

Let There Be Light

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“How Raven Stole the Sun” A Unitarian Universalist story adapted from the Haida

Once upon a time, you may have heard, when the world was created but not yet finished, Raven flew over the earth on his brilliant white wings. He wanted to see the beauty of the earth and he wanted everyone to see his beauty, but it was dark; no lights at all except little fires and torches here and there. Then he heard that there was a Chieftain, a powerful man, who was selfish and who held the sun and the moon and the stars in three boxes in his family lodge. Sitting in the trees nearby he saw the Chief's daughter coming down do the river to get water and Raven hatched a plan. First, he turned himself into a little evergreen needle. He dropped into the water and when the daughter scooped up the water for a drink raven flowed along into her belly. He moved over into her womb and nine months later he was born as a human baby. The baby's nose was very narrow and curved, just like a bird's beak. He was a very smart baby. They named him Khooyah and he was the grandchild of the Chief, who loved him very much. Granddad loved to look on Khooyah. One day he was crawling around and he went to the box with the stars. He wanted to play with the box. The Chief was very protective of this box and would let no one even touch it. But the Chief relented, saying, "What harm could a little baby do? He cannot even stand on his own." But this was Raven. So, he quickly figured how to lift off the lid and suddenly a whole rush of little lights rose up out of the box and danced on the ceiling and followed the smoke out of the square hole at the top. They rose up and up into the dark sky. Everyone was very happy about all this beautiful light, except for the Chief, who had lost a beautiful treasure. At first he was very angry with the boy, but slowly he was charmed into forgiving Khooyah. Then one day the little toddler reached for the box of the moon. Oh, it was the same as before, with lots more crying, and eventually the chief let little Khooyah play with the box. When Raven lifted the lid everyone was so amazed at the round ball of the moon. They tossed it back and forth, then Raven hurled it up through the smoke hole and it flew up and stuck in the sky. It was many weeks before the Chief forgave his grandson. Finally, came the box with the Sun. The chief was very afraid of the power of the sun, he bound the box in rope. He said, "It will burn you up, it will blind you, you cannot play with it ever!" But Raven cried and cried. Finally his mother said, "Father, Khooyah is not eating he is so upset. I am afraid he will get sick and die. You must let him play with the box. Put guards around him so he will not cause any harm". So it was. But then Raven jumped up on the box and he turned into a big bird. Everyone was so surprised that they could do nothing as he lifted the box, flew up in a circle and out the smoke hole. The soot turned all of his feathers black. Up and up he flew, pecking at the ropes, until he could go no higher. Then he turned and threw the box up while pulling the lid down with him. The Sun roared out of the box, Raven closed his eyes so he would not be blinded. The heat of the sun baked all the black soot into is plumage so that all ravens are completely black up to this day. The sun rose up and filled the whole world with light. Raven soared about looking over the wonderful world, green leaves and sunlight sparkling on water. Even the Chief, sad as he was, had to admit the world was better with light in it, to see his treasures blessing the entire world every day.

SERMON

Here we are almost halfway between the equinox, when light and dark are evenly divided, and the longest night of the year. We begin to feel the darkness creeping in. Even those of us who cannot see, who have never had eyes that worked like usual, can feel the difference between full sunlight and darkness because we have photo-receptors in our skin. We want more light. And our religious tradition is one of light, of more light, we say "let there be light!" In fact one of our theological threads is that of Process Theology. In this school of thought the creation is not like a ball of clay that the creator shapes into the wonders of the universe, but instead the creator is part of the creation in the clay, and the universe is also co-creator, shaping itself in tandem with the creative force. Thus not only is everything co-creation, but we are also creating our lives. Our decisions are not pre-determined; instead our choices interact with all that moves us to shape our being, to determine how much light we will show. We, in part, determine if we shall be like fiber-optic cables carrying the light and shining forth, or like lead pipes, bearing the substance of life but very little light. We gather in this church to help one another increase and reveal our inner light.

