

Are we only seeing through a glass darkly?



Highland Views

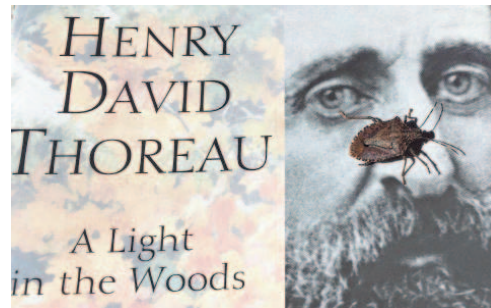
Chris Highland
Guest columnist

While crunching my lunch one afternoon I watched a “curiosity beetle” (some would call it a stink bug) walking, exploring, searching all around and across a picture window. This time, instead of using my “patented” glass-and-card invention to catch-and-release, I let the thing keep walking while I picked up my pen for column contemplation.

The beetle made me think of us (this is often how my mind works, in case you haven’t noticed). I’m not sure we’re that much different from these smaller creatures when it comes to seeing our world, experiencing the heights, depths and widths, and considering just how incredibly vast “our” universe really is.

The window world of the curiously circumnavigating insect is literally a window to our wider world. As the six-legged visitor circled around, I looked out at the swirling leaves of fall carpeting the browning grass. Raising my eyes I gazed through the woods and beyond to the dark green hills. Further, I could see up the hollers to the edge of the Blue Ridge, with waves of clouds slowly pouring over, bringing cooling winds and a faint hint of rain. In the greater distance, far beyond my sight, the rolling land, the sea and the greater expanse of the earth.

Much of what we “see” is an illusion, and even what we do see accurately is such a small sliver of the whole that we’re left standing or sauntering in circles, questioning our perception of any of it. I don’t like to think much about that, but I think it’s true. Only in our hubris would we humans imagine we have scoped the final frontiers and can say we know much, especially about “unseen” worlds. Does anyone actually believe



Nosy and curious CHRIS HIGHLAND/SPECIAL TO CITIZEN TIMES

we can simply “Google it” forever and ever, amen?

Imagine. We’re blessed/cursed with imagination. We wonder what’s out there, what life is and what it’s all about, though we know – if we’re honest with ourselves – that we’ll probably never really know. We are sapiens (wise beings) because we wonder, imagine and explore, which only makes us wonder more, imagine more. Becoming wise is another thing.

Back to the beetle. We think: “Stupid bug! How did you get in here and why don’t you stay outside where you belong. You’ll never find a way out on that windowpane.” And we’re probably right. Yet – now use some of that imagination here – what if the beetle suddenly turned to you, or me, and said: “Stupid human! Why are you in here and not out there? Looking through glass is not the same as using your eyes and all your senses to explore this massive planet. I may be only a speck, but so are you! At least I have six legs, and I can fly too!”

So there. If only the creatures we look down upon, catch or kill, could speak. Would we learn anything from them? If we are not already their students, their

words would no doubt have little effect. Then again, maybe we’re more sapient than I think sometimes.

Saul who became Paul (the one who upgraded Jesus – whom he never met – to the Christ; who gave us his letters as new scripture), famously said: “For now we see in a glass darkly (or mirror, dimly), but then we will see face to face.” He goes on to say, “Now I know only in part; then I will know fully” etc. (First Letter to the Corinthians, 13).

In other words, as science, philosophy and common sense clearly tell us, the more we learn the more we know and understand our world and ourselves. If we look through the window – or deeper in the mirror – the world just keeps unfolding, presenting endless wonders and discoveries.

And better, if we actually “open” the window – including the window (and door) of our mind – and get out in the open, we will learn every day, every year, world without end.

I sometimes wish some of the great spiritual writers had paid more attention to the world around them, sitting and observing or even crawling around with curiosity. Old Job encouraged that when he wrote, “Ask the animals and they will teach you; the birds of the air and they will tell you” – plants and fish, too (Job 12). Of course, he was talking about finding “God’s hand” in all the creation, but the point is still listening to the voices and lessons of the natural world.

In “The Spectacle of Illusion,” psychologist and magician Matthew Tompkins writes, “the explanations related to tricks of our minds can be even more wonderful than supernatural explanations.”

Let’s not be tricked by the dim windows or mirrors, especially the ones in our minds.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com.