

On Fire with Spirit
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When I was in seminary, we had to complete a multi-day career and psychological evaluation. As part of the process we took lots of written tests and inventories. One of them had questions on it like, “I am fascinated by fire,” “I hear the voice of God,” and so on. One of my friends who had mystical experiences in her past explained afterward how she weighed her answers. She didn’t want to seem too far outside the norm. She said that she gave them that she was indeed fascinated by fire, because so many are, but used more metaphorical responses when answering about of her mystical experiences. She took the evaluation before me and had told me about her dilemma. I was prepared for the fire questions. I have always been fascinated by fire. I learned how to build a safe and toasty camp fire at a young age, knew how to use our gas stove to make pancakes by five or six, and was (and continue to be) delighted by candles and the wood stove. When I was about 10, I think, there was a fire at a local business, luckily after hours so no one was hurt, and my mom asked if I would like to go see the fire. I said yes, and I will never forget the power of the roiling smoke and the fire lighting up the dark.

In Acts, Pentecost is established, born out of the Jewish holiday of Shavuot. Shavuot is the celebration of God giving of the Torah to the Jewish people. It is celebrated 50 days after Passover, which is also when Pentecost is celebrated. Pentecost marks the time when the Holy Spirit came upon the followers of Jesus.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.¹

In this story, it is not a dove, or voice from beyond that connects the followers to their god, but tongues, as of fire. Fire is all over the Bible, burnt offerings come up a lot in Hebrew scripture, God appears in the burning bush, and on and on. *This* moment is usually depicted in art as a group of people each with a little flame above their forehead. It is kind of a weird image, and in that way, really sticks out. The Holy Spirit comes as flame to the followers of Jesus and changes them. Pentecost is a moment when all the people can understand one another, or at least what they are saying. In the story of the Tower of Babel, the people were punished by no longer being able to understand each other. In George Tyger’s reflection he writes:

The people thought they could stand face to face with God just by erecting a tall enough building. But the story is also about the human need to own and control things. When so much is out of our control, the lessons of Babel are important for all of us.

We can all build Towers of Babel when we use God for our own purposes. We can use God to dismiss others, to assert our superiority, to divide people into those who belong and those who don’t.²

1 Acts 2:1-4

2 War Zone Faith

In the Pentecost story the message is that through Jesus, all people are brought back together. Of course, we know that this is not how it all played out among those followers, and there is not only one spiritual path. But, let us take this opportunity to wonder, what would it mean to understand each other differently and better? Unitarian Universalists, not generally being Trinitarian, don't often focus on Pentecost, but perhaps in a time of division, an opportunity to celebrate communication and the spirit that connects us all is a good idea. How do we understand spirit? How do we engage with it?

One way to engage with spirit, that can transcend language, is prayer and meditation. Prayer can hold a sacred space to name what we are grateful for. It can be a time to name our hopes and wishes for ourselves, others, or the world, or to name the actions we have taken, or not taken that we wish might had been different. Prayers can name our joy at the beauty and wonder of the world. It is direct and experiential, not an *intellectual* talking about our feelings and beliefs, it is about sharing and experiencing them. In a worship setting, when we pray together, it is our collective breath and attention that brings feelings of connection to each other and for some, to the transcendent. Ritual in our worship and in our personal practices offers a spiritual container and context for connection. When I am up at my husband's family camp in the summer, on a pond in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, I like to go out on the pond when the water is still in the morning. Sometimes I swim and sometimes I am in a kayak. I take time for gratitude and attention to the experience of my body in this particular beautiful and magical place. I pray, and I don't say a word. What ways do you pray? Is it with words? With your body? Where does it happen?

Spiritual practices are a path to let in the unexpected, to let go of control, of imagining we can build a tower to get to fulfillment. I have shared this reading with you before, but when I notice that I am holding on to control too tightly, I remember this poem from Wendell Berry

The love and the work of friends and lovers
belong to the task and are its health.
Rest and rejoicing belong to the task,
and are its grace.
Let tomorrow come tomorrow.

Not by your will is the house carried through the night.

Not by *your* will is the house carried through the night. Spiritual practices help us remain open to life, to other people, to healing and renewal. They hold space for gratitude, to name our deepest hopes and fears, to be attentive to our place in the web of life and to name our vision of a beloved community, we would like to live in to.

In both recent and long past human history we know that violence and terror can happen anywhere from in our homes to between nations or people. Love and compassion help us to hold each other through tragedy. My grandfather was a chemist and served in World War II in Europe. He died when I was 5 years old, so I only have a few memories of him, but I have a Unitarian Lenten devotional from 1941 that he carried in his uniform pocket through the whole war with his notes and marks. One passage in particular relates to our conversation today:

(from Tendrils) ... Oft-times we wonder what sustains a seeming frail, yet tender soul.
Though tossed about by ...adversity, it is not smashed to earth and overcome. Mayhap the human heart has invisible tendrils by which it clings to those eternal [truths], unseen

by the eye, yet felt by the heart? How frail at first may seem a sincere devotion, a far-flung ideal, or a burning conviction! But after it has been exercised by life's rugged experiences, it becomes one of the many anchors to which our soul holds fast.

We may have ideas about what is important to us, or what we believe, but it is only through our experience that we truly understand them, or change them.

Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt is the president of Starr King School for the ministry and offers this reflection:

What I know about being inclusive—crossing from culture to culture, learning the language of diversity—is that it's the work of a lifetime. It's hard to accept people who are not like you, who don't talk the way you do, or believe the things you believe, or dress or vote as you do. It's even harder to appreciate them for the things about them that are not like you, to find them interesting and fun, to enjoy the learning that's part of the experience, and to acknowledge, finally, that you may have to agree to disagree.

The truth is this: If there is no justice, there will be no peace. We can read Thoreau and Emerson to one another, quote Rilke and Alice Walker and Howard Thurman, and think good and noble thoughts about ourselves. But if we cannot bring justice into the small circle of our own individual lives, we cannot hope to bring justice to the world. And if we do not bring justice to the world, none of us is safe and none of us will survive. Nothing that Unitarian Universalists need to do is more important than making justice real—here, where we are. Hard as diversity is, it is our most important task.³

Sometimes what divides us is about differences in language and understanding, but more often it is a lack of shared experience and compassion. We need to listen to one another, and in order to be in connection, we need to be vulnerable. In the Christian tradition, tongues came to sit on people's heads, as of flame, and acted as universal translators. What tools do we need to be able to be good listeners, to be passionate about connection, and attention? George Tyger, in our reading earlier, written in Afghanistan for a military audience, concluded:

To put it another way, where have you experienced the Holy in your life, even here in this place? When does God feel far away? How has the divine been close to you? These questions can tear down the Towers of Babel in our minds and bring us down to earth, where God lives every day.⁴

Knowing ourselves is key to being able to talk with others about what matters most to us, *but* perhaps the highest hurdle to sharing our beliefs, our spiritual core, our practices, is our fear of judgment and vulnerability. Our spiritual selves can be very tender and we may be reluctant to talk about them or show them, but if we do not share in community, if we do not talk about our experience, and listen deeply to others, we will be without connection, adrift without center. What is the fire that pushes *us* toward connection, toward justice, toward building community? May we find the words we need to share it, and may our *actions* express our experience and beliefs, shining as bright as flame over our heads.

So may it be. Amen.

3 Been in the Storm So Long

4 War Zone Faith