

**Sunday, August 11, 2019**  
**Unitarian Universalist Church of Berkeley**  
**“From the Burning Bush to Burning Man”**  
**Jim Gasperini, preaching**

**Time for All Ages**

I'd like everyone to stay in their seats this time, as I tell five stories about how we humans came to control fire. Fire is so important that people around the world told stories of how we learned to control it.

<slide showing Ishi demonstrating the fire drill>

Story 1 is from Africa, though the picture on the screen is from California. A long time ago, some boys were out hunting, and stopped to make tips for their arrows. They discovered that if they twirled the arrow tips against another piece of wood very fast, they could make the tips very hot. At first they just had fun poking each other with hot arrow tips. Then they discovered that they could also use this trick to set dried grass afire. Even more fun! But then the fire got out of control, which made their parents furious. When the boys explained how they made the fire, however, everyone saw how useful their invention could be. Called a fire drill, people used it for hundreds of thousands of years, before the invention of matches. On the screen is Ishi, the last member of a Native-American tribe that lived up north around Mount Lassen, demonstrating his fire drill about a hundred years ago.

<Persian king>

Story 2 is from Iran. An ancient king out walking came across a poisonous snake. He threw a stone at the snake, missed, but hit another stone, sending off sparks, which gave him an idea. Both stones happened to be made of a hard kind of stone called flint, which makes sparks when you hit it. Making fire using special stones was another important way to make fire for thousands of years.

<Berkeley Nawruz>

To this day Persians honor the discovery by leaping over bonfires during a new year's festival in the spring, including members of the Iranian-American community of Berkeley, shown here last spring.

<Coyote steals fire>

In many stories fire must be stolen – from an animal, a god, or mysterious people who have fire but won't share. Sometimes animals help steal fire. Pity our poor ancestors who had no

fire, the Karuk people of northern California told—suffering in the cold and dark, forced to eat their food raw! Their tricky friend Coyote agreed to get fire for them. He snuck into the hut of some people who had fire, and ran out with a burning stick in his mouth. The people chased him. When they had almost caught him he passed the torch to Mountain Lion. When Lion was exhausted he passed it to a smaller animal, who passed it to another and so on until finally Frog took it in his mouth. The pursuers grabbed Frog by its tail. The tail came off, which is why frogs no longer have tails after the tadpole stage. Frog swam as far as he could, then spat fire out into a floating log. This explains how fire got into the wood the boys used to make fire in story 1.

### <Prometheus>

A story from ancient Greece tells of another famous fire thief named Prometheus. At the time of creation Prometheus and his brother, who were gods but not the most powerful kind of gods, were assigned to distribute means for survival to all living creatures. His brother quickly gave out strength to some animals, speed to others, fur, shells, and so on, but forgot to give anything to humans. Taking pity on the weak, furless, helpless humans, Prometheus stole fire for them from the craftsman god and the wisdom for how to use it from the goddess Athena.

### <Homo erectus>

The last story comes from the tribe known as scientists. Long ago, even before we were fully humans, some of our distant ancestors noticed that when lightning or volcanoes created fires it accidentally cooked food that tasted better than raw food and was easier to chew. Like all animals they were afraid of fire, but somehow these animals overcame their fear. They took burning sticks from natural fires, started little fires of their own, and used them to make light at night and cook. Gradually they learned how to keep the fires burning. Much later they learned how to start their own fires - whether it was boys playing with arrow tips or not, someone figured out how to use sticks and stones to create fire. Having fire is one of the most important things that changed those ancient people into modern humans.

Now it's time for the young people to go off to their next adventures, and for the rest of us to sing them out.

### **Silent Meditation and Prayer**

I invite you now to sit comfortably, close your eyes if you'd like, and share a time of breathing together. With each breath, we take in oxygen.

Beneath such figurative language as “the fire of commitment,” “the flame that burns within,” and “the inner glow,” is a literal kinship between fire and our basic metabolism. Let’s sit in silence for a minute, breathing in and out, as our lungs take in oxygen and our blood carries it to little fires in every cell of our bodies.

