

If you had the ear of the world, for a minute



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

I sometimes listen to Alan Alda's podcast, "Clear and Vivid." I enjoy hearing Alda's voice, remembering my family laughing (and often crying) during episodes of M*A*S*H, the 1970s drama set in the Korean War. For 11 years Alda hosted Scientific American Frontiers on PBS. I also listen to the podcast because Alda interviews interesting people with insights on the subject of communication. The Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science, at Stony Brook University on Long Island, New York, does exceptional work training scientists and science teachers to "tap into innate connections that come alive naturally when people recall a passion for their work."

This makes me wonder what would happen if Alda worked with religious teachers as well. And I'm curious how his approach might assist humanists and other freethinkers to be better communicators. Bringing representatives of various faiths together with secular freethinkers to enhance communication could be fascinating.

At the conclusion of each podcast, Alda asks interviewees seven questions. One is, "What would make you end a friendship?" Another is, "How do you like to deliver bad news—by phone, email or by carrier pigeon?" These more personal questions bring out a deeper side of each individual. In a recent podcast, Alda invited listeners to submit new questions for him to consider asking future guests.

I sent in the following questions, and I wonder if you have responses, or your own questions.

- 1) If you had the ear of the whole world for one minute (via internet, radio, TV, etc), what would you say?
- 2) If you could play a game with any person in history, what would you play and with whom?
- 3) If you had the power to stop any conflict in the



Eleanor Roosevelt, a memorial in Washington, D.C.

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world, which one would you end?

4) If you could speak all the languages of the world, what would you do with that ability?

5) When a person on the street asks you for money, what do you say and do? (note: I used to be a street chaplain)

6) If you were locked in a cell by yourself for even one day, what would you miss the most? (I used to be a jail chaplain too)

7) What is one thing you wish Science would solve, answer or at least explain?

8) If all religions of the world suddenly decided to work together, what do you think/wish would be the first thing they would/could do? (alternate: If you had Moses, Jesus, Buddha, Confucius and Muhammad over for dinner, what would you want to discuss?)

I'm told these questions were passed along to Alda, so we'll see if any make it into his podcast.

This got me thinking about an important reason why I write this column. I try to listen to what I'm hear-

ing in the world of faith and the secular world, present that to readers and offer my viewpoints. I don't expect everyone will agree (thank God or Goodness), yet I value all responses.

Along that line, in the spirit of Alan Alda, I'd invite you to present your own questions framed perhaps in this way:

If there was one thing you would like people to know about what you believe or your chosen faith, what would that be? And, if you're a secular person, is there something you would like people to know about living as an atheist or agnostic? Your comment could also be presented as a question for me, related to my journey of faith and beyond faith, but I'm really more interested in what you would like others to know.

I'm obviously not inviting proselytizing for or against faith. And it isn't my intention to offer a forum for someone to advertise their congregation or group. Yet, I'm curious how we summarize or label our beliefs or non-beliefs so that others can really hear us and maybe understand us.

For instance, someone might want people to know Jews and Muslims can live peacefully as neighbors, another wants us to know that not all evangelicals are supporters of one political party, and another wants us to know their pagan beliefs and practices are not evil but good. An atheist might affirm they are not against religion. In other words, like the first question I suggested to Alda's podcast, "If you had the ear of the whole world for one minute (via internet, radio, tv, etc), what would you say?" In this case, the whole world is Asheville and Western North Carolina.

For a future column I may present your voice and my response. Let me know your thoughts: chris.highland@gmail.com.

As Alan Alda says, "This has been 'Clear and Vivid' ... at least I hope so!"

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.