

“The Arrival of Light”
Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
Meriden, CT
A Story of Light and Sanctuary
&
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A Story of Light and Sanctuary

“...like the sun that rises in the east, blessing us all with warmth and light.” But suppose you’re heading west, west through the Pyrenees, that formidable mountain range separating Spain and France. I need some help.

[Ask a family of four to come up. Whisper to them that they will be a Jewish family fleeing Nazism in a dangerous escape across the Pyrenees. They will be walking stealthily, hand-in-hand, as if through a narrow mountain passage. One parent will have a map, the other, a compass.

Ask a man and the Worship Assistant to be the USC envoys, image of a chalice in hand. They will meet this family, hold up the emblem of the chalice, and guide them through the gorge.

Ask others—four or five—to be the mountains, lifting their arms to the sky in the backdrop of the dangerous journey underway.]

It was through the narrow passages of this mountain range that thousands of refugees fled from the scourge of Nazi oppression.

Imagine! It’s close to midnight. You’re edging your way through a narrow pass in the Pyrenees with your family. You’re a long way from home. It’s 1942 and you’re Jewish. Through clandestine channels, you’ve learned that there is a way out. You’ve never heard of Unitarians, but you did hear that a Rev. Charles Joy headed a group called the Unitarian Service Committee and helped folks like you escape to freedom.

But what a journey! You have a compass and a primitive map with checkpoints where you’re supposed to be met by Service Committee escorts. One of these checkpoints is just a few meters up ahead and around a bend. How will you know that the person who awaits you and your family is safe? This is a time to trust no one, but you’ve been told that your escorts will carry a piece of cloth with the likeness of a “flaming chalice.”

From your own faith, you cherish the symbolism of the chalice. You’ve drunk from one at every Passover Seder as you gathered around a table to celebrate another flight to freedom. You cherish the symbolism of a flame. Over two thousand years ago, your religious ancestors

overthrew their oppressors and sought to rededicate the temple by rekindling a sacred lamp with enough oil to last only a single night. Yet the lamp burned brightly for eight nights! A miracle? You're walking through another miracle. A chalice and a flame you're looking for? You're amid "an advent of light."

[The family stops for a while, as you tell of the origin of the flaming chalice.]

The flame and the chalice were joined in this icon of sanctuary in the perilous days of the Nazi oppression, when Jews, gays, gypsies, and yes, Unitarians, sought refuge. Rev. Charles Joy was then the leader of the fledgling Unitarian Service Committee. It would be another 20 years before it would be the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. Joy headquartered in Lisbon, where he oversaw a covert cadre of escorts who risked their lives to save others. How to ensure that those seeking refuge might trust these escorts? In the late 1930s an artist named Hans Deutsch was living in Paris and producing caricatures of Adolf Hitler. When the Nazis invaded Paris in 1940, Deutsch fled south and then west to Portugal. Deutsch had never heard of Unitarians, and he was a self-professed atheist; but when he met Charles Joy and learned of his work, he was so moved that he joined the Service Committee and agreed to serve it by designing a symbol of sanctuary, a symbol that could be used as a badge to be worn and an emblem to be stamped on papers to make them look official. Flame and chalice merged into a design that stood for faith lived in the service of others, whatever the risk to your own life.

[The family moves slowly ahead and turns slightly.]

You round a bend and two figures approach you out of the darkness. One is carrying a piece of cloth. What does it look like? By the faint light from the moon, you see the likeness of a flaming chalice. They whisper to you:

"You're safe. I'm Rev. Charles Joy and this is my friend, [name of Worship Assistant]. We will lead you to sanctuary."

["Charles" and Worship Assistant lead the family through more twists and turns on into "the light of day."]

You and your family made it across the Pyrenees, guided by ancient icons paired with new meaning and led by new-found friends who risked their lives to save yours.

Sources:

Dan Hotchkiss, "The Flaming Chalice," a pamphlet of the Unitarian Universalist Association, <http://www.uua.org/beliefs/chalice/151248.shtml>

The Arrival of Light – First Story

Imagine. You have arrived at the North Pole, and it is the winter solstice. You're accustomed to latitudes far to the south. Though you know better, you anticipate the next day. That is, you anticipate daylight. It doesn't happen. Every fiber of your being anticipates it. Your cognitive self reminds you where you are. Your cognitive self diminishes as you ache, yearn, scream out for day—daylight.

