

Is a ‘growing faith’ always a good thing?

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Persistent, resilient virescence.
Chris Highland/columnist

Stumbling down an Asheville sidewalk, grumbling at the loose bricks and cracked pavement. I wonder who keeps an eye on what's underfoot. What's over head — the growing mountains of steel and glass (aren't the mountains high enough?) appears to war rant lots of attention. Terra firma doesn't feel quite so firm sometimes.

Fractured footpaths have me thinking about our rather silly human tendency to create things that nature pushes aside with a shrug. Whether a town crumbles before the awesome power of water or wind, or a sidewalk crumbles at the strength of tree roots, we might do well to pause and ponder our humility, or lack of that virtue.

Like the River Arts District street art that cries out, "No more pavement!" we might wonder what really is beneath our feet.

As Thoreau famously wrote, "Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads." And he wasn't a particularly heavenly minded sort. He was speaking of down-to earth-and-pond respect, honoring what is close at hand, or foot.

As his contemporary, Walt Whitman, wrote, "Look for me under your bootsoles." Now, that's earthy and maybe heavenly too.

There's a neat little word, virescence, that means greening — living, growing, green. The more we appreciate the tendrils, sprouts and roots, the more we aren't so surprised by their resilience — a resilient virescence.

A thick layer of concrete or asphalt can't keep the green growth down, or out. The plants we call "weeds" seem to see our walls and streets and barriers as just another challenge to grow into and through.

Is there a lesson here for religious faith? I was taught in early years that growing in faith was the greatest thing in life. How were we supposed to grow our faith? It was fairly simple: pray more; read the Bible more; go to church more; talk about God with others more; repeat... more, more, more.

"Go deeper with the Lord," some would admonish.

From a distance now I can see how this left a perpetual feeling of inadequacy — never quite there, never quite good or godly enough. We could always get closer and closer to God. The ones we admired most were clearly "close to God." When they prayed or preached, we listened, took notes and praised ... more.

What happens when "growing in faith" comes to mean judging those who aren't "close enough" to God? And what if this leads to becoming more afraid and defensive toward other people who hold to other views? What if "growth" has more to do with protecting your own beliefs? in other words, what if growing is really more about hardening, digging in to hold your own ground "against the world"?

One young woman told me her parents refuse to support her marriage to a "non-Christian." I find that incredibly sad. The fear is that she might "drift from the faith" and God would be displeased. This is, of course, the old argument by the religiously correct that if they are displeased then surely the Lord is also displeased, because — you know — these folks know when God's feelings are hurt and what makes God so mad.

Here's where we need to take a long, deep breath, pause, take a walk, then try a little bit of reason. Considered in another, perhaps more healthy and creative way, maybe growing in faith can mean expanding your worldview, delighted by the wonderful diversity of opinions and experiences in our world (because it's everyone's world, believer or not).

My faith grew stronger as well as more meaningful and relevant when I stopped having to defend my beliefs and learned to listen more, to embrace differing understandings rather than push them away. When faith became an abundant field or forest of growth instead of a defended castle, it became much more real to me.

When my own paths and sidewalks of believing began to crack and fracture, it was sometimes hard to face. Yet, the virescence sneaking through the pavement of piety was such a wonderful surprise. I realized we can't pave over all natural beauty.

Religion can be like a hard, immovable layer over the fertile and fulfilling land. Or it can also be more pliable, earthy, living, green.

Pagans speak of "dark green religion." I like that. It scares those who think they can stifle the creative movement of things. But reasonable people know that isn't really possible. Persistent Nature will do what Nature does, regardless of us.

I know people who seem to have a "growing faith." They are open to change open to the greening. Their beliefs are full of life. Their outlook is virescent.

Like diverse species of trees and other rooted things, we can break up the pavement right alongside each other.

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