

Lighting a Candle in the Darkness

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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Prayer doesn't change things.

Prayer changes people, and people change things.

Let us enter into the spirit of prayer. *(Adapted from Lon Ray Call)*

A year after the end of the Second World War, in a sermon called “Christmas Always Begins at Midnight,” the Unitarian minister A. Powell Davies said the following:

Whenever we feel pessimistic concerning the future of humanity on this troubled planet, we can always remember this: that with all our fears and failings, we have yet somehow managed to put the brightest of festivals in the darkest part of the year. Not at midsummer but at mid-winter, we celebrate most universally our hope and joy.... When it is the darkest, we celebrate the light. When the earth is most desolate, we carol our joy. When the harshest and bleakest of the seasons is upon us, we can turn to gentleness, kindness and forbearance.... If we are to celebrate the ancient festival of light overcoming darkness, it must be in full knowledge of how dense is the darkness against which the light must shine.

Thrown as we are now into a 24/7 news cycle and wired to cable TV, to radio and social media that confront us on every hand with stories and images of havoc, violence, conflict, poverty, injustice, and degradation of the environment, who of us has not thrown up our hands and said “Enough! I can't take any more!” Who has not felt the numbing effect on our hearts, minds and souls of this seemingly incessant onslaught? You've heard the term “compassion fatigue”—I think a lot of us know it, fight against it as best we can, but saturated as we are by a seemingly endless catalogue of worldwide woe, sometimes it seems there's only so much we can take. And knowing who you are, what kind of people make up this congregation, those who have enormous capacity for feeling and expressing empathy tend to be most at risk for this kind of vicarious trauma. Caring comes at a high cost.

The darkness which saturates our landscape seems so deep and vast, what difference could lighting a candle possibly make?—or saying a prayer for that matter? “Better to light a candle than curse the darkness,” so says the proverb; to which my inner cynic responds: “One candle!?!—go ahead, but don’t think you’re going to change anything.” And then the resignation, the compassion fatigue, re-sifts and settles on the soul like cold, fine cement dust. Does knowing more have to mean feeling less?

Sometime ago, Diana suggested that I should listen to a story first broadcast on the CBC Radio’s “Tapestry” program back in late May. I did, and thought it worth sharing with you on this particular Sunday as we approach the darkest day of the year. It is a true story told by a young North Vancouver based author and journalist named Shula Klinger. Shula has a good friend named Razan whose family lives in Syria. Sometime ago, Razan called Shula keening with grief—a beloved cousin in Razan’s family had just been killed by a car bomb near Damascus. The tragic death of this young man, widely loved and cherished by his family and others, was compounded by the fact that he was helping the victims of a previously detonated bomb, when a second explosion went off, killing him and others.

On hearing of his death, Shula instinctively said to Razan: “I will light a candle tonight for him and your family.” Having said that, Shula immediately second guessed herself: “Would I look like fool? What difference does a candle make? What do I know about them and how they mourn?” She was relieved when Razan wrote right back to her, saying Syrians were also lighting candles for their dead, and thanked her.

Then Shula took a second step: she posted a photo of her candle on her Facebook Timeline and asked friends to do likewise: “Light a candle and post it there,” she wrote. Soon,

more candles appeared on her site—friends, relatives and strangers across Canada; and then more and more candles appeared from around the world: New Orleans. New Delhi. Hong Kong. Halifax. Perth, Australia, Paris, London, New York. She tagged her friend Razan in response to all those photographs of candles so that she and her family in Syria could see them.

Shula Klinger said that this has led her to thinking a lot about the relevance of our desire to light candles, and has concluded that there is something instinctual in this desire, this need of ours to light a flame in honour of the dead or as a symbol of affirmation that there must be light in the midst of darkness when we're struck by overpowering grief. "The desire to light a candle," she writes, "seems to be as universal as the fear of any family, any community that feels itself to be forgotten, neglected or abandoned by the world."

Oh come on, some friends said to her when she told them about what had happened. "Don't get yourself caught up in world events; you can't do anything about them." "Maybe not in real terms," she replied. But what is more important in time like these? Sitting aghast before our TVs waiting for the feeling to pass, for the pizza to be delivered, to surf to another channel? Just because we cannot change the state of affairs in a distant country; it doesn't mean we have nothing to feel, nothing to do. To quote again those words shared in our meditation today: "Prayer doesn't change things. Prayer changes people, and people change things." The same could be said for lighting a candle.

At least for her part, Shula Klinger "discovered there is a world of difference between doing nothing and simply lighting a candle. Fires have a tendency to spread," she wrote. "And when that flame is one of compassion, a desire to show support for people caught in a hellish situation, [well] that's the kind of fire I'm happy to light."

As candles from all around the world filled up Shula's Facebook page, her friend Razan called the young man's mother in Syria. "I told her what you were doing," Razan said, "and she was very, very happy. She says thank you, this means more than you can know."

