

Do we have to burn all our bridges?



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

In my lifetime I've witnessed (through media) the collapse of many bridges. The Tacoma Narrows bridge in my native Washington State (1940). A portion of the Bay Bridge in San Francisco during the 1989 earthquake. The I-35W bridge in Minneapolis (2007). More recently, the Genoa bridge (2018). Two of my wife's relatives were killed when a bridge in New York crumbled in 1987. Look up bridge failures on Wikipedia and the list is long and tragic.

We build these spans to last, but nature or poor construction can bring them crashing down like Legos or a Jenga tower.

It doesn't necessarily have to be this way when it comes to faith and what may come after faith.

People who choose a faith walk across a bridge from not believing to believing. Not everyone has much choice. When you've only been shown one bridge, it's no surprise when you "choose" it, especially when it's been presented as "the only way." Yet, even in a family where everyone is expected to be on one side of the river, the next generation may decide they want to look for another bridge, another side. Perhaps not as a rejection of their family's tradition but because they are interested to learn more about the other bridges and alternative sides of the waterways.

We call a person an agnostic when they aren't so sure that life is better on the other side of a span. Maybe the walkway, roadway, cables and towers disappear in a fog and all they hear is people beckoning, "Just believe; trust us." That's insufficient for naturally skeptical folks.

Some atheists have crossed bridges on their way out (exodus) from religious belief. Those who were raised as believers may discover it is quite difficult to even find a bridge, let alone cross it. Others may simply risk taking the plunge to swim or soar across the chasm to ... the next steps, whatever those may be.

A leap of unbelief. But no need to jump off or burn the span.

Wherever religion is dominant, there are those who choose to "take another path" (heresy) or cross another bridge to a worldview or belief that makes more sense to them. For many, the repercussions can cause fractures and failures in their families or friendships that last a lifetime.

Another way

When I left a narrow way of seeing the world I found a more inviting span paved with books and illumined by great thoughts and good people. I ventured out into the fog that eventually cleared to blue sky. I took deep breaths, feeling free but a bit fearful. "Can I still be a Christian while accepting there are other religions that are equally valid choices for a faithful believer?" "How can I be a Christian without feeling compelled to convince the rest of the world they are sinners on the flaming bridge to destruction?"

Through seminary and years of ministry I emerged



Crossing a Rogue River bridge, Oregon. CHRIS HIGHLAND/COLUMNIST

with a more "expansive" view of the expanse, an appreciation for all the bridges available to cross, and many others yet to be built. Questions expanded: "Why be a follower of only one faith when there are so many similar basic truths?" "Why not believe in goodness rather than a god, compassion rather than creeds or common sense rather than scriptures?"

The overpass from belief to non-belief can be long or short, over a period of years or months. For some of us, making our way across includes those we most care about—some of our cherished relationships survive the journey. In fact, we are delighted to discover that many people of faith aren't afraid to meet us on the bridges. We feel no need to burn every bridge behind us.

Building new bridges

Then again, it's entirely possible there will be no bridge, at least not the one we're expecting, and a new crossing may need to be constructed. It's encouraging to see some new bridges are already being built through cooperation between the faithful and the faithless.

A video called "Middle Ground" shows three people of faith sitting with three non-religious scientists discussing their views. There are no great conclusions and I didn't hear anyone change their mind, but at least for a few minutes people with different views of the world could sit in the same room and have a thoughtful conversation.

I read comments from some "AA's" (angry atheists) who thought the video was silly and pointless. They thought the participants should have been fighting over more controversial issues. My response was, Why? What does that accomplish? Why throw mud, stones and sticks when those could form a foundation for the next steps forward?

Bridges illumined with the fires of reason, respect and responsibility don't have to burn.

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. His new book, "A Freethinker's Gospel," is available from Pisgah Press. Chris will be teaching a course through the Great Smokies Writing Program this spring.