

HIGHLAND VIEWS

The privilege and adventure of grateful living



Chris Highland
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My father Robert passed away days before Thanksgiving in 1984. He was the age I am now, and while I may outlive him, I doubt I'll reach the 100 years his father William reached. The year before he died, Dad came to my seminary graduation, flying (for the first time) in one of those Boeing planes he built for so many years. He was full of life, love, laughter and pride in my accomplishment.

The last time I saw my father he was napping in his favorite chair in the living room of the old family home near Seattle. He lived his final years there, alone. My sister and I were busy with school, work and families. Thankfully, one of Dad's brothers lived close by and would often bring their father to visit. Near the end, one of Dad's sisters came to help a little, though all I remember her saying is that Dad wasn't using hot water to wash his dishes. Funny how the little things get magnified when someone is dying, trivial things stand out.

In this season—of fall, holidays, and death—I find myself returning once again to a short book Oliver Sacks wrote shortly before he died. A board-member of the ecumenical non-profit I served in California gave me the book, "Gratitude," as I was leaving my manager position with senior housing to move to North Carolina. Her inscription read: "I will be forever grateful that you came into our lives." A kind and meaningful sentiment. I felt more grateful hearing her gratefulness.

Sacks was diagnosed with liver cancer at the age of 81. As a neurologist himself, practicing for nearly 50 years, he was well aware he had only a short time left. Though blind in one eye, he kept writing until the end. He wrote, "I cannot pretend I am without fear. But my predominant feeling is one of gratitude. I have loved and been loved; I have been given much and I have given something in return ... Above all, I have been a sentient being, a thinking animal, on this beautiful planet, and that in itself has been an enormous privilege and adventure."

I would hope to share similar thoughts and words near my own end. There is nothing like the approach of death, or facing it in the face of another, that brings clarity to the meaning of

life and living.

We are living through a season of dying and death—gratefully, some of us are living through it. Over 250,000 of our fellow Americans, and over one million worldwide, have died from a living virus. "Gone viral" is a common phrase, but this isn't what any of us had in mind. So many fears my parents generation lived with seem to be inherited anxieties—war, the destruction of democracy, disease. The question they lived and died with remains ours: How can we find goodness and gratefulness in the midst of our fearfulness?

Oliver Sacks, along with so many who suffer through this pandemic, speaks the truth we need to hear. First, we can't pretend there is no fear. Sacks was a secular Jew who didn't use faith to mask a very human fear. My own work among the most vulnerable and fearful in our society taught me that fear, like truth, has eyes and ears and feelings. Yet, it's also true that one cure for that fear, or at least one way to keep it in perspective and live with it, is gratitude. Loving and being loved; giving and receiving what we can; discovering a depth of joy in the beauty of the world—this can help us accept our short, precious existence as "an enormous privilege and adventure."

I suppose it's all quite simple really, though often the most simple things become the most difficult, challenging and overlooked. As Dad taught me, with and without words, in his living and dying: do your best, laugh and make others laugh, all work is worthwhile work, hold to what you believe, be who you are though you end up alone. Basic lessons to contemplate and practice.

Near his own endpoint, Oliver Sacks wrote: "I have been able to see my life as from a great altitude, as a sort of landscape, and with a deepening sense of the connection of all its parts ... I feel intensely alive." What do we see from that altitude? Can we see the connections, feel the intensity of a full and fulfilling life?

It's true we can't always be grateful in every season of our lives, but we can touch the privilege of living and try to be more aware of the beauty along the way in this ever-so-brief adventure.

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. Chris' new book, "Broken Bridges: Building Community in a World Divided by Beliefs," is now available on Amazon.