



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Beacons of Fire and Light”

© by The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen

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Centering Thoughts

Homage to thee, O thou glorious Being...The Company of the Gods rejoice at thy rising, the earth is glad when it beholdeth thy rays; the people who have been long dead come forth with cries of joy to behold thy beauties every day. Hymn to Ra, Egyptian ‘Papyrus of Ani’ (Book of the Dead)

The fire is the main comfort of the camp, whether in summer or winter, and is about as ample at one season as at another. It is as well for cheerfulness as for warmth and dryness.

Henry David Thoreau

In everyone's life, at some time, our inner fire goes out. It is then burst into flame by an encounter with another human being. We should all be thankful for those people who rekindle the inner spirit. Albert Schweitzer

Sermon

Fire and light. When we gather in community in the sanctuary each week and give life to our chalice, we create fire and light. For some lighting the chalice provides a time to say a prayer or intention, a hope for some ideal, such as peace in our hearts and the world. For some, it is a time to share a word or thought that speaks to the nature of being human and alive, including the joys and sorrows we experience.

For some it provides a focused moment for reflection on a particular thought. For some, its lighting marks an entry into intentional sacred time as a community. For some, it is that beacon of light in the darkness, symbolic of finding our way towards responsible truth and meaning, as our Fourth UU Principle affirms.

For some, it forms a connection between us and all the other Unitarian Universalists lighting chalices around the globe, like signal fires along a mountain ridge reminding us that we are not alone. For some, lighting the flame in community lifts our spirits and affirms that we do something important when we come together to worship and recommit ourselves to our ideals.

And yet for others, it is it is also the light which chases away all that is mysterious and unknown, all that frightens us, all that may be hiding in the shadows where light cannot reach. And for many of us, it is all these things.

Fire and light mesmerizes us. Personally, I am drawn to gaze up at the sun and soak up its rays, though I know it can burn and blind. I can spend hours staring into a fire, watching its flames lick and consume what it will, leaving behind dust and ash.

Fire transformed ancient people's lives for the better, even as it held the power to destroy their lives. Learning how to control fire enabled people to survive harsh winters, extend the daylight by allowing it to be brought inside a dwelling, and made it possible to get more nutritional value out of meat through cooking and preserving through smoking. Fire also permitted the development of metallurgy. Gold, silver, bronze, iron, and tin created better tools, but also led to the development of deadlier weapons.

Humans have long-worshipped fire and light for its benefits and because fire seemed magical, something needing to be created and preserved, something not found readily in nature. To ancient peoples this mysterious fire seemed to come from a divine realm. Sun and fire gods or goddesses can be found around the world: Egypt has Ra, Greece – Helios, Rome – Sol Invictus, Persia – Mithras, Ireland – Lugh, Japan – Ameratsu, and India – Lord Krishna.

In the Hindu sacred text, *The Bhagavad Gita*, it said of Krishna, quote: “That light of the sun which illumines the whole universe, which is present in the moon and in fire likewise – know that splendor to be Mine.”

In the Book of Genesis, or Beginnings, God breathed the universe into existence by the invocation, “Let there be light – and there was light.” When Moses first encountered God, the divine spirit was made visible to Moses as a burning, flaming bush. When Isaiah believed he was too unclean to come before or speak for God, a seraph purified his lips with a burning coal. Jesus, often illustrated with a halo of light, says in the Gospel According to John, “I am the light of the world.”

Fire and light. When we light a candle for someone who has died, we use the flame to symbolize the life and spirit of the person, in part to show that the flame burns within us. Like heat and smoke, the person's spirit rises to Heaven or to the starry universe, becoming one again with all that exists once more. In Judaism, a person's soul is a candle of God. The candle's outer flame reminds us of our own inner spiritual flame burning within in the temple of our hearts and souls. Numerous cultures speak of people filled with divine spirit as being lit from within; light an indicator of the presence of the divine. We sometimes say, “Namaste,” to one another, meaning “the divine light in me greets the divine light in you.”

In Lao Tzu's lesser-known writing, *The [say: wha wuu jing] Hua Hu Ching*, the Taoist writes, “Trees and animals, humans and insects, flowers and birds: These are active images of the subtle energies that flow from the stars throughout the universe. Meeting and combining with each other and the elements of the earth, they give rise to all living things.” This, of course, was written nearly fifteen hundred years before Carl Sagan would help make famous the fact that we are all made of stardust, all created from the stuff of that initial, fiery, cosmic explosion we call the Big Bang.