In an old Zen story, someone once searched for fire with a lighted lantern. Had he known what fire was, he could have cooked his rice much sooner. It is so clear, said the monk, that it takes long to see. Would that it were always so clear, to all of us.

May we truly live with deep assurance of the flame that burns within. May the fire of commitment truly set our mind and soul ablaze. May all who come within our reach be kindled by our inner glow.

Amen.

## **Reading**

Jim Gasperini

Today’s reading is from *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, by French philosopher Gaston Bachelard.

If all that changes slowly may be explained by life, all that changes quickly is explained by fire. Fire is the ultra-living element. It is intimate and it is universal. It lives in our heart. It lives in the sky... It shines in Paradise. It burns in Hell. It is gentleness and torture. It is cookery and it is apocalypse. It is a pleasure for the good child sitting prudently by the hearth; yet it punishes any disobedience when the child wishes to play too close to its flames...

Less monotonous and less abstract than flowing water, even more quick to grow and to change than the young bird we watch every day in its nest in the bushes, fire suggests the desire to change, to speed up the passage of time, to bring all of life to its conclusion, to its hereafter... it links the small to the great, the hearth to the volcano, the life of a log to the life of a world. The fascinated individual hears the call of the funeral pyre...

To gaze into a fire is a hypnotized form of observation. This slightly hypnotized condition is surprisingly constant in all who watch a fire.

**Sermon      *From the Burning Bush to Burning Man***

“Hot hot, don’t touch!” my mother warned. Four years old, hypnotized by the mysterious flicker on the kitchen stove, I ignored her. Fire quickly seared both its appeal and its danger into my earliest memory.

Years later, my father allowed me to add a stick to the fire in the fieldstone fireplace in our old farmhouse. His gesture of trust marked a step in my progress toward full membership in my community. Later still, after I had helped him rake autumn leaves into a pile beside the dirt road, he rewarded me with another milestone in the transition to adulthood: yes, I could strike the match that set the leaves ablaze (we had no sense of “carbon footprint” back then. Burning leaves was standard practice.) Though it took a few fumbling tries before I got it right, I took great pride in the accomplishment.

Standing guard afterward, ready with my child-sized rake lest the fire try to escape the bounds we human masters had set for it, savoring the complex, spicy aroma of burning maple and catalpa leaves, I inwardly glowed with the awareness of having been entrusted with one of the keys to the kingdom.

<homo erectus fire drill>

The chain of one generation passing knowledge about and responsibility for fire to the next goes back long before we existed as a species. Scholars differ about which of our hominin predecessors first domesticated fire. Whether *homo erectus* deserves the honor, or some even earlier ancestor, while we domesticated fire, fire meanwhile domesticated *us*. Keeping the fire alive meant keeping our little band alive. So we learned cooperative behavior: someone must tend the fire while others collected fuel. Rituals that taught and enforced behaviors about keeping the fire going led to other forms of cooperation. We have probably performed fire rituals longer than we have used language.

The many fire ceremonies we perform at UUCB derive from *ancient* practice. Over our altar hangs an eternal light, a direct descendant of the *ner tamid* the prophet Moses taught the wandering Israelites to burn constantly before the Holy of Holies in the original Tabernacle.

Grace Ulp tells me that in our early days in this building the light was an actual oil lamp. A group called the Women’s Alliance regularly lowered it to replenish its fuel.

By the way, below this ancient Judeo-Christian symbol hangs what appears to be a brass statuette reminiscent of ancient pagan goddess worship. Grace professes no knowledge of how *that* got there. Hmm.

Since a fire can burn far longer than a human lifetime, well-tended flames often serve to link a culture's past, present and future. The Zoroastrians, who believe that fire is the earthly manifestation of the supreme god Ahura Mazda, have carefully tended sacred fires for millennia. In the last century the advent of natural gas and electricity made eternal flames and lights easier to keep going, They have proliferated around the world. Alas, aside perhaps for some natural long-burning fires – a mountain in Australia has burned for some ten thousand years – what we naively call “eternal flames” are not destined to truly burn eternally. If any of our recently lit flames last as long as those tended by the Vestal Virgins of Rome, they will still burn in the *thirty-second century*. The way we currently manage our world, before the *twenty-second century*, many of the places where eternal flames now burn are likely to be underwater.

