years ago when I was a parish associate in a beautiful church overlooking San Francisco Bay, I was teaching an adult study group on “Scriptures of the World.” It was a lot of fun to lead parishioners in readings and discussions of the Bhagavad Gita (Hindu), the Dhammapada (Buddhist), the Qur’an (Muslim), the Tao (Taoist) along with the only “holy book” they’d ever read — the Hebrew and Christian scriptures.

I think it was during this class (I was also leading seven services each week in the county jail), I came up with a simple parable, which still seems relevant to our day.

The scene is a busy street corner in a teeming city (it could be your town). People are going about their business with movement, sound and activity all around. A typical, ordinary day.

Then ... an accident. A moment of crisis. An elderly lady falls in the street. Cars, trucks and buses screech to a halt. The stream of women, men and children passing on the sidewalks stops. Everything stops, for a second.

Then, everyone runs to help the fallen woman. All converge to assist. Strangers rush over from all directions (some just want to gawk, but many more want to help if they can).

Now, freeze the action.

Unknown to everyone there, the shopkeepers are a Baptist, a Buddhist and a Bahai. The passersby are Muslim and Wiccan, Presbyterian and Unitarian. The drivers are agnostic and atheist, Catholic and Hindu.

Police officers arrive. One is Episcopalian, the other Jewish. An interfaith chaplain is riding along with the officers.

Emergency medical personnel race up — both women and both “nones”



Chris Highland titled this photo, “Thankful for strangers we meet along the way.” COURTESY OF CHRIS HIGHLAND

(not affiliated with any religion). Among the responders are black and white citizens, Asian and Native American, Republican and Democrat.

The lady who fell — a recent immigrant from (anywhere).

A scene of crisis. What do people do? Do onlookers stop to think, “I don’t know if that woman has the same beliefs that I do”? Do some say, “My political party is debating this kind of emergency assistance, I’d better wait for the decision”? Do others hesitate, thinking, “That woman isn’t from here so I’m not going to help”? Does a young adult think, “Oh, that’s just an old person; I don’t care”?

Let’s hope not.

I wonder how many religious folks would hold back for a minute to consider what their holy scriptures teach in these situations. Maybe someone would recall something about “helping the stranger.” Do you think anyone would say, “Wait! I have to go check what my holy book says or what my pastor, priest, rabbi, imam tells me I should do”? Would someone kneel to pray asking, “What does God want me to do”?

That seems silly, don’t you think?

Once, while riding my motorcycle through an intersection in front of my office, a lady ran a red light and smashed into me, sending me flying head over heels onto the pavement. My bike was totaled but all I had was a few

scrapes. Strangers appeared from sidewalks, cafes and cars, porches and the public library. The first to reach me were two homeless friends I knew from chaplaincy work, concerned for my condition.

Who is the stranger in these moments of crisis? Was I the stranger? Was anyone? Does anyone care what another person’s religion, politics, race or economic status is in these times? I highly doubt it.

When we don’t have time to let all our divisions and judgments influence our instinct to do the good and right thing, we do the good and right thing — at least, I think we’re inclined to.

The best of our faith traditions teaches us to love our neighbor — care for the stranger. When another person is in need, sick, injured, vulnerable or weak, it seems most people are wired to show compassion — it’s part of what makes us human.

But how many consciously practice that thoughtful, caring compassion? In the secular community, there are expressions of ethical responsibility, but how many live that in their lives?

I think that among the faithful and the faithless there are many who do live their lives with concern for others. My sense is that we all want to help when we’re needed; most of us will step in and step up to assist another person, including a stranger, when the situation calls for it. It’s in our blood to act, when we see another flesh-and-blood neighbor in distress.

As strange as it seems, we would do well to remember that we are all strangers — and that, in some sense, no one is truly a stranger. Those we may never know might need us, and we may, at some time and place, need them.

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