

Do people want prayer or presence?



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Columnist

A brown thrush flew into the window one morning. Walking slowly to the glass I saw it lying on the ground, beak open, panting. "You'll be OK; you're just stunned," I whispered. I left it alone, glancing out every few minutes until I saw it standing. A short time later, it flew off.

That week, in the John Burroughs class I taught, we read selections from his first collection of nature essays, "Wake-Robin." He describes hearing the "evening hymn" of a thrush in a hemlock forest. We discussed Burroughs' friendship with Walt Whitman and how he had suggested Whitman write a thrush into his great poem for Lincoln, "When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom'd."

The naturalist feels the "divine soprano" draws out "a serene religious beatitude" in him, a reverence in the stillness of the woods. He concludes by saying the feathered choir causes a "serene exaltation of sentiment of which music, literature and religion are but faint types and symbols."

Feeling that close to Nature—almost like walking into a deep green sanctu-

ary-Burroughs senses something more meaningful than we can find in art or faith.

This all reminded me of a scene in John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath" when the migrant father, Tom Joad, asks to talk with Casy the preacher:

"Tom looked at Casy's waving toes. 'Could ya come down from your thinkin' an' listen a minute?' Casy turned his head on the stalk-like neck. 'Listen all the time. That's why I been thinkin'. Listen to people a-talkin', and purty soon I hear the way folks are feelin'. Goin' on all the time. I hear 'em and feel 'em; and they're beating their wings like a bird in an attic. Gonna bust their wings on a dusty winda tryin' ta get out ...'"

In another scene, the tired and fading grandmother asks Casy to pray with her. Not so much "for" her but "with" her. He doesn't feel much like a preacher so he says, "My prayers ain't no good ... I don't know what to say." The weary lady tells him, "Then say one to yourself. Don't use no words to it. That'd be alright." Casy has his doubts, so he replies, "I got no God." "You got a God" the grandmother says, "Don't make no difference if you don't know what he looks like." Reluctantly, the preacher bows his head in silence; the woman watches him. When he raises his head she's relieved. "That's good; that's what I needed. Somebody close enough-to pray."

Preacher Casy doesn't understand what she means, but she goes on to voice one of the most profound lines in the book: "I'm just pain covered with skin." She knows that she's dying and she wants to know another person is there with her—she's the bird beating its wings in the attic.

With a wing and a prayer, we say.

Radical presence. Beyond words. Words mess it up. This calls up memories of the countless prayers of my chaplaincy years. In seven county jail facilities I would lead prayers or meditations for inmate gatherings. We might be standing or squatting by steel bars, sitting quietly or holding hands. Humans seeking something to bring meaning—a connected relation to each other and to something or someone. Some were pain covered with skin. Some were feeling joy; others, sorrow or fear. Whatever the reason for the request to pray, it seemed a silent presence was the best we could do—it was good.

Interfaith prayer gatherings that included the "street community" were always deeply stirring. Chants by Native Americans and Buddhists. Scriptures from Muslims and Christians. Wisdom from Jews and Wiccans. Songs and stories from unhoused people.

We are told by some that a prayer must be offered "In the Name of [blank]." It seems that some who pre-

sent themselves as masters of prayer think they have the special ear of God—invoking a divine name makes them appear to use the "king's seal" to assure He's listening.

I used to think there were "good prayers" and "bad prayers." Now I think preacher Casy got it right, and so did old grandma Joad. Be with people, hear them, feel them, hear their wings beating against windows and doors, hoping to be free in the fresh air and sunlight. It doesn't matter what your God looks like, or even if you have a God.

Can we sit silently with someone, let them know we care enough just to be there? Or do we have to say something, speak to Someone else, to let them hear our words, our beliefs?

Maybe the best we can do sometimes is whisper, "You'll be OK; you're only stunned; I'm here."

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.

Join Chris to celebrate the release of his new book, "A Freethinker's Gospel: Essays for a Sacred Secular World," at 4 p.m. Oct. 14 at the UNC Asheville Reuter Center and at 6 p.m. Oct. 23 at Malaprop's Bookstore/Café, in downtown Asheville.