

Baffled by a loss of faith



Highland Views

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Columnist

After a presentation I gave at a local nonprofit I received the following comments from a participant who was experiencing some bafflement (baffled: bewildered; perplexed):

“It baffles me ... that you have been so immersed in nature and all its richness and yet have not encountered your Creator in the process.”

I wrote back that I do indeed encounter my “Creator” in nature ... and that creative force/energy is nature — the Universe without a human face.

This bafflement often strikes me as a bit curious. What if those who seek an “encounter with the creator” in the natural environment took a walk with people who seek “close encounters” of a different kind?

If a Christian, a Muslim and a Jew stand together in a forest, on a mountain or at a seashore, they might all feel they are in the presence of “the Creator,” though they would each describe that “Other” with other names in other ways.

When a Buddhist, Hindu or pagan walks up to join them, what “creator” or “creators” are they seeking? Can a traditional Christian accept those encounters?

What some believers can’t accept is that secular people also have profound experiences in the natural world without looking to something or Someone else out there. Nature is full of wonder and endless lessons to learn. Why can’t that be sufficient?

Though they see no creator, other than nature, nontheists may have creative ways of describing the delightful things they sense.

The baffled respondent continued:

“It baffles me ... that over so many years when you ‘absorbed’ the Scriptures you did not find truths that spoke personally to you in timely ways.”

Assuring them that I did and still do find “truths” and wisdom in scriptures (not only the Bible) I also explained that I don’t find those words to be “divine.” Those of us who soaked up sacred scriptures might be squeezing the sponge now, drying out after years of saturation.

I’m fairly sure that I know where the bafflement comes from. Many believe as I once did, that without the Bible we would be completely lost. In my “Bible-believing” days it was my manual of faith, my guidebook, my spirit-inspired GPS. To accept there is truth outside the pages of scripture would be to admit there is truth outside of one’s faith. I now freely accept and admit that.

It’s not surprising that this swirling dance from belief to unbelief is a bafflement to some. It can be dizzying. What is often most perplexing is when folks assume those of us who don’t dance the same steps any longer have forgotten the fundamentals. But maybe we’ve found fresh fundamentals, and a new dance.

“Baffle” can also mean to restrain or regulate, as in baffling something so it doesn’t make so much noise. A baffle can “prevent the spreading of sound.” I wonder if some would like to baffle the voices of dissent sometimes, to silence those who ask questions or raise bewildering issues that cause bafflement.

What may be most disappointing is that people think former believers are “convertible” — that we’re candidates for re-conversion. When I’m not irritated by this, I’m amused, yet fully understand the attempt. In youthful days we believed those who were “led astray” just needed to hear the “good news” again and return to the faith of the flock. We didn’t give a thought to a person’s right to choose another point of view.

The person responding to my presentation had one further comment:

“People who declare themselves to be ‘Christians’ but turn others away by their over-evangelizing or use of ‘shop-talk’ language and fear-mongering and exclusionary behavior should not be a reason for us to turn away from the real truths of Christianity.”

Well, I did not choose to let go of my faith due to the “over-evangelizing” or other behaviors of believers. Though I certainly found the action or inaction of some disappointing, I stepped back to get a bigger picture, then made the rational choice to live without faith in a world full of faiths, without becoming anti-faith.

This is one of the most baffling things for those who think they have the “real faith” and the “real truth.” It’s hard for them to understand that someone who once believed no longer believes. There has to be a simple explanation, right? It must have been some bad experience.

They can’t imagine how a person doesn’t see the world as they do. What a great opportunity to face what baffles us and imagine how others might think and feel.

Maybe the “real truth” is that we are better off sharing our bafflement. Our world is baffling—perhaps especially our world of faith.

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