

“A Candle in the Darkness”
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Once there was a dark cave, deep down in the ground, underneath the earth and hidden away from view. Because it was so deep in the earth, the light had never been there. The cave had never seen light. The word “light” meant nothing to the cave, who couldn’t imagine what ‘light’ might be.

Then one day the sun sent an invitation to the cave inviting it to come up and visit.

When the cave came up to visit the sun it was amazed and delighted because the cave had never seen light before, and it was dazzled by the wonder of the experience.

Feeling so grateful to the sun for inviting it to visit, the cave wanted to return the kindness, so it invited the sun to come down and visit it sometime, because the sun had never seen darkness.

So the day came, and the sun came down and was courteously shown into the cave.

As the sun entered the cave it looked around with great interest, wondering what ‘darkness’ would be like. Then it became puzzled and asked the cave, “Where is the darkness?”¹

I tell you this story on this chilly December morning because we are moving into the time of greatest light and darkness. The holidays, with their many twinkling lights and merry carols, propel some among us into the darkest loneliness and despair. It is ostensibly a time of feasting and good cheer with family and friends, yet some of us are not close to anyone in our family or are missing people we loved terribly right now. I offer you some thoughts about finding hope in the midst of the world’s and your own personal darkness.

Like any story, this one has layers of meanings. We may at first feel sorry for the cave who was unable to share its experience of darkness with the sun. This is a feeling many of us resonate with as in our struggles to be truly known and understood by others.

Another way to understand the story is that darkness is only the absence of light. It’s not an entity unto itself; and not the opposite of light. And that light by its nature overcomes darkness simply by its presence.

If we extend the idea a bit further we might say that truth overcomes ignorance, hope overcomes despair, and love overcomes fear, in much the same way, as these are not opposites either but one is merely the absence of the other.

¹ The Cave. From One Hundred Wisdom Stories From Around the World. Compiled by Margaret Silf.

For me, the image of the Sun shining its light into the far reaches of the Cave's corners and crevices is a powerful one. This is what I imagine the transformational power of love looks like.

The light of love, of hope, of truth knows no bounds.

Given the power of the imagery of light, it is not surprising, then, how many cultures and traditions use candles and lamps in their celebrations at this time of year.

Today is the first Sunday in the Christian liturgical season of Advent. Like many of you, I grew up in a Christian church. Advent is the time of preparation and expectation for the coming of the Christ and with him the promise of Peace. Each Sunday in December we would light one more candle set in the fragrant, pine and balsam Advent wreath.

The first candle, the one that is lit this morning in churches and cathedrals all over the world, is called the Candle of Hope. As one church member said, "The light reminds us that Jesus is the light of the world who comes into the darkness of our lives to bring newness, life and hope."

The first day of Hanukkah begins Tuesday evening at sundown. I think it is fitting to honor the Jewish roots of our Unitarian Universalist tradition by hearing the story of Hanukkah. This is the story as I have learned it:

"The story of Hanukkah began 165 years before the Common Era. Three years earlier, the Greek Assyrians, led by King Antiochus, seized the Jewish temple in Jerusalem and turned it over to the worship of Zeus. They desecrated the space, outlawed the practice of Judaism, and began entering cities, rounding up Jews, and insisting they bow to idols and eat the flesh of a pig, two things expressly forbidden by Jewish law. An elder named Mattathias was outraged and began a rebellion. When he died, his son, Judah Maccabee, continued the fight. He and a few others fought the Assyrian army and, despite the overwhelming odds, retook the temple. When they entered, they found it nearly destroyed. The altar was broken, the precious objects had been stolen and sold, and most importantly, the lamp that was always lit to indicate the presence of God had been snuffed out.

Judah Maccabee and his men looked everywhere for the special, consecrated oil they needed to relight the lamp. They found only one small container that had not been ruined, enough for only one day. But it would take eight days to make more oil. (Why eight days? Because in the Jewish tradition, the eighth day was a new beginning, it was infinity or wholeness, one more day than it took to create the world.) With only one day's worth of oil, the temple could not be rededicated. Even so, they lit the lamp and eight days later, it still burned. The temple was restored. These are the miracles of Hanukkah, that a small group of fighters could defeat an army and that one day's oil burned for eight days, restoring the temple."²

² From Ministrare, Rev. Sean Dennison's blog found here: <http://revsean.com/>

These days Jews come together as families and light the candles in the menorah in part to symbolize the hope that, against all odds, those who are oppressed will, like the oil in the lamp, endure.

In an email a Jewish friend of mine wrote, “Thousands of years later, no matter how much darkness surrounds us, we still light the menorah. The light of the Hanukkah candles is a reminder of past miracles, and of the continuing pursuit of peaceful Jewish ideals.”

Diwali, or Deepavali, is celebrated by Hindus, Jains as well as Sikhs in India and Nepal. It is five days of festivities that end up falling on our calendar sometime in October or November each year.

People place small earthen lamps in rows around their homes and all over town. The lights or lamps signify victory of good over the evil within every human being. While Deepavali is popularly known as the "festival of lights", the most significant spiritual meaning is "the awareness of the inner light".