You wait. You must if you are to live. Then, as if in a dream, a speck, a disk-shaped speck, becomes visible. You wait and you wait—weeks, months. The disk encircles you in spirals, rising until it dances into its highest round on the Summer Solstice. Then...it begins to set, as surely and as slowly as it rose.

Over the course of a year, you will witness one sunrise and one sunset. You will know sunlight for six months and darkness for six months. For weeks upon weeks you will know only darkness. For weeks upon weeks you will know only light.

Which do we who are human long for most? In Meriden, Connecticut we reside at the latitude of 41.5 degrees from the equator. We are a far distance from the extremes of the poles and from the equator itself. Sunsets and sunrises are a common occurrence, a normal occurrence. When the Solstice arrives exactly two weeks from today at 12:39 pm, we will not, as our friends at the North Pole, Santa Claus perhaps, experience 24 hours of non-stop sun. But we will know just over 15 hours of sunlight. And after a winter that felt long and brutal, the advent of light and the warmth of the sun are welcome from the depths of our souls and psyches.

So imagine, you're back at the North Pole. You've endured a "polar night," a six-month passage of darkness, and you spot a glint of light. Day after day it spirals around you until it reaches its apex just two weeks from now. You've yearned for light. Can you stand so much of it? The relentless shining of the midnight sun? This "polar day?"

Sunrise for most of us symbolizes the arrival of life. Sunset for many of us symbolizes the waning of life. Light is life. Darkness is death. Is it so?

Genesis—the beginning. In the first few verses of the Book of Genesis, we read:

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light 'day,' and the darkness he called 'night.' And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day."

Was it so? Legends are myths are stories to reveal an imagined truth and sometimes a partial truth. Was there a void from which light and life emerged?

Science and awe are siblings born of the same human parents.

The advent of light is an endless search scientifically and spiritually. How? When? Why? The “why” is ever persistent and teasing. The “how” and “when” are grist for eternal inquiry, periodic discovery, subsequent counter-discovery, continued inquiry, and pervasive wonder.

Joseph Silk, in the preface to his work, *The Big Bang: The Creation and Evolution of the Universe*, writes of how awesome it is

“...to look up at the sky on a clear night and realize that our sun has no more cosmic significance than any one of the thousands of twinkling stars. ...The Milky Way galaxy alone contains more than a hundred billion suns, almost all too faint to be distinguished by the naked eye. Our galaxy is no giant among galaxies; there are tens of billions of similar galaxies dispersed throughout the observable universe. And beyond our cosmic horizon there may be uncountable billions of galaxies destined to swim into view in the distant future.”

The instruments of modern astronomy and astrophysics tantalize us with a glimpse of the cosmos and present a story, a history, of the infancy of the universe.

“When we survey the distant reaches of space, we are looking back in time. We view the most remote galaxies as they were many eons ago, when their light began its long journey through space,”

observed Silk.

Light travels. We speak of light years, one light-year being a measure of astronomical distance. When most of us first heard of a light year, we learned that it is “the distance that light travels in a vacuum in one Julian year—that is, 365.25 days.” Then we get hooked on “year” and morph it into a unit of time. It is rather a unit of distance, which includes the construct of motion. Perhaps we can only say light travels; it never really arrives. We speak of light increasing. We speak of light intensifying. Are these notions simply variations on the reality that light travels? That is another story for another day after I have done far more research than I have.

Was there ever a time of “no light”—a void of darkness akin to a “polar night” where not a speck of light was visible? Silk postulates “the first millisecond.” Tracing the history of the universe back through time, it becomes hotter and denser and hotter and denser. The so-called visible universe becomes smaller and smaller. He invites us to imagine “a vast network of hypothetical observers, who trace the history of different regions [of the universe] back through time....until only one atomic nucleus would be contained within the observable universe.” The dimensions of that observable universe would be “about one ten-thousand-billionth of a centimeter.” Further imagine “a moment so early and a density so high that the gravitational stresses were capable of tearing apart the vacuum. ...At the moment of singularity [the Big Bang], space-time was essentially disrupted by the gravitational forces.”