### <Christmas Eve candles>

Another type of community fire ritual celebrates the turning of the seasons and other annual events. In our beloved Christmas Eve tradition, each person adds a candle to a magnificent glowing manifestation of the light and warmth of our shared community.

### <early 20th century painting - jumping over fire>

Celebratory fires marking the passage of time were common in many pagan traditions throughout Europe, and became incorporated into such Christian traditions as the feast of St. John the Baptist, on the summer solstice, when young couples leapt over bonfires to encourage fertility. One theory of how Christmas came to be celebrated on December 25<sup>th</sup> is that this was the date of the Roman festival *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti*, the “Birthday of the Unconquerable Sun.” Some cyclical fires served as rites of renewal – by burning up the broken and decayed, room was made for new forms, new thoughts, and new worlds.

### <Menorah on the UUCB altar>

A related type of ritual celebrates historical events, or rites of passage in a person's life. Jewish members of our congregation place a menorah on our altar during the festival of Hanukkah, and light one of eight candles each night until all are burning. On the screen is last year's menorah, reflected in the lid of a piano. The festival commemorates the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem two thousand years ago.

In another echo of ancient practice, we make tea lights available on the table holding our Memory Book. In our non-specific UU way, what the act of lighting a flame there means or commemorates is up to each person making the gesture.

The form of the gesture though recalls ceremonies of remembrance, such as the personal fire ceremonies in Jewish, Hindu and other traditions that bring to mind loved ones on the anniversaries of their deaths. More distantly, it echoes rituals in which the fire served to communicate with divinities. Through the smoke it sends aloft, one may ask questions, do penance, attempt to appease, or send appeals. The gesture also echoes rituals of purification and protection, in which something troubling or threatening gets burned up in the fire, symbolically purging away the unwanted to create a stronger and purer self.

The beautiful creations of our Altar Guild usually include large ceremonial candles. Guild member Jean Hyams suggests that for the Worship Associates who usually light them, doing so could serve as a ritual of transition into the sacred time of the service, and as a moment to remind oneself to be present.

### <agnicayana>

Some fire rituals persist for millennia. The complex Vedic *Agnicayana*, which takes place over days and features a giant brick altar shaped like a bird of prey, has been performed in parts of India for over four thousand years. Originally it marked a declaration of ownership: each time the Indo-Iranian people moved further east into the Gangetic plain they performed a ritual declaring: this land is now ours. That's one type of fire ritual we don't perform much here at UUCB.

Of much more recent vintage is the lighting and extinguishing of our UU chalice, a practice developed in recent decades as a way to mark off time together in worship and meetings. It exemplifies a broad class of rituals sanctifying a particular time and space. We've heard often about the history of the chalice, so I won't dwell on it now. Something about lighting a fire signifies: *now we choose actions with serious intent*.

I was a bit surprised, once I started looking, by how many different ways we use ceremonial fire at UUCB. I promised, however, more than a catalog of ceremonies. I promised to speculate a bit about what makes fire such a versatile symbol, and tool for creating ritual. Here goes.

Philosophers, naturalists, alchemists and scientists long struggled to answer a basic question: what *is* fire, actually? Is it one of four or five "elements" composing the universe? Or is it the *one* universal element, out of which all else was born? It seemed obvious for a long time that burnable things contained some kind of fire-substance, which escaped when they burned.

### <Moses and the burning bush>

Sometimes, staring into our fires, we have seen a god - even *the* God. Those who witnessed heavenly fire strike the earth as lightning came to what seemed obvious conclusions about fire gods in the sky. The Vedic god of fire, Agni, derives from an ancient Indo-European deity whose name lives on in English in such words as ignite, igneous, and ignition.

When not a god itself, fire could still make manifest the divine presence and the divine will. The God of the Israelites spoke to Moses through a burning bush, and led His people through the wilderness with a nightly column of fire. In ancient Greece, after an annual festival at a temple of Dionysus, the god made a great fire shoot forth if he intended to produce a good growing season. If no fire appeared, people prepared for the worst.

