

A parable of bears, trees and naps



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

Here in Asheville we're used to seeing big furry things wandering through our neighborhoods. When they aren't helping themselves to take-out from someone's smelly garbage can, they're lumbering along looking for berries or other snacks. Being omnivores, they're constantly on the prowl for food—like the herds of shoppers we see at Harris Teeter and Ingles.

On a sunny Sunday afternoon, Carol and I heard an odd sound. A young male black bear had just wandered by the window, so we wondered if he was scratching and scrounging through someone's trash. Going outside we watched the bruin climbing a black walnut tree near our deck. People often share stories and photos of bears in trees—but this was a surprise. We watched as he climbed, then climbed a little higher, finally coming to rest in a comfortable nest of branches.

I've been known to climb trees myself, and built "tree-forts" as a boy, so I was impressed with his skillful ascent. I have pleasant memories of discovering a perfect perch in a tree where I could rest comfortably, lean back on the trunk, let go with my hands, take a deep breath and watch the surrounding world without being noticed. There was a lift—a heightened sense of awareness and delightful contentment. I won't say I felt "one with the tree," but there was certainly an elevated consciousness of what I could only call "wildness." There's a wilderness up in a tree, just over our heads.

Our neighborhood climber delighted us but not with dramatic activity. He stretched out his legs, like lounging on a lawn chair, and promptly took a nap. Over the next hour we spied to see if the sleeper was still nestled in his leafy bed. No one else seemed to notice something fuzzy in the forest.

We reveled in the picture of total relaxation, whispering that he reminded us of a gorilla, paws and pads stretched out.

When the silent snoozer woke up and slowly descended to a crook in the trunk, he proceeded to scratch his back on the rough bark. It was like watching an old episode of "Wild Kingdom." He continued his lazy lallygag up the street



Looking for a nap tree. CHRIS HIGHLAND/SPECIAL TO ASHEVILLE CITIZEN TIMES

and disappeared through the bushes.

Is there some possible parable in this story? I'd like to think so.

In college Greek and biblical studies I learned that "parable" literally means to "to throw beside." It's where we get "parabola"—a symmetrical curve. So, as the dictionary says, a parable is "a simple story used to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson." I suppose it's throwing us a mental curve.

More precisely, a parable is a pictorial instruction thrown down beside us. Or, in the case of the napping bear, thrown above us into a tree.

Some thoughts that come to mind (nothing too profound here): find a place to rest, to feel safe and let go the stress; don't be afraid to explore; seek balance.

Ultimately, at least for me, I'm reminded to allow Nature—the natural world—to be the instructor, the parable-maker, to give us the parables to live by.

The napping bear was an image of pure contentment as he enjoyed a laid-back respite from life on earth.

Religious traditions teach a great deal about service, study, prayer—the "practice" of faith. Nothing intrinsically wrong with these actions. Yet, what of the "lilies of the field" or "bears in the trees"? What about letting anxious worrying over "stuff" and the incessant stuffing of our short lives with busyness drop away? At least sometimes; at least

for a short while; and maybe on a regular basis.

Perhaps the bear is teaching us that taking a breather is healthy. Bears are very busy, on a constant search for food. But they also climb, nap and scratch their backs. We've seen cubs wrestling and rolling on the lawn. We observe birds, deer and other wildlife singing, leaping or showing other signs of what can only be called joyful fun.

I don't tend to give human characteristics to animals, yet once in a while it's useful to imagine, or simply consider the wild neighbor as a teacher or its instinctual behavior as a lesson of some kind—or at least it could be a lesson, if we have interest in learning then and there.

It might be that the parable, thrown down from the tree, has something to do with the truth that once-upon-a-time stories are happening all around us every day, if we look up more, hear the rustling of leaves, the scratching and snoring.

The Goldilocks tale gets inverted. "Who's been sleeping in My tree?"

What parables are we hearing (or missing) today?

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.