In bringing her story to a close, Shula writes that "in a culture swamped in an outpouring of texts, it's a relief [a boon] to find there is still room for the on-line equivalent of a nod, a silent supportive hug that says: 'you're not alone and your people have not been forgotten.' Or as Razan's own caption read: 'You have given something to all the abandoned families of the world.'" And then this: in Shula's words—"I have often wondered how it is that human beings are able to observe horrific acts on the other side of the world and while being temporarily upset be essentially unchanged. But now, when I wonder how our compassion for others has been stretched so thin, or wonder how we can restore it to health, I know what to do: I light a candle."

I don't know when Unitarians started lighting candles in worship services. It wasn't standard practice before the advent of the flaming chalice symbol which came into use during the Second World War by the Unitarian Services Committee. We've certainly lit a lot of candles in the past sixty years or so. I do know, and have been told by a couple of people over the years, that they find candle and chalice lighting an unseemly intrusion of ritualism into what they feel should be a more soberly robust and rational gathering of like minded, progressive folk. We're supposed to be the anti-churchy church alternative is what I guess they're getting at; and I'm sure they have their own stories of religious trauma moving them to feel this way. I think I understand and respect their feelings

But I have to tell you, I've warmed to candles and candle lighting, and—safety obsessed—I'm saddened we'll see fewer live flames in our candlelight service tonight. I only hope we

can still keep lighting this chalice, this advent wreath, these candles of joys and concerns—it would be sad day if we're reduced to flicking a switch to illuminate them as well. Maybe there's a line we won't bring ourselves to cross... for there's something instinctual in this desire, this need of ours to light a flame.

Think about what happens when we light candles up here. First, I can't tell you how many times I've had to hunt down a match or a lighter in this place. I stop thinking about what I'm going to say in a few minutes in front of all of you. Something more immediate and primitive takes over—I'm on a hunt for a match; they're something we don't touch or deal with much these days.

Once I've tracked down a match or lighter, I hunt again, this time for someone, usually a child or young person, to come up here and help me light the chalice. And then up they come, in front of all of us—sometimes thrilled or scared, and our attention shifts, de-centers away from ourselves for a moment to the person, to the pulpit, the chalice, the unlit candle and suspense of what's about to take place—will they succeed in lighting this taper? Will it go out as they walk over to the chalice? And the hot wax—oh no, is it dripping on the floor, or their hands? Am I going to hear about this from the Buildings and Ground Committee or an upset parent? And then, this chalice candle itself: how many times has it resisted the flame from the taper, the quavering small hand? Why won't it light? What should I do, tip the candle? Sometimes it takes several attempts, but eventually, at last, the fire takes, the wick alights, the chalice burns, and our worship moves to a deeper place...

Do you see why it's OK that we light candles up here? Why it may be a good thing?
Yes, it's a pain: there's something awkward, uncertain, primitive, sticky, imperfect and tentative about it all.

"Fires have a tendency to spread." And when that flame is a desire for going deeper in worship and outward in compassion, when for a moment the focus of thought and need turns from oneself and one's own skin beyond to others in a show of support and solidarity that the flame will be lit by a child so that our worship can continue, deepen and expand—and we as a congregation, not atomized individuals, find ourselves united in purpose and strength and hope while this timeless, instinctual, universal, humble act takes place....

That's the kind of fire I'm happy to light....

Let the melting wax drip all over our hands and floor and chalice stand;

Let the flaming wick snuff out and time arrest its inexorable march as we do it all over again;

Let the hands tremble, let our eyes and hearts attend;

May we see and feel that something out of the ordinary is taking place, for surely it is...

May we seek always to bring light wherever the deep shadows fall.

Speaking of shadows....For over thirty years and more, it seemed as though the entire Southern Hemisphere on this side of the globe was plunged into the heart of darkness: military coups, brutal dictatorships, civil wars, thousands disappeared and dead—violence and oppression—an unending nightmarish contagion. It all seemed beyond hope and remedy. Do you remember? It filled my secondary school, university and graduate school days.

How many candles were lit by anguished families in those decades, in how many churches, homes and open spaces? We'll never know. But hoping beyond hope, they were lit by

the non-famous, by nameless non-celebrity culture mothers who gathered and stood vigil for their lost children in plazas in Argentina and parish churches in El Salvador and elsewhere....

Fires have a tendency to spread, and they congregated and conflagrated, and in one Latin American nation after another in the 1990s up to the present, extraordinary people have been pushing the darkness back, demanding and securing basic civil, economic and democratic rights and freedoms. The progress has been uneven and is always under threat, but the advance has been real and is taking root. Surely, this is one of the most important stories of our time, and how little we know or take note of it!

I just want to share one story—a candle in the darkness if you will.

