

The sweetness of light in the blink of an eye



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

In the biblical book of Koheleth (Ecclesiastes), we read: "Light is sweet." When we read this in a class I was teaching, someone said it should be "life is sweet." That's what we're used to hearing, but many scriptures of the world speak of light, enlightenment, the sun. Jesus is called "the Light of the World," yet says his followers are "the light of the world." And we're told by some traditions that darkness, like death, is to be feared, though we all face it some day. Additionally, some are encouraged to "turn a blind eye" to some offense or distraction. Blindness is used as a lesson in spiritual matters. We never want to lose our sight; light is sweet.

At the conclusion of another class, a bright flash crossed my left eye. When I got home I thought something was in my eye but drops didn't help. Then I saw there were dark floating strands moving around inside my eyeball. Alarmed, I told my wife and then called for an emergency appointment with the eye doctor. In an exam the next day, the ophthalmologist calmly told me I had "floaters" – vitreous fluid or cell debris in my field of vision. "Comes with age," she assured me. I didn't feel very assured. This came on so suddenly and I wasn't at all convinced I would "get used to it."

How do we handle these instantaneous moments in

life when something profoundly changes? What do we do when a physical issue, mental alteration, or a change in relationship, job or a death occurs? It can make us feel fragile, vulnerable and perhaps frightened. And it can all happen in the wink of a second, in the blink of an eye.

A story I've told many times concerns the trailwork I did while living on an island in the Pacific Northwest. All alone deep in the woods I was clearing brush when a small branch poked me in the eye. Not sure if I'd actually lost my eye, I stumbled back to my tiny cabin with intense pain. Gently washing the area I finally got the courage to look in a mirror. Relieved to see I still had my eye, I kept it covered for several days. Gratefully recovering one afternoon, I continued to squint, guarding my injury, while walking out to my compost. Something caught my attention in the alder above me. My feathery neighbor the barred owl was staring down at me. I almost thought I was dreaming. She had one eye closed. The same one I injured!

"The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy your whole body will be full of light" (Matthew 6). I think I understand the meaning here, yet the eye is not the lamp – it allows light to enter the body. If you are "dark inside" then you need to find ways of letting in the light. We could have long discussions how to do that. Some say faith is the light. Others say reason. Sometimes perhaps a combination. Yet the point is fairly clear: get light! (Jesus probably didn't mean light-headed though).

The Hindu "Gita" speaks of "the inner light." Mystics have always used this language. Having "the eyes to see" is a practice of opening windows of perception,

or kindling a hidden lamp within. For these folks, the senses are like symbols for something "deeper" yet brighter. The "Tao Te Ching" says: "The sage regards their center, and not their eyes" (12). Gautama Buddha taught: "In the midst of blind mortals, the truly enlightened shine" (Dhammapada 4:16). Yet, some caution is in order. Those who claim to see, hear, feel or touch something or someone "beyond the senses" can't be disproved or even questioned. Freethinkers will always question and hold high the essential lamp of reason. The Roman Stoic Epictetus wrote: "most of you are blinded." For the philosopher, the cure is wisdom, practical knowledge applied with all senses fully functional, especially common sense.

All this is not to say there are no moments when a flash of light crosses our vision. What happened to me after that class could be interpreted as a "message," a glimpse of enlightenment. Well, no, possibly the beginning of a cataract (and a disturbing sign of aging), but I experienced no new "insights" other than the fact that many others live with "floaters" too.

The writer of Koheleth claimed he saw "nothing new under the sun." Hard to see how he missed it. When we most appreciate our sight, when we are truly grateful for these amazing organs we call eyes, everything is new under the sun, in the light, the sweet light, of day.

Chris Highland served as a minister and chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His latest books are "Friendly Freethinker," "Broken Bridges" and "A Freethinker's Gospel." Learn more at chighland.com.