

The discipline of seeing what is often overlooked



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

I'm not a wallpaper kind of person, but one of our rooms is covered with wallpaper with a leaf design. The pattern has faded over the years, but leaves are still visible. I noticed a beetle crawling up the wall. I didn't think much of it, until I observed that the beetle seemed to be following the leaf pattern, climbing along the design as if it was a growing plant. Amused, I wondered if this was a lesson from nature.

Paying attention in the face of so many distractions, you need to train yourself to see what is overlooked. This takes time and effort, with a willingness to improve a sense of sight that may be under-appreciated. It's possible to experience a strange feeling that some might call "spirituality," while others might call it intuition or – a "heightened sense."

Naturalist John Muir was climbing a

mountainside in the Sierra Nevada and found himself stuck spread-eagled on a rock face. He couldn't see where to move his hands or feet. "I must fall," he reasoned. Yet, this wasn't all about reason, or physical strength. Once he began to resign himself to fate, it was as if his senses were suddenly supercharged. He described feeling "possessed of a new sense," and spotted handholds and footholds to pull himself to the top of the cliff. Though Muir was a religious person, he didn't believe this was supernatural in any way. It was simply evidence of the ability of the body and mind to do extraordinary things.

In the biblical Book of Daniel, King Belshazzar, son of Nebuchadnezzar, held a banquet during which something strange happened. "The fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall." Everyone was frightened, so the king summoned the wisest people in his court. None could read what was on the wall. The queen knew someone who might help. Daniel, a Jewish exile in Babylon, "was found to have a keen mind and knowledge and understanding." As a prophet of Israel, Daniel spoke boldly to

the king—his worship of the gods of silver and gold were nothing before the God of Israel. Then Daniel translated the words: "God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end. You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting. Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians."

Though these words were a clear threat to the king, he honored Daniel, gave him gold, and clothed him in royal robes. Nevertheless, "that very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain, and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom."

This is the origin of the phrase, "See (or read) the writing on the wall." Straight from the Book of Daniel, the meaning is clear: a person is able to read a message and its meaning. Maybe a supernatural scribble from a god, or maybe a lesson learned from close observation of the natural world. Either way, it leaves the impression we sometimes need wise interpreters of life's mysteries.

John Muir once wrote that in order to see things from a new perspective we might need to "regard it from a new point of view, or from the old one with our heads

upside down" (Alaska journal, 1890). To see something differently we may have to try something very different than we're used to. If we don't understand something, we consider it from another angle. This applies to views of faith as well.

I was listening to a podcast where a minister who served as a pastor for over 30 years was explaining why he left the church and his faith. He said he once believed many experiences were "miraculous" and supernatural, but came to have a different sense, from a new perspective. Now, as a nonbeliever, he's still the same loving, compassionate person. He just found a way to climb up and away, as Muir might say, possessed of a new sense.

Perhaps when we see "the writing on the wall" it could be interpreted through serious thinking, impelled by curiosity to closely investigate the matter. An odd or unexplained experience may wake us to something we've never thought of before. Upon reflection, we could learn the lesson of the beetle: not every leaf is as it appears; and a wall is not alive or life-giving.

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