Central to Hindu philosophy is the affirmation that there is something beyond the physical body and mind which is pure, infinite, and eternal. They call this the Atman. Just as we celebrate the birth of our physical being, Deepavali is the celebration of this Inner Light.³

It is not really such a surprise that fire and light bring us joy – and we bring them into our celebrations. When humanity’s ancient ancestors first learned to control fire they found the winning ticket to ride the wave of evolution. These early hominids discovered that having a fire in their camp meant so much more than warmer nights. Cooking became possible and the array of plants and animals available to eat exploded exponentially.

Fire helped to keep predatory animals at bay and extended the light, offering the first occasions for socializing, planning and the building of culture. It was probably in circles around these ancient fires that many stories and music first began to take form. To this day, it seems, there is something deep in our bones that associates the flame as a symbol of hope, happiness and truth.

We light candles on birthday cakes, honoring each year of life with a separate flame.

In times now past, a candle placed in a window would help travelers find their way to warmth and shelter after nightfall.

Demonstrators carry flames when we march proclaiming our support of policies that serve justice and truth.

And each week in this community we light candles, symbols of our joy or sorrow our deepest truth.

³ Wikipedia “Diwali” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diwali>

I'd like to share the story of my friends Brad and Nicky. They are going through a hard time financially right now. For as long as I have known them – over ten years – they have worked hard. Harder, in fact, than most people I know. They have both worked at least two separate jobs – even while Nicky was in graduate school. Like many of us in our thirties, they are determined to get just enough ahead to have some financial independence. Nicky really wants to be able to stay home with the children they hope to have.

The couple invested in real estate, using money from their student loans. When the property values soared they refinanced in order to purchase even more properties. Then they launched a business. But now the real estate tide has turned and just as they were planning to expand their business they find that they are stretched so thin that they are facing possible bankruptcy.

We've been on the phone a lot in the last few weeks. I can't begin to comprehend the level of stress and anxiety they are facing. One thing my friend said has stayed with me. She told me this story:

“Brad and I were eating dinner Sunday night after a long, hard weekend of crunching numbers. The stress of it all had made us short with one another and we had been arguing on and off all day. We don't normally have a candle on our dining table but Brad decided to clear off all the paperwork and light one. As we ate and talked the light around us began to fade. I think we were just too exhausted to get up and turn our lights on.

As I gazed at the flame dancing there between us, and the piles of paper disappeared into the darkness of the room, something struck me. I realized that no matter what happens – and its possible we'll end up losing all that we've worked so hard for – but no matter what, no one can take the most precious thing away from us.

I got up and came around the table, fell on my knees and put my arms around Brad. I was crying and I even think he was a little bit too. We sat by the flickering light of that one candle and held onto each other. That night was the first in about a week that we both slept all night.”

I know that it will not matter how much money Brad and Nicky have – their love will pull them through this time of uncertainty and many others yet to come.

This is what I believe: Love is the hope that burns through the darkness of all despair. There is nowhere it cannot penetrate. No heart is too hardened, no situation too desperate to keep the light of love from transforming it.

Remember the story of the Unitarian minister, Norbert Chapek, who when he became imprisoned at the Nazi concentration camp in Dachau, helped breathe some hope into the lives of the other prisoners. He led a flower communion, like the one we celebrate each spring, using whatever flowers the prisoners could gather from the grounds. I imagine that the little vase must have been filled with tiny blossoms the people found growing in patches

of weeds around the edges of the camp. But for those people, in that desperate time, the hope gleaned from the feeling of community gave them enough strength to carry on.

Years later, a former prisoner wrote a letter saying that had it not been for Chapek and his Flower communion, he and many others would not have survived.

And that is what matters. There is the heart of it.

The light of love, of hope, of truth knows no bounds.

If the dull ache of depression or pangs of despair begin to plague you during this season it is my hope that you will remember that you are always held in the embrace of love. There is nowhere you can go where this love cannot reach you. There is an unlimited, unimaginable, ever-present power of Love that is as close to you as your own breath; your own heartbeat.

I know that is a bold statement. Let me tell you how I came to believe that.

Growing up in the United Methodist Church I was both drawn and repelled by the platitude, “God loves you.” How wonderful to be loved at all times, no matter what. But I kept getting hung up on the theology. As hard as I tried, and as badly as I wanted to, I couldn’t make myself believe in a personal God.

In Unitarian Universalist circles we tend to soften the theistic nature of the phrase and instead say, “You are loved.” But that sentence still implies someone or something who is doing the action of loving. It is true that there are always at least a few people who love us. But worded passively like that diminishes the power behind the words.

What I have come to believe, through experiences like that of Brad and Nicky, is that there is a mighty force of Love in the Universe. Like light or electricity it flows from one thing to another. It is not static. It cannot be grasped or held onto. The only way to feel it is to open ourselves to the current, and allow ourselves to be the conduit to others – we must become loving. Through our words and our deeds, love is incarnated in the world illuminating truth and restoring hope.

As we walk together through this holiday season, may the twinkling lights adorning rooftops and trees be gentle reminders of the transformational power of the Light of love.

Like the sun that entered the cave and asked, “Where is the darkness”, so too does love, when welcomed into our dark places vanquish pain, fear and hopelessness.

The light of love, of hope, of truth knows no bounds.

May it be so. And Amen.