



Highland Views
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Columnist

Mountains to sea, crossing lines for humility and humanity

I've always been of two minds with this: Am I a mountain person or a sea person? I have spent most of my life near the salt air of inland sounds and sea, with mountains standing silent in the distance. My family had a small cabin in the Cascades of Washington State an hour drive through the countryside from our home overlooking the Puget Sound. As a young boy, swimming and fishing in the clear waters of the Skykomish River, hiking the green soggy streams they call trails, I sensed the highcountry was somehow home. Yet I couldn't wait to get back to the shoreline. Maybe I missed my friends or my favorite television shows (usually about wildlife and wild places).

Now that I live in the mountains I don't miss the ocean too much. I suppose I've discovered through the years that I'm more a tree person anyway, in forests near to sea or closer to the sky.

This reflection on natural places, where a person feels at home or "grounded," stirs some thought on the ways our beliefs "place us" somewhere. We feel closer, more "at home," in certain ways of seeing the world, others or even the divine. We're uncomfortable when we get close to the edges of our comfort zone. It can feel disorienting (losing our compass) to cross into unfamiliar country where we fear losing touch with "our mountain" or "our shoreline." There are some lines we just don't care to cross. But perhaps there are lines we should consider crossing.

Khadija, a young Muslim woman my wife and I know, directly responded to the terrible firestorms in Northern California. This remarkable woman described her action in this way:

"I am Muslim, helping at a Jewish synagogue, where there are Christian Latino children affected by the fires. There is no color or religious line when it comes to helping."

She could have referenced the Qur'an. We could hear how her faith inspired her to act. Yet she chose to draw attention to the artificial lines that divide—and the goodness that happens when those lines dissolve or simply become irrelevant.

I wonder sometimes why we turn to ancient texts and traditions, quoting verses, doctrines, creeds or voices from ages long ago, when we could "just" act with kindness, compassion and justice. We point to boundary lines instead of the ground we stand on. We guard the fences instead of looking for the gates.

Then we hear a youthful voice calling us to humbly practice our humanity.

Sure, many are inspired by their faith to help others. They may have favorite teachings or images in mind. They may imagine Buddha speaking with an outcast woman on the road or picture Jesus touching a leper or Muhammad encouraging a child. Someone might recall a Torah passage, "love your neighbor as yourself" and "love the alien [stranger] as yourself" (Leviticus 19). Jews, Christians and Muslims may especially recall the famous lines from the prophet Micah (6:8): "He has told you what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Back in my "days of faith" a funny thing happened. We would often put the stress on the last phrase in that verse. It was most important that we "walk with God" which, ironically, caused us sometimes to forget the humility part. When the focus was on our faithfulness, it was easy to forget to practice what is good, just and kind.

As Gandhi wrote, "A person's devotion to God is to be judged from the extent to which they give up stiffness and bend low in humility" ("The Bhagavad Gita According to Gandhi"). The Bible calls these folks "stiff-necked"—we say stubborn and self-righteous. When people refuse to "bend low" they lose sight of the whole point of devotion: to serve.

How does all this apply to secular people? I see a direct connection and practical way to understand "line-crossing." Say you were a Humanist Red Cross worker in that shelter and saw Khadija moving around among the evacuated fire victims. You notice this because it's a synagogue and you see her speaking to a Latino Catholic family with small children looking up wide-eyed at the young woman with a headscarf. You sense that faith is active, yet so is basic human goodness and kindness. There are no stiff necks here (except those sleeping on cots) while staff and volunteers, spiritual and secular, are each bending low in humility and humanity.

Now I understand, it's not about summit lines or coastlines, it's about me, a person, finding home, alongside others seeking the same.

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