

The Ninth Candle

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)

Unitarian Universalist

December 5, 2021

Reading

Channukah, by Lynn Ungar

Come down from the hills.
Declare the fighting done.
Be bold -- declare victory,
even when the temple is wrecked
and the tyrants have not retreated,
only coiled back like a snake
prepared to strike again.

Come down. Try to remember
a life gentled by daily acts
of domestic faith -- the pot
set to boil, the bed made up,
the table set in calm expectation
that when the sun sets
we will still be here.

Come down and settle.
Unlearn the years of hiding.
Light fires that can be seen for miles,
that dance and spark and warm
the frozen marrow. Set lamps
in the window. Declare your presence,
your loyalties, the truths
for which you do not expect to have to die.

It would take a miracle, you say,
to carve such a solid life
out of the shell of fear.
I say you are the stuff
from which such miracles are made.

Sermon

A Hanukkah menorah holds nine candles, one for each night of the eight-day festival... along with a ninth candle, in Hebrew call the shamash, or helper candle. The shamash is lit first every night, and then it does the work of lighting the others – just one on the first night, two on the second, and so on through the eight nights, so that those candles can each in turn, and finally all together shine for all to see.

And each night the candles are allowed to burn completely on their own, until with a final little puff of smoke they are used up, having shared all the light they had to share. It is beautiful to be present for the candles' shining during the hour or so it takes for them to completely burn. So that in exchange for a little patience, you are given a lot of peace.

Back to the shamash, the ninth candle.

It is one thing for a *candle* to be a helper. What about us? Does the shamash offer an example for us?

In a short piece on the web by a writer named Samantha Barnett, she noted that the word "Chanukah," though meaning "dedication," as in the re-dedication of the temple following the Maccabees' victory, also shares the same root with the Hebrew word "chinuch," which means education. She went on to reflect on how each of several teachers of hers over the years had served as a shamash for her. She wrote:

Good teachers inspire us to grow. By expecting the best from us, they make us better. They give us the spark that enables us to shine.

Samantha Barnett shared a story about a history teacher who had inspired her to enter a poster contest on the theme of free speech – and she won second place, having never won a prize for anything.

Then she wrote of her music teacher in high school. Her learning from him was not so much about music but about people, that "being a good person doesn't mean being nice; it means having others' best interests in mind and nurturing their growth."

Just what it means to be a shamash – whether a teacher, a coach, a friend, or a teammate: think of that category of "assists" for basketball and hockey players. Just as important as the player who makes the basket or the goal is the player who fed them the ball or the puck, helping their scoring teammate to shine.

Well, as I started to muse about those who have been a shamash to me, the list got pretty long pretty quickly – as I expect it might for you. My parents first of all, who never failed to support my interests, to help me shine – including surprising me with a banjo when I was sixteen or so. And I don't recall having asked for a banjo; I think they just figured I might like a banjo....

Then a few more years later, supporting my choice to attend Haverford College... which ended up shaping my life in huge ways, as you've heard me affirm on other occasions – indeed, in important ways shaping my approach to ministry. Professor Paul Desjardins, for one, a

scholar of Plato, Aristotle and the rest, drew out our thinking with probing questions and challenges in ways something like Socrates, who had described himself as a midwife to the soul – something like the idea of helping others, as a shamash, to shine. Well, Paul helped us to shine.

Then there were my professors at Starr King School for the Ministry, whose calling was to help us bring forth our gifts, our unique ways of shining, to whatever form of ministry each of us would pursue. For example, Ron Cook, who in our preaching class encouraged me to shine a bit more when he wondered out loud (after I'd presented what may have been a somewhat pedantic sermon that was probably more like an essay than a sermon) why I couldn't preach with a little more of the spirit with which I played the banjo.

I could go on about those who have been a helper, a shamash, to me. I encourage you to make your own lists.

But I also need to say a few words this morning to remind us that not only have we each had and hopefully still have many who have been for us a shamash – whether teachers, friends, coaches, family, whomever... but that we also, each of us, can be and are a shamash to others. Not necessarily in huge ways either, and not necessarily because we are even experts about one thing or another. Samantha Barnett quotes a Jewish sage and scholar of the last century, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who said that if we all we know is the letter *aleph*, we should teach it to others.

So I have no doubt that if each of you gave this a little thought, you would think of many ways in which you have been a shamash to someone else, helped someone shine – likely in ways more substantial than teaching a letter of the alphabet (though for a grandchild that itself can be huge!).

Years ago I was part of a group shamash one holiday season. This goes back to my years teaching music at the Spear Educational Center, a school for children who carried all sorts of diagnoses, from learning disabled to “retarded” (a word we thankfully no longer use) to autistic – a wide range of kids. Well, after a couple of years of encouraging singing, drumming, square dancing and so on in individual classes, often one student at a time, it occurred to me that maybe we could pull off a Christmas play or program of some sort, invite the parents, find ways for each child to participate.

So – with lots of help from the other teachers (as I said, a group shamash), we did it. Some of the kids could sing Christmas songs, and the ones who couldn't sing could drum or shake a maracas or pick out a tune on the xylophone, and so on – but every last one of them was given a part to play.

Well, the big day came and the auditorium (actually the cafeteria) was filled with parents and other family members and friends, I expect some (maybe many) in tears, perhaps never having been able to imagine that their special children with whatever labels the wider world had given them could be in a program like this, just like so-called “normal” kids.

We all had so much fun that we did it again the next year. At the end of which, one of the kids, Charlie, came up to me and said, “Well, we did it again Mr. Brown.”

Yes indeed, all the other teachers (including my Susan) and I had served as shamash to those kids, enabling them – not us, them – to shine in ways they perhaps never had.

The fact is, though, that we don't need to look to dramatic moments in which we have been a shamash for others or someone else has been for us.

Almost every day we have opportunities to help someone shine with a word of support or kindness.

It is certainly true here at Old Ship – might sort of be a defining characteristic of a church or of any spiritual community. Maybe we can put it this way, that we each are sometimes one of the eight candles, shining, whether singly or together in a group (like a choir or a committee... or the big Merrie Market team), and sometimes we are the ninth candle (choir leader or committee chair) helping others to shine.

It is a beautiful thing! It is community! It is love.

But whether here at Old Ship or in our families or circles of friends or with colleagues at our work, we can each be the ninth candle, the shamash, for others, even as we are grateful for those who are shamash for us.

One more thought – this about miracles.

As you know, the eight nights of Hanukkah lights recall what is named the miracle that took place after the victory of the Maccabees over those who had oppressed them, had prohibited them from practicing their Jewish faith. With their victory, the Maccabees reclaimed the temple in Jerusalem and re-dedicated it in a ceremony which was meant to include lighting the temple lamp for eight days. And though they only had enough oil to last one day... it indeed lasted for eight. Miracle!

Or, as some commentators have put it, the real “miracle” may have been that a small group of rebels somehow managed to defeat a superpower.

Perhaps. But I'm *certain* of this: if we don't think much of miracles which contradict the laws of physics, we can surely affirm that the most important miracles for us most of the time are daily, and are not really miracles at all in the usual sense of that word. Just this: that each day each of us can play a transformative role in the lives of others, helping them to shine – sometimes as simple as a word of support or a literal helping hand.

We live in the lap of mystery. Who really knows what this life is all about, what this wondrous universe is all about or what it's for – I don't!

But you and I do know that whatever is going on here, life can sometimes be very hard... and we can make life easier for each other with the everyday “miracle” of care and kindness, using our light to kindle or brighten the light of our neighbor.

May it always be so.