

## **Witness To The Light**

the Rev. Edmund Robinson  
Unitarian Universalist Meeting House  
August 30, 2009

I was twelve years old, in the seventh grade, on January 20, 1961; I remember the thrill of hearing John F. Kennedy's inaugural address:

Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans—born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage—and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this Nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world.

Kennedy was committing this nation to stand for human rights, to stand for freedom. I had been raised in a conservative household – during the Presidential campaign that fall, our English teacher had enlisted us in a debate, and I had taken the side of Richard Nixon. I remember going to a Nixon campaign appearance at the state capitol. But now, the election over, Kennedy's words were stirring something in my soul.

He said,

In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility—I welcome it. I do not believe that any of us would exchange places with any other people or any other generation. The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it—and the glow from that fire can truly light the world.

I have been thinking a lot about light lately, and its use as a metaphor. Light itself, as we experience it, is incorporeal, and what we call the spirit or soul is also incorporeal, so it is natural that the one serves as a convenient metaphor for the other. Light is not spirit, but points to it as the finger points to the moon.

Now I am aware that there is a negative aspect to this use of light as metaphor, and that is it reinforces an unconscious racism. If we identify light as good, some will hear that as light-skinned people are better than dark-skinned people. I don't like this aspect of it, but the metaphor is otherwise very powerful, so I urge you not to apply what I have to say about light to skin pigments.

The author of John's Gospel, in the famous opening the passage I read, uses light as a

metaphor for the spirit coming into the world through Christ. He is self-consciously copying the beginning of Genesis, a passage which refers to the creation of light itself in the world; as Ellen deGeneres phrased it:

‘In the beginning there was nothing. God said, "Let there be light!" And there was light. There was still nothing, but you could see it a whole lot better.’ The the author of John takes off on this familiar passage to transform it into the coming of Christ.

The author of John was a Platonist. The Greek word Logos, usually translated in this passage as “word” also means reason or plan. Plato believed that reason, Logos, was the most important attribute of God, and that each person had the seed of reason, spermatikos logos, in his or her psyche, which could communicate more or less with the big Logos.

John’s Gospel makes Christ equal the Logos, and the Logos is also identified as the Phos, or light.

He refers to John the Baptist as the witness to the light. The Greek word for witness is also the root of our word Martyr, for the earliest Christian martyrs were considered to be giving up their lives as a witness to the truth of the salvation offered by Jesus.

The last sermon I gave here was on life after death, and I mentioned how some of the most compelling evidence we have for a life after death comes from Near Death Experiences, which have some weight because the experiences reported are so similar: the person often reports moving toward a white light. These reports are witness to a light.

As I thought about it, I realized that this may be an apt description of religious liberalism. We are not called to believe in any particular creed or any particular state of soul God, Christ or life everlasting. We do not agree among ourselves on these matters, and we have agreed to be together in covenant despite this disagreement. In fact, we welcome the disagreement.

But what we do in our churches, I think, is to bear witness to the light and to honor those who bear witness.

Now there is one group among us who literally are called to bear witness to the light, and that is the artists and architects. The rest of us experience the amazing changes of light that characterize this little spit of sand out in the middle of the ocean, but the artists and architects are the ones who work with it, who try to capture it. I asked them to try to capture particular light effects in words, and I’d like to share a few with you.

Marion Harcourt: “In the summer in North Truro on the Bay the sun is slowly setting. As it goes down a beautiful golden path appears on the water. That is when we quickly don our suits and swim in the GOLDEN PATH.”

Judy Reed: “One condition that delighted me, and I have only seen rarely, was one in which, under a dark blue-purple clouded sky, the almost setting winter sun suffused the earth in a soft yellow glow, suggesting that the light came from the earth toward the sky instead of the

usual.”

Architect John DeSilva was inspired to write a long essay of which this is a snippet: “The sanctuary of the UUMH is a well lit space. It is bright throughout the day, even on cloudy days and even with the windows half covered by the shutters. Natural light comes in from three directions, north-east and south-west at the sides and north-west at the rear (filtered through the vestibule and over the balcony). South-west light can be harsh but simple roller shades are enough to control it. In true, New England fashion, the space is a simple “shoe-box” shape. The natural light is more captured than it is manipulated. The combination of good proportions, well considered and executed details, appropriate color, and abundant light makes for a spiritually uplifting space. I love the space and I suspect Le Corbusier would have as well.”

Jane Eccles: “As an open air painter, I would say (as would most outdoor painters) that ‘light’ is my subject. There is a phrase on the final page of Henry Beston's "Outermost House" . . . "dawn seen over ocean". That is my favorite light . . . daybreak over Pleasant Bay, especially dramatic when storm clouds are gradually parting and shafts of light break through, lighting the edges of the clouds and reflecting on the Bay.”