### <campfire>

My own first memory of pondering the question “what is fire?” places me sitting around a campfire with Boy Scout Troop 43. At that age, I devoted much of my leisure time to tales of intrepid space voyagers, who boldly leaped through mysterious time warps and encountered strange creatures on alien worlds. *What if*, my fourteen-year-old imagination speculated, *fire is actually an alien life form?* Think of it: fires are born, take in food, grow, give off heat, move about when they can, then eventually die – just like living creatures! I can’t remember what my fellow Scouts thought of my idea. I thought it brilliant.

That fire might be alive in some sense is not, of course, a new idea. The Roman essayist Plutarch, writing in the first century of the common era, observed that “Nothing bears such a resemblance to an animal as fire.” Fire moves and feeds itself, he noted, can die either by forced quenching or natural decay, and when quenched “makes a noise and resists, like a dying animal.” From the animist perspective – perhaps the oldest human conception of how the world works - *everything* is alive. The only exceptional thing about fire is how obviously it makes its living status apparent, compared to the subtler life of wind, say, or rocks.

From a scientific perspective, life does share a strange sort of kinship with fire. Most living creatures get energy from cellular respiration. At the core of respiration, a set of processes that releases biochemical energy from nutrients, is a combustion reaction. This form of combustion is a much older sibling to the rapid, harder to control form of combustion known as fire.

Of the four traditional elements, fire is by far the youngest. Earth, air, and water existed for four billion years before the fire of combustion even became possible. Though we may speak of the sun as “burning” and of “fiery” volcanoes, the thermonuclear process that powers the sun and the gravitational forces that create volcanoes are very different from

the combustion process of earthy fire. Before *us*– here I speak very broadly, meaning by *us* all carbon-based life forms – there was no fire.

Why not? There was nothing to burn! It took us living things a billion years to create the conditions necessary for our younger sibling, fire, to be born. We had to somehow emerge in the seas, find foothold on dry land, and die in sufficient quantities to create fuel. We also had to produce enough oxygen. The atmosphere, which originally contained next to no oxygen, had to contain 13% before the first smoldering fires could occur. How did that happen? *We* did it, again speaking broadly of us living things. Once our little cellular combustions are all spent we leave the cell walls behind, huge quantities of them, ready for our hotheaded sibling fire to consume.

Fire is the energy of life, concentrated and unleashed - the tepid juice of our slow internal smolder squeezed from its watery casement, distilled into blazing high-proof fireshine. Though fire never appears on any chart of the “family tree” of life, it lurks there, a non-living relative.

So that’s the first part of my explanation of our endless fascination with fire: a vague sense of primal kinship, and awareness that fire is the life force distilled. The second part is our sense, conscious or not, of how dependent we are on this, our first technology, and how thoroughly our interaction with it has shaped our civilizations, our environment (for good or, as we increasingly are aware, for ill) and even our bodies.

People have always pondered how it came to be that we humans, alone of all the animals, learned to control fire. Every culture has at least one myth; we heard several earlier. However we managed the trick of controlling fire, it enabled us to come down from African trees and live wherever we chose. Wielding fire, we could chase predators out of caves. We think of “cavemen” as primitive, but in their day wresting control of such useful shelters as caves was an achievement, accomplished through mastery of our first technology. Control of fire enabled us to lose most of our body hair, shrink our gut, spend less time chewing uncooked food and more time exercising our expanding brains.

Without the creative and destructive power of fire we would be the helpless, shivering animals in Plato’s version of the Prometheus myth, last in line when the gods handed out the necessities for survival.

<fire performer at Burning Man>

I also promised to mention Burning Man, another relatively new location of fire rituals. Not all the fires at Burning Man are ritual fires. Burners perform with fire just for the fun of

playing with one of the things their mothers taught them never to play with. It's like a giant sandbox for adults where we play with all sorts of things, such as crazy costumes. Thanks Gail and David for the examples – imagine 50 thousand people dressed like that. Learning to twirl sticks with fire on each end or dance with candelabras balanced on your head takes discipline and concentration, the stakes heightened by the knowledge that a mistake can seriously harm you. This is a late friend whose playa name was Koyote.