The nation of Uruguay has a population of about 3.5 million people. It's nestled along the Atlantic Coast between Brazil and Argentina. In the late 60s, in a fatal attempt to quell labour and student unrest arising from economic and political crises, the head of state declared a state of emergency, banned political parties, and beefed up police powers. An armed insurgency ensued, and the military staged a coup d'etat, shut down the Congress, suspended the Constitution and democratic rights, and waged a dirty war of kidnapping, mass arrests and extrajudicial murder—a state of affairs that gripped that nation for over fifteen years, as the same scenario was being played out across South and Central America.

Fast forward, to the mid 90s up to today, everything has changed. Uruguayans have restored their democracy and rights; their left of center government has legalized same-sex marriage, abortion and the production and use of marijuana. Its key energy and telecommunications industries are nationalized. And the government sets prices for essential commodities such as milk and provides free computers and education for every child. And you

know what? They're thriving and have won international praise for transparency, safety, robust civil rights, democratic government and lack of corruption.

The current head of state is a former 1960s revolutionary militant, shot by the police six times and who spent fourteen years in military prisons, much of it in dungeon like conditions. Jose Mujica is seventy-eight now. When elected president, he foreswore living in the state palace, which he's turned over to organizations housing the homeless, and continues to live instead in the one-bedroom farmhouse outside of the nation's capital which he shares with his wife Lucia Topolansky. Topolansky was also a leftist guerilla fighter, prisoner, and victim of torture, and now a leading member of the Uruguayan Congress. When he's not driving a tractor on the farm, he gets around in a VW bug, traveling without guards and pomp of any kind and he gives away 90% of his presidential salary to charities.

At the recent United Nations Rio Summit on sustainable development last year, he railed against the blind obsession to achieve growth through greater consumption. "I'm president," he said. "I'm fighting for more work and investment [in my country] and trying to diminish unnecessary consumption...I'm opposed to waste—of energy, or resources, or time. We need to build things that last....If we lived within our means—by being prudent—the 7 billion people in the world could have everything they need. Global politics should be moving in that direction."

Lighting a candle in the darkness. I thought of that especially when I read that during two year's solitary confinement at the bottom of a well in the 70s, Jose Mujica spoke to the frogs and insects to maintain his sanity, and now he's President of Uruguay. (see Jonathan Watts, "Uruguay's President...", *Guardian*, Dec. 13, 2013)

"When I wonder how our compassion for others has been stretched so thin," writes Shula Klinger, "or wonder how we can restore it to health, I know what to do: I light a candle."

In closing, one more quote and final thoughts. The great Jewish rabbi, scholar and activist Abraham Heschel said this about prayer, and I'm thinking of candle lighting here as well:

We do not step outside the world when we pray; we merely see it in a different setting. The self is not the hub, but a spoke in the revolving wheel. In prayer [in lighting a candle] we shift the center of living from self-consciousness...[to that] center toward which all forces tend. Prayer takes the mind out of the narrowness of self-interest, and enables us to see the world in the mirror of the holy. For when we betake ourselves to the extreme opposite of the ego, we can behold a situation from the aspect of [the eternal].

Standing in some reality which makes us realize our own finite existence and yet links us to the greater whole of which we are a part—now that just may give us the perspective, detachment, honesty and hope we need to face life and death, traumas great and small, and thus give us the strength to kindle a candle and push back the darkness to make room for the light.

Blessing the Candles

by Rev. Lynn Ungar

*Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha'olam, asher kidshanu
b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu l'hadlik neir shel shabbat*

Here in the last
gentle light past sunset
At the end of the week,
in the last years of the century
it is hard not to grasp
after the receding light
It is hard not to wonder
what is left--two candles burning--
Insufficient light to plant
or cook or paint the kitchen
Anything purposeful that might
claim some conviction of the future.

There is so little we create
A few lines that take on life,
a bookcase that stands steady
There is so little that remains,
and always someone wanting.
I could hand out quarters
on the street all day and no one
would be saved or safe or whole.

Outside, the street lamps
are blinking on into a false
pink phosphorescent cheer
and we are sitting silent
in the wake of the candles'
first flare. I am watching you
looking at the candles
or the darkness in between them.

This is the blessing that we
have kindled—this particular dark.
This space between two poles
which we, who are not angels,
can inhabit. If you stand facing me
this is what you will find
The gap between us where

our common lives take shape
The space between us that
we reach into for love.

Outside, the royal blue is deepening
to black. The stars begin to form
their million year old light
into constellations which we,
in our demand for form and story
have decreed. And you and I
are caught between the candles
where we cannot help but live,
In the close and infinite abundance
held between the kindling
and the dying of the light.

*Praised be Thou, Eternal God,
who has sanctified us with
thy commandments, and required
of us the kindling of lights.*