Light, unimaginable light, began its long journey through space and time.

The Arrival of Light – Another Story or Two

Imagine. You're curled up, cozy and comfy. You're fed on demand. You're hugged, constantly. You're soothed in a warm bath. But this isn't forever. You grow and grow. Time to move on and out. You squirm and stretch and POP! Here you are! What is that blinding you? You squint. What is that horrific noise? You want to put your tiny hands over your ears! Oh wait, it's you! You're letting out a howl you've never heard and nobody else has either.

What a compromise it is to be born. Yet breathing feels right. Feeding takes on a different form, but it doesn't take long to get full. Hugging isn't quite as warm, but it still feels good. You begin to pick up sounds and arrange them. You begin to see shapes and structure them. Light waves act on your optical capacity, and life assumes color.

You learn early on to stop, listen, and look. Or is it stop, look, and listen? Or is it simply stop whatever you're doing, because it's soooo dangerous? You're curious; you explore, you discover, you connect with a Mom or a Dad or both or Moms or Dads and maybe a brother or sister or two, maybe some grandmas and grandpas and everybody else who squeezes your toes and makes silly sounds. You do something grownups call "play," but by the end of the day you're wiped out. Into that hushaby time that feels a bit like you're back in that cocoon you'd almost forgotten. The sun comes up. You get up. You play some more. You eat some more. You learn "Twinkle Twinkle" and "The Eentsy Weentsy Spider." Bedtime.

Off you go to school one day. You discover some more. Sometimes you act up. As you grow up, you act out. You learn because of yourself and in spite of yourself. You discover because of your teachers and in spite of your teachers. You are becoming who you are.

If you're fortunate, you grow strong and healthy. If you're challenged, and you surely will be in some ways, you grow as strong and healthy as possible. You embrace life and you chafe at it. You give thanks for your life, and you throw rocks at God. It all depends.

If you're fortunate, you form bonds that grow your soul. You establish boundaries that preserve your dignity. You forge connections that become friendships. You perhaps forge a friendship that becomes love and a longtime partnership sealed in a covenant. Perhaps you become a parent and discover as quickly as your parents did that every child under the age of eighteen is at-risk—lovable but at-risk—and that every parent no matter the age becomes a parent-at-risk. If you're fortunate, your life is rich and full and your cup brims with the wealth of joys savored and love given and received.

The sun rises and sets, day after day, season after season, year after year. How many lights have you kindled—birthday candles, Christmas lights, Hanukkah candles, holiday sparklers, campfires, home fires, chalices even? Perhaps you are still here because someone kindled a chalice for you as you fled with your family from forces of oppression. Perhaps you are still here because someone helped you see the light of your own goodness and possibility. Perhaps you are still here because you've allowed your light to shine. Perhaps you are still here because you've been there when your friend's light was growing dim, and together you re-kindled it.

You have known the arrival of light and life. You have honored this gift. So too you will know the receding of light as age and illness begin to encroach as they do.

And do I die?

asks my friend and colleague Kathleen Korb.

How should I die?
 My atoms
 are the same that existed
 on the first day of the universe.
 My elements
 are identical with the make-up of
 the stars.

I am one with all that is,
 and my brief life a comet's trail
 across the starry universal night.

I do not die.
 My elements are scattered.
 New lights, new comets' trails will use them.
 There is, because of me, a new note in the song
 sung by the morning stars.

Imagine, you are once again on a narrow passage in the Pyrenees, greeting a stranger bearing a light, crossing to sanctuary. Imagine, you are a hillside witness to the star-filled heavens, wondering at the vastness of miniscule twinkling light-years away. Imagine, you are present at that moment of singularity, the outset of light's long journey through space and time. Imagine, you are amid a polar night; light has receded. Your memory trove is full. And you see...you see what...Northern Lights? An astonishing white light? What is it that you see as light recedes? What is it that you see as light dims...or brightens?

Amen

Sources:

The Book of Genesis, New International Version

Kathleen Korb, "And do I die?"

"Light-year," <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Light-year>

Joseph Silk, *The Big Bang: The Creation and Evolution of the Universe*, W.H. Freeman and Company, San Francisco, 1979.