

Rich in small wonders but we're poor in seeing them



Highland Views
Chris Highland
Guest columnist

When I woke up the other morning I had a bug bite on my arm. Red, a little swollen, bit of an itch. Not bad, just irritating. The night before I'd been reading my bedside copy of "Extraordinary Insects." Didn't they know I'm learning about them, not seeking to harm them?

Norwegian biologist, Anne Sverdrup-Thygeson writes: "Fortunately, we'll never manage to wipe out all the bugs. But we would do well to take more care of our tiny six-legged winged friends, because despite their 479-million-year track record, they're starting to struggle." We should be alarmed to learn in some areas on the planet 75 percent of the "accumulated biomass of all insects" has fallen. We hear about the "climate crisis" but not so much about the "insect crisis." Why should we care? Why should people of faith or freethinkers care?

Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson gives us some perspective: "If human beings were to disappear tomorrow, the world would go on with little change. But if [in-

sects] were to disappear, I doubt that the human species could live more than a few months." That's quite a bite to the human ego. For those who believe a Good Creator made all creatures along with us, wouldn't it be a concern to protect them all – at the very least, not to thoughtlessly kill them?

Maybe a few are stung by this question: If religion was to disappear, what would change?

As a secular person I acknowledge that great good has come from faith around the globe. Lots of people have been "inspired" to work for human rights, social change, providing food, medical care, housing and much more. Though religious dogmas and doctrines have often been buzzing around to distract believers, some of the most basic religious teachings have been positive for the human community. It doesn't bug me to share this small planet with those who believe in other worlds.

Faith can also bite, sting and spread unhealthy things, like bigotry, supremacy and a distrust of critical thinking. Stirring up destructive swarms of sectarianism in order to dominate the world endangers us all, vertebrates and invertebrates. Does Reason ever come in a spray can?

Near the end of "Extraordinary Insects," a Canadian researcher is quoted

as saying: "The world is rich in small wonders – but so poor in eyes that see them." This seems to be a recurring theme in religion (and in my own writing). There are great things to be seen – even the great in the smallest of things – but we tend to miss them. It's like gazing at a tree and focusing on the trunk and branches yet overlooking the leaves, blossoms, fruit and small creatures living on it.

Reacting to a post on my blog about historical religious creeds, a commenter invited me to "argue" theology. I questioned why we need to argue about these things and asked him what his "creed-entials" were for the discussion (trying to keep it light). He replied that his arguments are his credentials. Oh well, end of a discussion that never began. Getting drawn into debates and disputes over subjects I once thought were central doesn't appeal to me any longer. It just sounds like buzzing in my ear.

On an evening walk we were keeping our eyes peeled for our resident bear family. Then, just as we were wondering when the turtles might be emerging after a spring rain, ahead on the grass we spotted a snapping turtle slowly plodding toward the pond. Rich in small wonders, we are surrounded by amazing, beautiful living things, but how

poor we are to notice.

We often read about people who are harmed by animals of all sizes. We still live with a degree of fearfulness over the tiniest virus. It's good to be cautious, wise to be aware. Yet it's also wise to be aware of how our fears cloud our vision, our reason, so we lose the lessons. How many of the world's Faith Founders presented natural lessons drawn from their immediate environment? We might imagine a buzz in the air as they spoke.

As I've said many times in a variety of ways, for a secular person wonder is our faith, curiosity our creed, truth and beauty our deity. What makes wonder, curiosity, truth and beauty different from faith is these are generated by delight, awe, a commitment to open questions beckoning us to investigate, to explore, to learn more and keep going with a willingness to change viewpoints when new evidence is presented. Everything becomes an instructor (clergy, if you will), even the smallest wonders such as insects.

If our sight is poor, it may be possible to correct it through closer attention.

Chris Highland served as a minister and chaplain for many years. His latest books are "Friendly Freethinker," "Broken Bridges" and "A Freethinker's Gospel." Learn more at chighland.com.