Opinion
Culture
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Soul Seeing



(Unsplash/Austin Chan)



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No one else in our group paid the sign much mind. Even to this day, I'm not sure why I noticed it. It hung over the mantle of a substantial fireplace in a California bed and breakfast. Previously broken, reassembled with a few missing pieces and prominently framed, its large letters read "This Is Your Life."

I tried to photograph it, but because of the lighting and reflection from the glass of the frame, I was disappointed with the suboptimal photo. Reflected in front of the patchwork sign was my image, obscuring the uniqueness of the sign.

The occasion for the gathering at this cozy Santa Cruz inn was the nuptials of our niece, Shannon, and her husband, Marty. It was a small wedding, with mostly family in attendance. Folks arrived over the course of Thursday and Friday, giving us time to settle in before the wedding. We'd gather in the common room to chat, update each other's lives and toast the bride and groom. It was there the sign caught my attention.

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Suspecting a story, I asked the innkeeper about his piece of art. He was happy to tell how he previously lived near Hollywood. Wandering around an alleyway behind the television studios, he spotted the pieces of the still recognizable sign in a pile of rubbish. Recalling affectionately some memories of an old radio and TV program by the same name, he gathered up the pieces, took them home, reassembled them and framed the somewhat crude work of art. It would become a focal point in his inn.

"This Is Your Life" was an American reality series on network television from 1950 to 1987. In the program, the host surprised guests and then took them through a retrospective of their lives in front of an audience, including appearances by colleagues, friends and family. The show alternated life stories of entertainment personalities with tributes of "ordinary people" who had contributed in some way to their communities. Despite the sometimes-cloying tributes, the show enjoyed commercial success for that era, earning high ratings and awards.

When I expressed my mild disappointment with the photo to the host he asked with a faint smile and an interested voice if the superimposed image perhaps suggested

the reality of my own "This Is Your Life" — fractured in places, repaired, blemished, but still put back together, mostly intact, and holding together in some fashion.

I didn't know anything about the owner's story, yet he left me with some thoughtful reflection to blend with pleasant memories of a fun wedding weekend celebration.