I once talked with a young man, a Unitarian Universalist who had grown up in this faith. One day he heard some people on TV singing "our song" the one he thought we wrote and we sang about our chalice and the light within each of us. They were singing "This Little Light of Mine." He was shocked, not only that other people knew this song, but they had changed the words! Of course he came to understand that we inherited that song from the gospel tradition and the idea that light should not be hidden under a basket but held up to bring light to all around. We Unitarians don't have a corner on the light. We simply say, let there be light in the world, and we work to help the spiritual light come through reason, compassion and healing community.

It should be noted that we are not always good at spreading light in the darkness. For instance, do you know how many Unitarian Universalists it takes to screw in a light-bulb? It Takes 130:

- 12 to sit on the board which appoints the nominating and personnel committee.
- 5 to sit on the nominating and personnel committee which appoints the Facilities committee.
- 8 to sit on the facilities committee which appoints the light bulb changing committee.
- 4 to sit on the light bulb-changing committee do discuss the method of installation, the implied racism in using words like "light" or "dark" and the ecological sustainability of the entire church's wiring and lighting system; finally issuing this statement:
- "We choose not to make a statement either in favor of or against the need for a light bulb. However, if in your own journey you have found that light bulbs work for you, that is fine. You are invited to write a poem or compose a modern dance about your light bulb. During next Sunday's service, we will explore a number of light bulb traditions, including incandescent, fluorescent, three-way, long-life and tinted; all of which are equally valid paths to luminescence."
- Then it takes 1 person to get totally frustrated, go get a bulb and ladder, and screw it in.
- After completion at least 100 individuals are needed to complain about the new light-bulb and its installation.

Despite our limits we strive to bring more light into people's lives, because we know these are dark times. Oppressed by poverty, or hatred, by war or domestic violence, people long for light. In lives darkened by crime and broken dreams, illness and horrors and divisions of all kinds, we are certain of the increasing darkness all around us. We may begin to think that spiritual light is dwindling as steadily as daylight in the fall. Some people stop looking for True Light and cling to little flames, like the people in the story of "How Raven Stole the Sun". The message today is that there is more light and we can let it shine.

Light as spirit is an ancient image. Note that Dr. Karen Armstrong begins her latest book, *The Case for God*, in the darkness of the caves at Lascaux. We can only imagine the ancient rituals to bring light, tentative and flickering into those chthonic places, to paint the power of life into the darkness. Light is so important to us that now, when we evoke non-visible things like Love and God, heaven and spirit, we do so with images of radiance, brilliance, warmth, or enlightenment.

There are two parallel passages in the Christian Scriptures about this. In John's Gospel Jesus said, "I am the light of the world, he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life". Then John's first letter begins by saying, "5This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. 6 If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth."

Long before Jesus, the prophet Isaiah described his people in darkness (Isaiah 59:9-11):

We look for light, but all is darkness; for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows...
At midday we stumble as if it were twilight; among the strong we are like the dead.
All growling like bears; moaning mournfully like doves.
We look for justice, but find none; for deliverance, but it is far away."

Then, in the next chapter of that book, are these words of hope (60:1-3):

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.
See, darkness covers the earth and thick shadow covers its peoples,
But the [glory of the Lord] appears over you.
Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

In the seventh chapter of the Hindu scripture the *Bhagavad Gita*, God reveals himself saying, "I am He by whom the worlds were created and shall be dissolved... I am the sweetness of water, the light in the sun and in the moon. I am the mystic syllable Om in the Vedas... the Virility in men. I am the Fragrance of earth, the Brilliance of fire. I am the Life Force in all beings..." And When the revelation of God reaches its ultimate moment the writer of the Gita interjects; "If there should be in the sky / A thousand suns risen all at once / Such splendor would be / Of the splendor of that Supreme Spirit".

