



Returning to the roots. CHRIS HIGHLAND/COLUMNIST

## Fondly remembering West Asheville's Pastor David Morgan



**Highland Views**  
Chris Highland  
Columnist

On a brilliant and blustery Sunday morning in autumn I received word of his passing. Gazing out the window watching big sycamore leaves float by, falling down to rest, I had been thinking of life passing by — my own, my family, nature.

Pastor David Morgan told me how much he enjoyed reading this column. He was a gentle soul. I don't use that phrase much anymore, but with a few it seems fitting.

Last year, Carol and I had lunch with David and his wife Anne, also a minister. David and I connected, planning to get together again. He shared my curiosity and openness to respectful conversation.

When a friend and I were experimenting with a new kind of secular congregation, David surprised me by walking in to sit with us in the circle. He sat quietly, smiling, nodding, attentive. I asked if he wanted to say anything. He said, no, he just wanted to listen.

I didn't know him well, but I sensed he thought of himself as a freethinker.

Afterward, Carol and I walked him to his car. He was a bit unsteady and we were concerned, though there was strength in his handshake and hug as he said goodbye. It was the last time I saw him.

The few times I attended his church, when Carol was guest preaching, I was warmly welcomed. I had no doubt that one day David might ask me to say a few words in a service. I don't think a "secular sermon" would have rattled him at all.

There are moments when I wonder why a person of faith would read the musings of a former minister turned secular. David gave me a clue — a gift really: "I just want to listen." Showing up, offering support, when words are unnecessary. An attentive presence.

"Passing." Our euphemism for death. Not passive. A movement, an active step, out or up or ... who knows? Seriously, who knows where we pass on to, if anywhere?

My life has been marked — perhaps scarred or tattooed — by deaths, passings. Parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, friends, relationships. The leaves pass. Season by season, they — we — fall, float and find the earth again.

A Zen master wrote that fallen leaves are the mothers of the trees. Dissolving into the earth, they send nutrients through the roots, up the living organism into the bark and branches to become buds and blossoms and leaves, again. Each tree is, in a literal sense,

a tree of life — an endless cycle of living and passing.

In Walt Whitman's contemplative poem "This Compost," he relates his startling realization that the earth absorbs all the diseased, all the dead. He hesitates to walk over the fields or through the forests or to lie on his beloved grass among decaying leaves and the leavings of generations passed.

He cries out to the ground: "How can you be alive you growths of spring? How can you furnish health you blood of herbs, roots, orchards, grains?"

He refuses to avert his eyes, to turn away and deny the truth. "Behold this compost! behold it well! ... What chemistry!"

Then, with deep reverence: "I am terrified at the Earth, it is that calm and patient ... It gives such divine materials to [humanity], and accepts such leavings from them at last."

We grieve Pastor David's passing along with his wife Anne and the congregation of Oak Forest, a small Presbyterian church in West Asheville. A kind person, a good man, will be greatly missed. I would have liked to be "an attentive presence" with him, to spend more time listening to his thoughts. No doubt we would have disagreements, but I'm confident we would never be disagreeable with each other.

I suppose what I most wish to say in honoring David is that he offers a living lesson, a hopeful challenge, that people can and will connect across the boundaries of belief. Even the name of the congregation he served, Oak Forest, gives a hint. When a sanctuary is known by the living land it's built upon and the growing goodness of its people, in my mind that "sacred house" has deep roots in community.

I've always felt we're too quick to use words in the presence of loss, of passing, so I'll leave it to the poet of "Leaves of Grass" to invoke celebration even in mourning. I'm fairly sure David would smile with silent approval:

*"At the last, tenderly,  
From the walls of the powerful fortress'd house,  
From the clasp of the knitted locks,  
from the keep of the well-closed doors,  
Let me be wafted.  
Let me glide noiselessly forth;  
With the key of softness unlock the locks-with a  
whisper."*

(From "The Last Invocation.")

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many 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](http://chighland.com). His new book, "A Freethinker's Gospel," is available from Pisgah Press.