

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“The Holy Flame of Life”
Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore December 10, 2017

Sermon

Specially consecrated olive oil was needed to re-dedicate the temple in Jerusalem. Almost all of the available oil containers, called cruses, had been desecrated. Only one cruse remained with the priestly seal on it. The desecrated altar had been cleansed after pigs had been sacrificed to Greek Gods. Statues of those gods had been removed and destroyed. The Torah (Exodus 27:20) directed “And thou shalt command the children of Israel, that they bring unto thee pure olive oil beaten for the light, to cause a lamp to burn continually.” The Jews were ritually impure because of the conflict with and defeat of the Syrians and Greeks. Their purification process would take seven days. Yet the light of that one cruse of oil managed to last through eight nights, time enough to make sanctified oil by the eighth day to keep the lamp burning.

Fire has long been sacred to humanity. There are stories of the holiness of fire and of a lamp or fire constantly burning all around the world. Think of our ancestors before recorded history who didn't know how to start a fire. Once they encountered a fire, it was a special opportunity. With care, they would be able to keep it going by feeding the flames and preserving the embers to light other fires. Without fire, there was no protection from man-eating predators, no way to cook, and no way to stay warm on freezing winter nights. Fire allowed humanity to leave the African savannah and move to climates more hostile to our fur-less bodies.

One of the best known religious traditions with a reverence for fire is Zoroastrianism. Long, long ago they worshipped with fires on hill and mountain tops. Ahura Mazda, the light of wisdom in their tradition, was equated with the sun. Light pushes back the darkness of chaos in their dualistic religious thought. Mazda brings life to the world just as the sun does. They see fire as a purifying force to eliminate wickedness. Zoroastrian temples include a holy fire urn that is always burning to represent goodness and purity.

In the Hindu tradition, the god Agni, is visualized as a god of fire. The holiday of Diwali, also called the festival of lights, incorporate Agni as a symbol of light and energy. During the autumn celebrations, small lamps mark the festivities. In the spring, bonfires honor Agni during the Holi celebration. In rural India, mothers carry their babies in a clockwise direction around the bonfire for remembrance and good luck.

Bonfires are a familiar ritual for Solstice in the Celtic tradition. Native American fire-keepers keep the fire going day and night so they would always have a fire source. Lighting a candle is a common way to remember people who have died and those who are in need in many religions including Unitarian Universalism. It is hard to find a religious tradition that doesn't have some positive use for a holy flame to be lit.

Even growing up a secular Humanist, I had a reverence for fire. Building a fire in the fireplace has always felt like a sacred act to me. I remember reading Hermann Hesse's book *Damien* that

described the characters worshipping in front of a fire that appealed to me. They would quietly watch the fire burn until the flames disappeared and the ash covered the glow of the embers. Some of us have worshipped in this way around a camp fire, talking and watching the fire die down until it went out.

Given humanity has celebrated the holy flame for so long, it seems almost sacrilegious to turn against the nurturing and sustaining aspect of fire. Yet the world is using fire so profligately that it may be dooming us.

The burning of fossil fuels is releasing prodigious amounts of sequestered carbon into our biosphere in the form of carbon dioxide. On one level, it is great to be bringing all that carbon back into the life cycle again. Unfortunately, it returns in a form that captures heat from the sun in our atmosphere and dissolves into the oceans as carbonic acid that changes its PH, threatening to make them unlivable for many creatures.

The explosive power of fire has been used to make horrific weapons of destruction. The spark ignites gunpowder driving a bullet at high speed out of the barrel of a gun. Fast burning jet fuel engines drive planes and rockets to deliver explosive power that levels buildings and shatters human bodies.

Just the smallest fire generated by a lightning strike can grow quickly to the proportion of a forest fire. And if fed by high winds as is happening right now in Southern California, burning embers can leap long distances. A small fire in a barrel can escape and start a conflagration like what happened in Cohoes last week burning up the downtown area. The destructive power of fire has an awesomeness all its own.

Dangerous as the humble flame can become, we couldn't have life without it.

That is because the fire isn't just outside of us, it is inside us too. We literally are burning up calories every day to stay alive. Without that burning process, we couldn't regulate our body temperature at around 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit. Every process of our body requires energy to be completed. Muscles need fuel to contract. The heart muscle can't beat without a little nourishment. The brain is an energy hog that uses up twenty percent of our caloric intake.

To extract energy out of sugars, starches and proteins we've consumed, they must burn too. That burning process in us needs oxygen. And if we don't breathe to bring in oxygen in and expel carbon dioxide waste at very regular intervals, we will die in minutes. Let's just say, the inner flame in us is very real and very necessary to our survival on a daily basis.

