

Fingers crossed. Knock on wood. Not standing for superstition.



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Many superstitious beliefs and behaviors are contagious, caught in childhood. My mother sometimes repeated “old wives’ tales” (as they were once called): wish on a wishbone while breaking it, an itchy hand or dropping a spoon means we’ll have visitors (I don’t remember this ever happening). Spilling salt was a “sign” too, but I don’t recall what that was. Throwing salt over your shoulder just seemed messy to me. I don’t think Mom actually believed these things, but she picked them up in her youth, probably from her German Lutheran mother. I vividly remember my

friends and I taking great care not to step on a crack in the sidewalk — we knew that might break our mother’s back! Quite an awful thing for kids to worry about. Of course, Friday the 13th was an “unlucky” day, dangerous to the careless.

As I recall, touching wood or knocking on wood (especially a tree) was meant to summon tree spirits within. Like many superstitions, the knock was a request for protection. Finger crossing may have started among Pagans, but one theory is that early Christians used it as a secret sign (see artsandculture.google.com/18-superstitions-from-around-the-world).

At various times in history, tossing a coin into a fountain for luck, placing a horseshoe pointing up, a broken mirror, a black cat crossing your path, walking under a ladder and the like, all “meant” something — it held meaning or served as a warning. I wonder how many still believe these things, and if they do, why?

A history podcast I often listen to (The Ancients) covered the main Greek gods. The final one they discussed was Hestia, the goddess of the hearth. She was both the firstborn and lastborn of the gods (you’ll need to look that up), and though she had very few temples, the first sacrifice would be offered to her. Of course, she didn’t really need a temple, since every household with a hearth had a built-in altar to Hestia. I mention her because it could be said every religious ritual involving a sacrifice is performed to honor, please or appease a deity. Something visible is offered — even a rite of prayer — to show reverence for an invisible presence. It’s not hard to see how this activity can involve and evolve into simple superstition.

Not to be disrespectful, but I think we need to ask how much religious belief and practice is superstitious or based on superstition? The word “superstition”

comes from the joining of two Latin words meaning: “to stand over,” which could refer to “standing over something in awe.” I find that fascinating, since many superstitious actions seem to imply a deity or divine presence stands over and above the believer. One question that arises is: how much superstition should we stand for in the 21st Century, and a related question: can a superstition “stand” the test of reason?

In Evangelical days, we were rather spooked by anything that had 666 on it. We were somewhat terrified by the prospect of a satanic anti-Christ, son of the devil, showing up to attack our faith. When I learned in a seminary class that the number 666 could have been a code-word used by early Christians for the emperor Nero, I could look back on my youthful fears with a smile. But so many

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superstitious or imagined evil signs aren't so funny. How many people have lived in terror of doing something that might cause bad things to happen? How much faith is built on those fears? We only need to consider perhaps the greatest superstition of all — Hell — to know how terribly destructive a belief can be.

This gets serious when, for example, women are being imprisoned or killed in some African countries,

charged with witchcraft. Or, in some Middle Eastern countries, people are attacked when accused, often falsely, of blasphemy — hurting the feelings of God or the godly.

Handling a holy book incorrectly can bring severe punishment in some cultures. Disrespecting or insulting a holy person can be deadly. Think of the “houses of God” around the world, believed to be sacred spaces with untouchable items or inaccessible areas. Think of the special powers assumed by some who claim to channel God's blessings (plenty of these in our country).

I'm not suggesting we dishonor or disrespect any of

these beliefs or believers. What I sense is needed, perhaps more now than ever, especially in our culture of conspiracies and disinformation, is to bring out the old tried and true tool of critical reasoning. Questioning superstitions, or merely “standing over” them with a skeptical eye, to ask whether or not something is superstitious, should be encouraged, even welcomed by believers whose faith is more than just another form of finger-crossing.

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