Sue Taylor also wrote a long essay and then wrapped it up in this description: “Soft yet bright light intermixed with water vapors of fog and sunlight with soft yellows and coral/reds floating moving in/on the atmosphere here on the elbow between water and land.”

And Phill Thompson: “Occasionally a bright orange sun setting directly behind the Harding Beach light will turn, what should be the dark shadow side of the lighthouse, a flaming red. I have a photo to prove it, and I can paint it, but I can't explain it. “

Of course we can't explain it. All of these descriptions are attempts to put into words experiences which are beyond words. My mentor Victor Carpenter says that what UUs try to do is “eff the ineffable.” Light is by its nature ineffable, and so are life's ultimate mysteries, so that is why light makes such a good metaphor.

But as we transition from descriptions of physical light to light as metaphor, the skeptics among us will put our defenses up. Who says there is any such thing as spirit or soul or God? You can use all the metaphors you like, but are you talking about anything that's real? Is there any there there? The finger pointing at the moon is a great image, but we need to know that there is such a thing as the moon.

In the context of this skepticism, physical light seems like the given, the obvious, the down-to-earth, the concrete and scientific, while spirit or soul or God is an abstraction, a shadowy creation of philosophy, folklore, myth and religious faith. That is, if we ignore the science.

What I have tried to convey in the voices of the artists is that light is ever-changing even at the level of our senses. When we look through our scientific instruments, it becomes even

more changeable. A prism bends white light and splits it into a spectrum of colors. Water reflects it, lenses can sharpen or fuzzify it, mirrors can bounce it around the room.

But twentieth century science has shown us that there is an essential ambiguity about light down at the very core. As Sue Taylor pointed out in her essay, light is both a wave and a particle. Now how can that be? A particle is something solid, I can imagine holding it in my hand, it is like this desk or this pen. It is a solid object existing in space, with a definite location. A wave, on the other hand, is not a thing in that sense. It is a property of some medium. You have an ocean or a lake; the thing in the lake is water. The wave is a particular type of movement of the water. How can something be both a wave and a particle at the same time? Doesn't this statement beggar the language itself?

But you see, this is what makes light such a great metaphor for the ultimate mysteries, which for convenience I will call spirit. The spirit is solitary and relational at the same time. The spirit is the property of one person's biography and the common property of all humanity at the same time. The spirit is logos and spermatikos logos. It's nowhere and it's everywhere. The word becomes flesh and dwells among us and yet stays as part of God. The light dies when the light-bearer dies and yet it continues as well. The light is visible at times and at other times it becomes invisible.

Light can illuminate the many faces of experience and the unity beyond them. Forrest Church likes to say that our various religions are like the different windows in a vast cathedral. One light is coming through the windows, but we will each see it differently. One light, many windows.

Perhaps the most important use of light as spiritual metaphor is the inner light. Emerson said, "A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within." The idea of the inner light is central to the religion of the Society of Friends, familiarly known as Quakers. One Quaker explained it this way: "In every human soul there is implanted a certain element of God's own spirit and divine energy. The element, known to the early Friends as 'that of God in everyone,' or the 'seed,' or the 'seed of Christ,' or the 'seed of Light,' means to them in the words of John 'the Light that enlighteneth every man who comes into the world.'"<sup>1</sup>

In Qi Gong practice, when I make it down here on Monday mornings, Jennie urges us to visualize light of certain colors originating from particular organs in our bodies.

The inner light is strong in the Gospel of Thomas, an ancient text only recently discovered, which may be as old as the Gospels in the Bible. Here are two examples: 24

---

<sup>1</sup>[http://www2.gol.com/users/quakers/inner\\_light.htm](http://www2.gol.com/users/quakers/inner_light.htm)

[Jesus'] disciples said, "Show us the place where you are, for we must seek it." 2 He said to them, "Anyone here with two ears had better listen! 3 There is light within a person of light, and it shines on the whole world. If it does not shine, it is dark."

83 Jesus said, "Images are visible to people, but the light within them is hidden in the image of the Father's light. 2 He will be disclosed, but his image is hidden by his light."

There is a third Thomas quote that is almost exactly the same as a verse from the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew: "33. ... No one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket, nor does one put it in a hidden place. Rather, one puts it on a lampstand so that all who come and go will see its light."