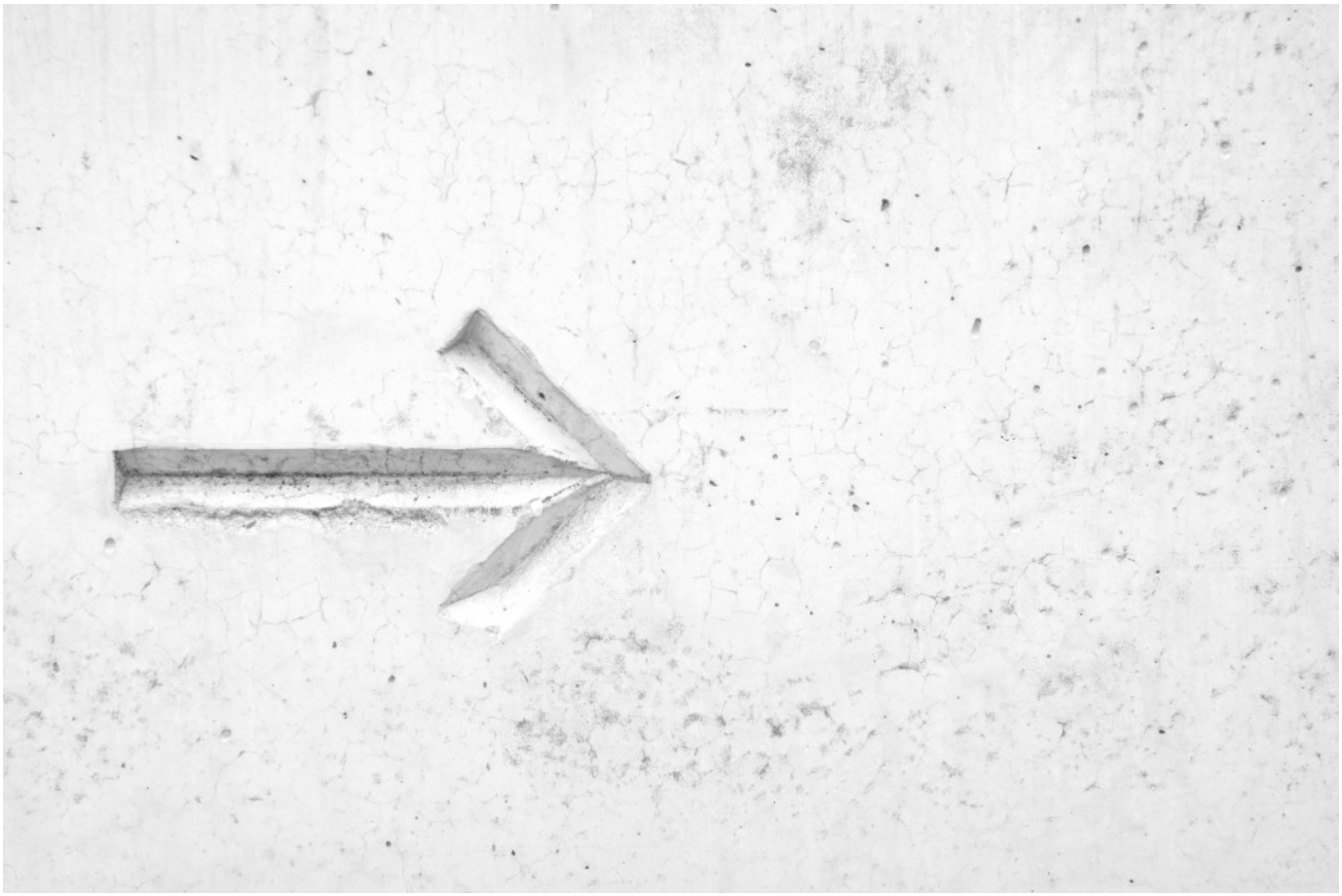
> Signs, of course, guide much of our daily lives.
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Signs, of course, guide much of our daily lives. They direct us to the correct bed and breakfast, note "no vacancy," tell us when apple cider is available, note Mass times at our parish and help in so many other ways.

On a less tangible, but deeper level, there are real personal and spiritual signs to help guide our lives. At important junctures in our lives, "signs" appear that might nudge us into a relationship, career or vocational path, religious faith tradition or a geographical location as a place to put down our roots. The late University of Notre Dame theologian Holy Cross Fr. John Dunne shared his wisdom and insight over the years with his many students, perhaps most poignantly with my favorite quote from one of his talks:

> Things are meant;
>
> There are signs;
>
> Listen to your heart;
>
> There is a way.

Dunne reminds us to always be attentive to events and encounters (such as weddings) in our lives and to be alert to signposts and touchstones we encounter along the way. If we then listen carefully to our heart, we will find our way in an abundant fashion on life's rich sojourn.



(Unsplash/Hello I'm Nik)

If we are attentive and aware, God's presence frequently manifests itself, primarily through signs from others, often those we know, other times through someone new to us. During a challenging stretch of life, a neighbor appears at the back door with a steaming pot of soup. On the anniversary of a loved one's death, a single yellow rose is left on the porch. During a time of languishing dread, a friend calls to say, "Let's go for a run." A mentor points out a job posting that she hints might be a good fit. Such encounters hold our fractured, blemished, reconfigured lives together.

Then there are events like this encounter with a sign that is a sign. A skeptic might claim mere randomness or serendipity. But Pam, a dear friend of long duration (not an "old" friend) quickly counters that that's "no question, that was a God wink!"

There might be a potential danger to think of these encounters as fatalism or predestination, but there seems to be a critical difference. I doubt that God oversees us like pieces on a vast chess board. Rather, I think he "booted up" our world and allows for wisdom to grow through humanity and signs that appear that guide us toward goodness and growth. Certain signs, of course, may connote a warning, but

nearby there might well be a sign left by a Dunne messenger, with a faint but clear message: "Listen to your heart; there is a way."