And that flame can operate at a deeper, more metaphoric level too. Just as the log in the fireplace gasifies due to the heat of the flame, releasing combustible gases and leaving behind soot and ash, so we too are consumed in this burning process, transformed day by day as our bodies are gradually used up, become more fragile and start to fall apart.

Humanity has been like a fire storm as we have slashed and burned and cut down forests, overgrazed the meadows, leached out the nutrients from the soil through extractive farming

practices and paved what we want to drive and park on. We are consuming the surface of our planet and in the last several hundred years started deeply mining and burning up what is under that surface. It is as if we are robbing the graves of our carbon based ancestors. Like Prometheus, we are stealing the fire of the gods and gaining god like powers. Will we share his fate for our actions?

What seems crystal clear to me and I hope to you as well is we must turn from our profligate consumption of fossil fuel and greatly reduce our reliance on it for our energy needs. This should be our nation's number one priority rather than trying to resurrect coal as an energy source.

This is one of the positive images of the Hanukkah story. The renewable light source, olive oil, that was supposed to last for only one day lasted for eight. I imagine, rather than a miracle, the priests looked carefully at how to make the oil last by trimming the wick, covering the oil to prevent evaporation, and maybe even preventing a breeze from disturbing the flame causing inefficient combustion. They innovated and found that they could make their oil last almost an order of magnitude more than they expected. What a wonderful image for us as we seek to get more light with less energy. LED bulbs consume so much less energy than incandescent bulbs, we might already be able to get an eight to one savings! What other efficiencies might be possible in the future?

I'd like to suggest that we develop what might be called a skillful, a wholesome, a responsible relationship with fire. Evolution has given us the ability to anticipate the results of our actions. We can guess what will happen if we continue to burn up everything in sight, polluting the air and thus compromising future generations as they are crowded together as sea-levels rise.>>>

The engineers I used to know in Silicon Valley myopically believe that we can innovate our way out of just about any problem humanity will encounter. To that I say, there are some hard limits that are likely to stop us in our tracks. And even if we can avoid some of them, the toll in human suffering by those in the less developed world will be horrendous ... already is horrendous and getting worse. We have a moral responsibility not to destroy their lives and their worlds.

And what usually gets left out of the conversation is the biosphere itself. The ecosystem of species we are burning up is dying off. Not through any fault of its own, but through the instability generated by human activity. Basically, Mother Nature is getting burned and it's almost all our fault.

In a way, metaphorically, we are all in Southern California, threatened by wildfires burning out of control whipped up by Santa Ana winds. With a President and a Congress that believe in drill, baby drill, letting no fossil fuel reserve go unexploited, it can seem like we are doomed. And I'm sad to say, those living close to sea level around the world will likely have to move.

Let me just pause here and say, I can easily go down a path of gloom and doom. Watching the level of carbon dioxide in the air relentlessly creep up can feel pretty hopeless. Maybe the Agung volcano erupting right now in Bali might give us a reprieve but it will only postpone the inevitable.

The theme for this month is hope and I thought this sermon was going there, but so far I'm feeling like I'm headed straight into the hopeless corner.

That is probably how things felt for the Jews in the first century as they dealt with Roman oppression that they couldn't do much about. The Maccabean rebellion had been a flash of glory that degenerated quickly into politics as usual then Roman conquest. I can imagine how dispirited they probably were at the time.

And then out of Nazareth, out of basically nowhere, out of a place where absolutely nothing important happened, a couple arrived in Bethlehem and the woman gave birth to a baby boy. This seemingly insignificant event became a world changing moment.

We don't know what kind of world changing moments are ahead of us. I'm not saying our current President is the anti-Christ who might set the apocalypse in motion, but if you get raptured before I do, please put in a good word for the rest of us. I'm not planning on going anyway because I'm in it for the long haul. I'm inspired by the Bodhisattva commitment to forego full enlightenment till all beings are awakened. Yes, there is likely to be much suffering ahead for all of us – but maybe that is the nature of how things will play out before enough people wake up from their xenophobic materialistic trance to see clearly and then choose the way of collective liberation.

What I know without doubt is the holy flame that burns within cannot be destroyed. The Spirit of Life is very strong and will continue to be and to become with us or without us. I have great faith the fire of love will not go out ... even after eight days have transpired.

Benediction – Rabindranath Tagore:

Peace , my heart, let the time for the parting be sweet,
 Let it not be a death but completeness.
 Let love melt into a memory and pain into songs.
 Let the flight through the sky end in
 the folding of the wings over the nest.
 Let the last touch of your hands be gentle
 like the flower of the night.
 Stand still, O Beautiful End, for a moment,
 and say your words in silence.
 I bow to you and hold up my lamp
 to light you on your way.