

Anyone Got a Flashlight Handy?

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One of the most universal symbols in human meaning making and faith is that of light. That's of course, because our eyes are pretty much useless in the dark, and we need light to not only see, but grow our food. Before electricity, how much light there was where you were determined a lot – and it still does. The less light there is, the more some folks' mood seems to decrease. Light is a good thing – in the world's religion light matters. In a world, where darkness seems to be getting its claws in, there has never been something as wholesome as light. Light purifies, it makes clear, it allows growth. These are the qualities that naturally make it drawn to images in religion of good deeds, righteousness, and yes, of course, enlightenment. It is a versatile symbol with plenty of applications. And light of course is a source of anxiety.

There are three anxieties about light that I think are worth exploring in our texts. The first, is from the natural world. There's a fear amongst scientists about the growing phenomenon of light pollution – that is too much unnatural light that makes it hard for animals to fulfill their basic rhythms and if you're an astronomer, it makes it harder to see the night sky. So, in our world, what I would say is that there is a whole lot of spiritual light pollution. Light, as I see it, in spiritual terms is something that comes from the core of who you are and radiates out. It is not manufactured, it is not bound up with ego or signaling to one another that the light is present, it is not prone to giving off heat, in other words, and it doesn't prevent anyone from thriving in its presence. In our spiritual world however, there is a sense that one ought to be making plenty of light, and what good is a little bit of light if others can't see it? And yet, this is the sort of light that can make it hard to see what really matters – it can make it hard to see the night sky, it can make it hard for others to flourish. Real light is not about hemming others in, staking out a place of the ego, or signaling to each other that light is present.

The second is that we should contain what light there is in our lives, this is what scripture terms, "hiding your candle under a bushel," but if there's anything that religious traditions seem pretty excited about it is that authentic light, the sort of goodness that is inside each and every one of us, has a place in our world. Let your light shine before all people, scripture instructs. This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine, another hymn tells us. And yet, shining the light that is at the core of ourselves, if it is natural light, can feel incredibly vulnerable. The thing that should make that easier is that each and every person has that luminous essence that characterizes creation. Everyone has it – your vulnerability and openness is just an invitation to more vulnerability and openness from your fellow travelers on the path. It is not diminished in sharing, in fact it multiplies in sharing. It lights many torches. It is good for cooking, the classical Chinese Sutra tells us this morning – I love that line, because it means that the light of teaching, the light of

enlightenment, the light of truth is good for something. It has practical effects. It is not just theory, but practice.

And the third anxiety about light is that it just feels like it's getting dark. So, there can be this impulse to see that a lot of bad stuff is happening in our world and to think that there is no light, or to, instead of feeling vulnerable, and sharing your inmost light, you may seek for a shortcut. You may ask around if anyone's got a flashlight. Scripture tells us that the kingdom of God is both already and not yet. It is coming, and yet it is within you. In the same way, light is within every person, and yet there are no shortcuts to the cultivation of practices of light, no shortcuts to vulnerability, truth, forgiveness, and grace. The thing that is the most unpopular to say either to teenagers, adults, or spiritual seekers is this: it takes time.

And yet, it is so worth it. The quakers speak of the inner light as a gift that every person has, and as a faculty of discernment. Gnostics thought we were all pieces of the divine spark looking to find a home. The Shabbos candle welcomes Shabbat, and plenty of other traditions emphasize light. Sharing our light with others means sharing what is at the core of our identities. If you worry about it being dark, try cultivating authenticity and lack of ego. That is where lights tend to burn the brightest and most vivid. That is where the divine spark can at last have the fuel it needs. That is where our hands can rise to meet the challenge of our world. That is where we can celebrate the luminosity of others. Because make no mistake – the world would like certain people, whether by race or gender or sexuality to be denied the ability to let their true selves shine. The answer to that is more light, more incandescent love, more fires from the source of our being that make the way clear for others. Who knows – maybe we can even fight back the darkness.