The scholar Elaine Pagels, whom I've discussed here before, has offered the idea that the gospel of John was written to refute the Gospel of Thomas. Certainly John has a different take on Jesus' role. Jesus in John is only divine and the rest of us are mortals and the way to salvation consists of believing in him. In John, Jesus says, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."<sup>2</sup>

In the Matthew version of the lamp and the bushel, Matthew adds a sentence to the beginning: 14 "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. 15 No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

You see the contrast: John has Jesus saying, "I am the light of the world," but Matthew has him saying to his hearers "you are the light of the world." I'll take the more Universalist Jesus. If there is a light, I think we all have it, though sometimes it's hard to see.

When we begin a service in a UU Church, we light a chalice. We do that because the chalice was a recognition symbol used by the Unitarian Service Committee in trying to get Jews out of Czechoslovakia ahead of the Nazis in 1939-40. Why did they adopt that symbol? Because of Jan Hus. Jan Hus, who lived in the Fourteenth Century is a national hero in the Czech Republic. He went against the grain of the Roman Catholic church of time because he wanted to serve communion to the common people. He was burned at the stake in 1415. The chalice, aflame with the fire of freedom, is his symbol.

Now the story of Jan Hus occurs within the history of the Christian church. Why then would his symbol be used as a symbol of recognition for Jews? Because the light it represents is the light of freedom, a light which was threatened with extinguishment by the Nazis. This is the light that transcends particular religions. It is a light worth dying for, and it is a light worth

---

<sup>2</sup> John 8:12

bearing witness to.

Jan Hus was a witness to the light, a martyr in all senses of the word. In the next century, we have two martyrs more directly in our religious lineage, two witnesses to the light: Michael Servetus, a passionate voice against the doctrine of the Trinity, burned at the stake for those beliefs in Calvin's Geneva in 1553, and Francis David, the founder of Unitarianism in Transylvania, who died in prison in 1579 for his belief that because Jesus was not God, one should not pray through him.

Our American Unitarianism and Universalism have ties to these European traditions, but they are directly descended from the Eighteenth Century movement called the Enlightenment, which also gave us modern science and modern democracy. We try to live in that light and bear witness to it.

What is the light to which we are called to bear witness in our Enlightenment faith? What does our chalice represent when we light it every Sunday? I think it is not just freedom of speech and freedom of thought and freedom of doctrine, but also freedom itself. It is not just your truth and my truth, the truth of revelation and the truth of reason and the truth of myth and the truth of poetry, but also truth itself. It is not just love for our earth and our fellow creatures and our family and our country and our church, but also love itself. It is not just the light shining in the eyes of the baby or the grandmother, but the worth and dignity of every person, no matter how marginal.

We are called to witness to the light even when, especially when, it doesn't add up, it doesn't make sense. I had a parishioner at another church who had lost her first baby at birth, then went on to have three more healthy children. She always lit a candle on the anniversary of the baby who had died. One day she came to me and said that when she was picking up her teenagers at youth group from the church two nights before, she had an overwhelming feeling of the presence of her lost baby. She said she couldn't tell her husband and she didn't feel that she could tell anyone else in the church because it was not rational. I said there's something wrong with that – we need to build a community where it's safe to talk about the things that don't make sense, to bear witness to the light.

Revelation is not sealed. We are called to bear witness wherever the light is found. It is as grand as the traditional idea of the glory of God, the rays bursting forth from behind the clouds over the bay at sunset, and as modest as the twinkle in the eye of the person sitting next to you. What is revealed by the light is a moving target, and we accept that different people will see it differently, as we look out of the cathedral through different windows.

The Quakers, like us, place great value on the individual experience. George Fox said "You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this; but what canst thou say? Art thou a child of Light and hast walked in the Light, and what thou speakest is it inwardly from God?"

John Kennedy walked in the light. When he was assassinated, a part of me died too. At age 15, I felt that the light of human freedom which he had championed was in danger of going out. But I realized that the torch had simply been passed to all those who responded to the light of his original words. Robert Kennedy carried the light and with him it seemed to burn even brighter than it had with Jack. Through the civil rights and antiwar movements of the 60's and the race riots, we looked to Bobby to carry the torch. Then another part of me died when he was assassinated.

Ted Kennedy did not carry the torch as visibly or dramatically as his brothers had. But he carried it far more effectively, and it has lit the generations since. With his passing, the torch has passed to yet another generation.

Ted Kennedy walked in the light, and we all bear witness to the light he carried. I remember the thrill of hearing him speak at the Garden Theater in Charleston during his run for the presidency in 1980. Here's what he told the Democratic National Convention at the end of that campaign, as he had decided to continue in the Senate: "For all those whose cares have been our concern, the work goes on, the cause endures, the hope still lives, and the dream shall never die."

May you rest in peace, Senator Kennedy and may the rest of us continue to be witnesses to the light.

Amen.

## Reading

### John 1 – The prologue

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13 who were

born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth