

How Shall We Live in a Burning World?

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October 17, 2021

Readings

from “The Fire Sermon” – an early discourse given by the Buddha

I have heard that on one occasion the Buddha was staying in Gaya, at Gaya Head, with 1,000 fire-worshipping monks. There he addressed the fire worshippers:

“Monks, Everything is ablaze! What All is ablaze? The eye is ablaze. Forms are ablaze. Consciousness at the eye is ablaze. Contact at the eye is ablaze. And whatever there is that arises in dependence on contact at the eye — experienced as pleasure, pain or neither-pleasure-nor-pain — that too is ablaze. Ablaze with what? Ablaze with the fire of passion, the fire of aversion, the fire of delusion. Ablaze, I tell you, with birth, aging, and death, with sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, and despairs.”

from *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants*:

The moral covenant of reciprocity calls us to honor our responsibilities for all we have been given, for all that we have taken. It’s our turn now, long overdue. Let us hold a giveaway for Mother Earth, spread our blankets out for her and pile them high with gifts of our own making. Imagine the books, the paintings, the poems, the clever machines, the compassionate acts, the transcendent ideas, the perfect tools. The fierce defense of all that has been given. Gifts of mind, hands, heart, voice, and vision all offered up on behalf of the earth. Whatever our gift, we are called to give it and to dance for the renewal of the world.

In return for the privilege of breath.

Sermon

Today’s sermon title occurred to me a few weeks ago as I reflected on the upcoming Glasgow UN climate conference in the first week of November.

I know I don’t have to lay out the science for you, or to name once again that climate change is now quite clearly the climate crisis, the climate emergency. Those in congress, for example, who look at bills with huge investments in alternative energy and say “What’s the hurry?” or “Why so many billions?” simply don’t seem to be living on the same planet as the rest of us. I sent an email to one of those senators this morning after waking too early with his opposition to necessary climate action stirring my thoughts.

After all, if we are not in the midst of a climate emergency here on our home planet, I'm not sure what would qualify!

Anyway, I could rant on.

And I could list all the things you already know that we have to do, collectively through our political and corporate institutions as well as here at Old Ship and of course individually. Top of the list of course is to stop as soon as we can burning the fossil fuels that are heating and burning and flooding our planet.

But you know all this stuff.

Yet here's the thing: knowing might not be enough. Listen to this from Richard Powers, writing in his new novel, *Bewildered*, set in the not-too-distant future:

Earth had two kinds of people: those who could do the math and follow the science, and those who were happier with their own truths. But in our hearts' daily practice... we all lived as if tomorrow would be a clone of now.

And I recognize that to a large degree I include myself in that "we" – so easy, when you have a pleasant life of privilege, to assume that life will continue to go on nicely enough

Anyway... all said by way of introduction... I want to talk about how this sermon title nudged me to go deeper than the politics, deeper even than the science.

"How shall we live in a burning world?" eventually evoked for me one of the Buddha's early discourses, a talk which came to be known as "The Fire Sermon." You can look it up. It is not long. We heard a bit of it in the first reading this morning.

The "fire" in the sermon is, as you likely surmised, a metaphor – fire as a apt image for greed and craving, for out-of-control, shall we say, burning, desire for always more: more pleasure, more wealth, more power, more recognition and prestige, maybe just more comfort.

Now, the Buddha was addressing the origins of personal suffering (*dukkha* is word in the original language), the suffering that comes from these various out-of-control cravings and desires, particularly when we believe that satisfying those cravings and desires will make us happy.

But what happens when we multiply the individual by, oh, say six or seven billion of us – most of those billions much of the time anyway driven to one degree or another in just the ways the Buddha names, driven to want more, thinking that having more will make us happy, thinking that an ever expanding economy will make everyone happy, thinking that getting more stuff, far beyond our actual real needs (which of course do need to be filled), is the goal of life.

Well then here we are! This is what happens. We find ourselves in a quite literally burning planet because of the burning of never-satisfied or satisfiable craving.

And it is nobody's fault and everyone's fault.