Even the Buddhists, who have no God, evoke spiritual power as light. Enlightenment is when, knowing reality beyond the impermanence of existent things, free of greed, and hatred, and delusion, one attains the "Clear Light Mind" that sees all things in the true light of Dharma.

We draw on all these images of light and spirit and Truth. In 2002, at our national assembly's Service of the Living Tradition, my colleague Rev. Barbara Pescan spoke of the valley of darkness and then preached,

"It is time to aim our lights down there into the valley where someone, surely, is trying to get home, trying to get over, trying to get out of trouble, trying to get on to the morning... It may be that we have spent too much of our time speaking against the critic in the front row and too little listening to the hunger of those in the back, who are ready to go on and go out with the message if only someone would remind them often enough why they should... It is time to let our light shine, yea, to turn on the path and begin walking, up or down the mountain, all the while scanning the shadows for other lights that are shining back at us --- in the valley, on the next mountain, a little further on, looking for us, looking to help us all get home.

So how do we let the light shine? First we look to our own hearts and into the lives of all people to find where light shines. We affirm light as inherent worth and dignity. We begin with light in your life, whatever inspires you, by whatever name we say, "no matter how small, let it shine". Then, we heed the guidance of reason and the results of science. We draw very heavily on the Age of Enlightenment, that marvelous era of Descartes, Spinoza, Locke, Bayle, Newton, and Voltaire the age of rationalism, universalism, and empiricism. The results of science have brought all sorts of light into the world. We know so much that was once hidden in darkness, hidden by ignorance and superstition. Even light itself: beyond being a phenomenon that lets us see or warms our earth, though still a vast mystery, is described as varying fields or moving packets of energy called photons. Like any mystery, to explain it we tell stories. For example, did you hear of the photon that tried to check into a hotel? The Clerk asked him if he needed help with his luggage and the photon said, "No, I'm traveling light."

Science, beyond being a source of jokes, helps us reveal the fact that the darkness of space contains light, that we are all interconnected, and that everything is woven with everything else. Science is one revelation that helps us to see "the bonds that bind each to all" as Reverend Morrison-Reed put it. And that leads to our desire to create compassionate community.

All religions, knowing the complexity and mystery of health and illness, hold a hope for healing through wholeness. You all may know that Jesus was known as a healer. You may not know that the Universalists in the Philippines are known as faith healers. I have long affirmed that we have access to that same healing power of faith, as a supplement to medicine, at least to empower us to live in peace and wholeness with the light and darkness of life. At times I have created Unitarian Universalist services of healing. Once I led a healing vespers. We sang songs of health and healing, read inspiring words about healing, and then each person was allowed time to share something they wanted healed. Perhaps it was a broken relationship or a broken wrist. Perhaps it was healing from personal violence or national healing from war. We all responded to these with the ritual phrase "We wish you healing, we wish you wholeness". One woman spoke about her son who was going in to have surgery done on a shunt from his brain. It was very risky surgery and she was deeply afraid of all that could go wrong. After the service she said she was glad to know she was not alone in worrying and that she felt more peaceful and hopeful. The next day the surgery took half as much time as predicted, it was a

fantastic success and her son showed immediate improvement. Now, I don't assert any direct, causal connection between that ritual and the healing of her son. But I know that the candles we lit in that ceremony helped her see the possibilities of miracles, of hope, of healing. The connections we revealed that night helped in the unfolding of peace and well-being in her life.

This is our purpose to release the light that has been hidden in the boxes of fear and alimentation and selfishness. Each life is like a little flame. In the vastness of the universe it may seem small and at the end of life it passes out back into that universe, but if we let our light shine, it can be of great power for others. Our light is ultimately part of the light of a thousand suns rising all at once. Together we share in the power to steal the sun from any who would hide it away and then to share it with the entire world. And when we share our light, bring it together; the light grows bright, even as the world darkens. This is what we say each week and what we sing today to close this service, from hymn #142 [words by Frances Davis] "Let there be light, let there be understanding... open the door of concord, opening into grace".