### <aerial shot of Burning Man Temple>

Right now, on a dry lakebed in Nevada, artists of many levels of ambition have begun building elaborate sculptures designed to burn. Two years ago I went to Burning Man specifically to ask: why? Why put so much effort into making something beautiful, only to set it to the torch?

The answers I heard ranged from the practical to the mystical. Making temporary art can free the imagination, was one answer. If artists had to plan for what to do with their creations after the festival concluded – take it all apart, cart it away and find someplace to store it – far fewer works would get built.

### <the Man burning>

The festival culminates in two great rituals. First comes the Dionysian burning of the giant eponymous effigy. Surrounded by tens of thousands of cheering celebrants and bizarre vehicles blaring cacophonous music, the Man goes up in a blaze of fireworks.

### <Temple burning>

The next night, much of the same multitude watches in solemn silence as an intricate, lovingly-constructed wooden temple laden with personal mementos burns in ritual mourning for friends and family lost during the previous year. Some of the mementos people attach to the Temple come with explanations: a picture of an older man with a long letter from his daughter examining the twists and turns of their relationship. A picture of a dog, with a note on lined paper in a child's hand: "I wish I had played with you more." Others speak eloquently, if ambiguously, without benefit of text: someone's wedding dress.

One of the artists who spends a month each year building the Temple, who gave her name as Gravity, answered my question by saying "some things are too sacred to keep. When we burn them they go from physical to ephemeral."

Larry Harvey, founder of the festival, said “We take people to the threshold of religion. Our aim is to induce immediate experience that is beyond the odd, beyond the strange, and beyond the weird. It verges on the wholly other.”

Watching an elaborate structure burn, freed from having to feel sympathy for anyone who lived or worked in it (since no-one ever did,) or who might be suffering financial loss as their real estate investment went up in flames, free to view spectacular fire as a purely aesthetic experience – a well-designed burn can be gorgeous. Enthralling. And yes, verging on something other.

The Burning Man festival – in a dry lake bed that most of the year is just dust or mud - is a microcosm of the ephemeral nature of life. All human creations are temporary, after all. The art we diligently try to protect in museums for a few brief centuries will someday go the way of the treasures lost in the Dresden firestorms, the National Museum of Rio de Janeiro, and the great Buddhas of Bamiyan. The deliberately temporary art that burns in Black Rock City is just more temporary than most.

Watching fire is like time-lapse photography in reverse. Each log we put on the fire represents ten, fifty, or hundreds of years of the diligent, concentrated effort of a living tree. We watch it spool backward into dust in half an hour. As Bachelard put it, “fire suggests the desire to change, to speed up the passage of time, to bring all of life to its conclusion... it links the life of a log to the life of a world.”

One can hear in this, as he did, “the call of the funeral pyre.” Or we can hear the classic lesson to appreciate the brief time between when we flicker into existence and when we flicker out. As a Swahili word in a favorite hymn we will sing a little later puts it, Abateewah – oh, fortunate existence! We come from the fire, live in the fire, go back to the fire. Whoa, such is life!

Thank you.

### **Singing the Journey #1074 Turn the World Around**

1. We come from the fire, living in the fire, go back to the fire, turn the world around.
2. We come from the water, living in the water, go back to the water, turn the world around.
3. We come from the mountain, living on the mountain, go back to the mountain, turn the world around.

Chorus 1: Whoa, so is life! Ah, so is life! Whoa, so is life! Ah, so is life!

Chorus 2: Whoa, so is life! Abateewah, so is life! Whoa, so is life! Abateewah, so is life!

Chorus 3: Whoa, so is life! Abateewah, (ha!) so is life! Whoa, so is life! Abateewah, (ha!) so is life!

Section 1. Do you know who I am? Do I know who you are? See we one another clearly? Do we know who we are?

Section 2. Do you know who I am? Do I know who you are? See we one another clearly? Do we know who we are? Do you know who I am? Do I know who you are? See we one another clearly? Do we know who we are?

1. Water make the river, river wash the mountain, Fire make the sunlight, turn the world around.

2. Heart is of the river, body is the mountain, Spirit is the sunlight, turn the world around.

3. We are of the spirit, truly of the spirit Only can the spirit turn the world around!