Oh yes, we can justifiably point the finger at fossil fuel companies who for decades have denied or downplayed the dangers of global warming and the contribution of their industry to global warming and the climate crisis. We can point to politicians and nations denying the gravity of our situation or simply not doing enough in the face of ever more convincing evidence

that we are indeed in the midst of a crisis that will only continue to escalate if we continue to fail to act.

But what I'm suggesting is that the roots of the crisis run deeper than corporate and political indifference and denial.

To put it simply, the burning world is the result of our burning greed rooted in our misunderstanding of what makes for happiness, what makes for human flourishing, what makes for the flourishing of all life for that matter.

The solution?

Begins with each of us, spiritual work leading to the material work of living as greenly as we can, discovering that it is in fact more pleasant to live greenly and simply... even as we of course call those fossil fuel corporations and our politicians to account... maybe march and rally, maybe commit civil disobedience, certainly vote, send an email or many emails.

But yes, we do begin with ourselves – of course. Which doesn't mean spending years in Buddhist meditation or a monastery before we *do* anything. But to be effective in our lives, we do well to be reflective about our lives and about the purpose of our lives.

For many meditation might be part of a path to such contemplation of what truly matters most and what matters less for our happiness and contentment. It certainly might include reflecting on which of our own desires, including a desire for comfort above all else (that one gets me...), are healthy, life-affirming, and which are not, which are even destructive of our personal well-being and of the well-being of those around us, our communities, our nation, our world, the Earth herself.

Then of course action flows – not waiting till we have “it all” figured out, but action flows in the course of our lives and our days of reflection, contemplation, maybe meditation.

And you know what? It might be that “how to live in a burning world” hasn't changed much in essence over the centuries, indeed millenia. (This is why, after all, the ancient texts still speak to us once we strip them of all that is no longer historically or culturally relevant.)

The Buddha's teaching of how to live in a burning world? To tame the fires of lust and desire.

Jesus's teaching? To love one another, to love our neighbor as ourselves. Worth pondering: What does love of neighbor really look like in these times?

Or the admonition in the biblical book of Deuteronomy: “I have set before you this day life and death. Therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live.” Worth pondering: What does it mean really to “choose life”?

Or this from the Hindu Upanisads: “You are what your deep, driving desire is. As you desire, so is your deed. As your deed is, so is your destiny.” Worth pondering: What is our true, life-giving desire? Isn't it the well-being of all beings – not for only our individual comfort and well-being, but for all beings? If so, doesn't this give us more than a clue as to how to live in a burning world?

We heard earlier that beautiful passage – which was the final paragraph, the final thought and invitation in Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*, her invitation to honor our responsibilities for all we have been given.

Well, elsewhere, near the end of her book, she catalogued the many kinds of fires, most of which are indeed life-giving and life-enhancing, from the fires that warm us on cold days, to fires for cooking, to hearth-fires that warm our hearts as well as our bodies, to fires which, with care, clear the landscape for new growth, new life, to ceremonial fires.

And after all, each Sunday we Unitarian Universalists kindle a ceremonial flame, a bit of fire, as we open our worship – this flame, this fire representing among much else the light within, the energy within each of us and all of us collectively gathered around the fire, energy of love and care and kindness.

Yes, literal fire out of control is another matter, as we know only too well and more than ever in recent months. Just as the fire of desire out of control is another matter. But just as all fire is not bad, so too, as that text from the Upanishads suggested, not all desires are bad, not at all. We desire food when hungry. We desire human intimacy when lonely or just because intimacy and love is good. It is simply and dangerously when we desire the wrong things for the wrong reasons or in the wrong way that we can bring ruin to our own lives and to the lives of others.

In the spirit of all I've been saying this morning, many of you know an ancient Buddhist text which is often used as a meditation and which is an expression of desire for the well-being of others, of all beings: May all beings be well and safe, may all beings be at peace and at ease, may all beings be filled with loving-kindness.

This is the fire of desire as inexhaustible fuel for human flourishing, for the flourishing of all life. This is what it means to “choose life” – this, it seems to me, can be a guiding mantra for how to live in a burning world.

So may it be.