Fire and light have cosmic, religious, spiritual and symbolic resonance with much of humankind. In the Promethean myth human subservience to the gods separated these two similar beings. When Zeus demanded that humans present the gods with a choice sacrificial portion from each animal slaughtered, Prometheus plays a trick on Zeus. He wraps bone and gristle in fat, a portion Zeus then selects. The humans received the better meat. Angrily, Zeus punishes humans by taking away fire, intending to keep it only for the gods. Prometheus then steals fire to give to humans. Zeus then punishes Prometheus for eliminating that which separated the gods from humans. A myth surely, but one that recognizes human manipulation of fire sets us apart from other creatures. Fire empowered humans. Fire enabled humans to be creators.

Fire and light may be ours to command, but we still fear what hides in the dark. As a child I remember having to close my closet door completely before going to bed. If it wasn't closed, it appeared like a huge, gaping black hole, an opening to another realm where monsters or ghosts lurked, and, if given the chance, those monsters would come out of that dark space to harm me. Even the dark space under my bed was treacherous. I had to shine a flashlight under it each night to assure me that nothing was hiding there, nothing would come out to get me in my sleep. Even so, if I got up in the night I was always sure to step as far away from the bed as I could, lest something grab my feet and pull me under.

Before you psychoanalyze me, I probably watched way too many scary movies on TV. But these fears are really normal, immature thinking. When we grow older, we learn the difference between what is real and what isn't. I now know only dust bunnies live under my bed or in my closet, but you and I still have plenty of things real and unreal to fear.

Our futures are mysteries, hidden in the shadows of time yet to come. A literary device called foreshadowing hints at what will unfold, but life rarely provides such clues. The light of this day, this present time is the only time we can see, and even then we rarely see our lives clearly. We often wear masks for others, we sometimes wear masks to hide even from ourselves. We have relatively little control over what happens in our future—we can't prevent ourselves from getting some diseases, even when we think we live the healthiest of lifestyles. We can't prevent losing a partner to death, or to failed relationships, or other disappointments. We can't guarantee untold riches and happiness, either. We can only live each moment in a way that increases the opportunity for greater good to occur, but life includes no sure bets. Some of us would love a crystal ball or a special light that could shine into the future so that we could ward off the bad and encourage the good. But such magic is unreal.

It's no wonder ancient people revered the light and lit candles and bonfires to chase it away. It is no wonder that in the darkest days of winter, humans developed rituals to invoke the return of the sun's fire and light, and celebrated lengthening days with joy and merriment. At least some of their fears could be laid to rest when days warmed and light filled more hours.

But let us not forget the value of the dark and unknown too quickly. We gestate in darkness in our mother's womb, being made ready to face the harsh light of reality and life. We need darkness each night, too, not just to separate the light from the dark, the day from the night, but because our

bodies are tied to this daily rhythm. Sleep comes to us at night. Studies show that physical and mental health problems arise when we receive too much light and fight our body clocks. Some experts worry that all our electronics with their constant glowing lights never give us total darkness anymore. They see this resulting in changes at the genetic level—we're aging before our time, as if our bodies are programmed only for a certain amount of daylight. Artificially extending daylight seems to harm us.

We need both the dark and the light for healthy minds and bodies, and we need it for our spirits as well. Metaphorically, darkness is a time when we turn inward to examine who we are and what is most important to us. In time, we may bring something to the light, but first it needs that quiet dark for gestational purposes, for reflection and introspection. Last Sunday I talked about Buddhist mindful meditation which may lead to enlightenment—the soul illuminated and on fire. Jewish and Christian traditions also share ideas of retreating into darkness. Jonah went into the dark belly of the fish to consider God's demand that he be God's hands and voice in the world. Jacob wrestled with God one night. Both men emerged from this dark time with new commitment and resolve to live more closely in accord with God's expectations. Light met them when they re-entered the world. We too must take time to wrestle with our own demons, our gods, our values, our relationships, and more. And we too can set new courses when we feel corrections are needed. But if we never stop to examine who we are or where we are in life, we will never know when it's time to set that new course.

As the winter solstice draws near, let us celebrate as our ancestors did by welcoming the return to longer days. Join us on Dec. 21 for a musical service acknowledging this seasonal turning point, and on Dec. 24 for our annual Christmas Eve service filled with carols and candlelight.

But even as we celebrate the fire of the sun and its returning light, remember that the dark is, if not always welcome, at least not always to be feared. And, if you find yourself in the dark without a sure path out, know that our fire, our flaming chalice along with the warmth of this community, remain here to guide you back into the light. May it be ever so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. In what way are the UU flaming chalice symbol and/or UU community meaningful to you?
2. How might an experience of fire, light, or darkness have changed you in some way? Or, in what way is fire, light, or darkness significant or meaningful to you today?
3. How has a person or wisdom from the past or present ignited your inner spiritual fire?