



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Bravest Fire

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June 18th . . . 120 children are evacuated from Camp de Benneville Pines as the Lake Fire burned over 31,000 acres in the San Bernardino forest. Gratefully, the fire was contained, and our beloved Unitarian Universalist camp is able to proceed. Later in August, we will donate our offering to help Camp de Benneville restore lost income due to the fire.

July 17th . . . On I-15 a brush fire in the median jumps the freeway. The California Highway Patrol estimated there were up to 70 cars, trucks and tractor-trailers on I-15 northbound near San Bernardino. Twenty vehicles were destroyed and 10 were damaged. Helicopters streaked through the air, carrying huge buckets of water, and dumped their loads on burning cars, trying to stop the advance of the flames burning the chaparral on the hillsides.

Every week a fire makes national news, my mother calls me with alarm in her voice. First, she tells me how far away I sound and how much she misses me. Then . . .

“I saw the fire on the news . . . are you safe? Are you close to it?”

“Yes mom, I’m fine, we’re not that close in Pasadena.” Each time I assure my mother of my safety, of the safety of our community. As the days get hotter this summer, it feels like fire has upgraded from a distant threat in my imagination, something filed under California rare emergencies like earthquakes or mudslides, to something that is becoming a little too close.

As a new Californian, I have a lot to learn about fire. I am coming from New York City, full of densely populated, tree-lined brownstone streets. Tragic and destructive fires there usually happen indoors . . . cigarettes in bed, hotpots left on, shoddy electrical wiring gone very, very wrong. But fire here seems to have a different quality. People live in such close proximity not to one another, but to the mountainous chaparral, a beautiful and vulnerable landscape constituted by the dense thickets of native species like the manzanita tree, brush sage and the chamise plant. In this state of consistent draught, California “fire season” has stretched from summer and early fall to a year-round concern.

Richard Halsey is founder of the California Chaparral Institute. His mission is to help ordinary citizens understand the complexities of the chaparral landscape and its relationship to fire. Halsey believes that more understanding can both protect vulnerable communities from fire’s destruction while protecting the chaparral landscape from human destruction. In his book *Fire, Chaparral and Survival in Southern California* Halsey compares people’s fear of nature to the fear people have towards strangers. He says:

How we perceive nature is not unlike the way we interact with each other. The more distant we are from a person, the easier it is to neglect, take for granted, or create prejudicial caricatures. However, once we actually meet, know their name, and spend time understanding the stranger’s place in the world it becomes impossible to ignore his or her rights, needs and

inherent sacredness. The same applies to places we are unfamiliar with or have forgotten, places like the chaparral.

Halsey and like-minded ecologists consider fires a natural part of the regeneration of desert ecology. While the chaparral is not “fire dependent,” few organisms in Southern California have evolved without adapting to the element of fire. Over time, fire has become a regular part of the cycle. With impinging human development and the persistent drought, a perfect storm of wind, fuel and heat can ignite small brush fires into raging blazes, consuming acres, residences and lives.

This kind of fire, volatile, out of control, consuming, dangerous, is a stranger to us. Unitarian Universalists often use fire as an energizing and hopeful element in our faith life. Our most beloved symbol is the “flaming chalice” a vessel which hosts a flame kindled within, and we light candles each week to honor our own spiritual journeys. The raw, elemental beauty and power of the symbol of fire is a source of strength, awe, and fear alike. Controlling it, we find power and comfort. Out of control, fire can become a stranger to us to be feared and despised.

Lauren Winner writes about contemporary spirituality from a Christian perspective. Her newest book is *Wearing God: Clothing, Laughter, Fire, and Other Overlooked Ways of Meeting God*. She is fascinated with what she calls fire’s “paradox, its contradiction and doubleness: fire warms us and gives us light, and makes it possible for us to cook and to read late into the night and to keep warm in winter. But fire can also destroy: fire can engulf bodies, devour towns, annihilate whole cities. Fire is essential for life and civilization, and fire is a threat to both. Fire warms but can blister; fire heats but can consume.”

The story of the burning bush is an Exodus tale from the Hebrew bible often lifted up in the spring seasons of Passover and Lent. This is a story about fire familiar to many of us. Moses was tending his father-in-law’s flock at the edge of the wilderness. He pauses at the base of Mount Horeb, called the mountain of God. An angel appears to Moses in flames of fire from within a bush—you might imagine a bush perhaps not unlike our desert chaparral. Moses, curious, approaches the bush to get a closer look. When he does, God calls to Moses within the bush and says “Here I am . . .” God asks Moses to remove his shoes, as he is standing on holy ground. It’s then when Moses, so bold and curious before, becomes paralyzed with fear. The text says he hides his face. But he listens to God.

And God says “I have seen the misery of my people . . . I have heard them crying out and I am concerned about their suffering . . . And I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.”

Moses balks at this assignment. “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?” he asks.

And God assures Moses that he will be with him.

Now many of us know this story well as a miracle tale—of God’s power to burn the bush without consuming it—God’s power to control and manipulate the unpredictable element of fire. But Lauren Winner is taken with another dimension of the story maybe not as familiar to us. She notes that in ancient rabbinical commentaries another miracle is at play.

I wonder . . . maybe think of a bush or shrub in your backyard or one on this campus . . . one that is really dry in the summer heat.

How long do you think that bush would take to burn?

And then how long would you be able to stand there and watch that brush fire, feeling the heat, feeling the terror and amazement pulse through your body before you turned to run away and call for help?

The miracle the rabbis point to is “the miracle that Moses paid attention long enough to notice that the shrubbery was not being consumed.” That he was curious enough to come closer to the fire, not to turn away in terror.

Winner writes: “Only after God saw that Moses had stood still long enough to notice the bush in its unconsuming fire did God call out to him.”

Reform Rabbi Laurence Kushner takes this interpretation even further in his commentary. “The burning bush was not a miracle. It was a test. God wanted to find out whether or not Moses could pay attention to something for more than a few minutes. When Moses did, God spoke. The trick,” Rabbi Kushner writes, “is to pay attention to what is going on around you long enough to behold the miracle without falling asleep.”

The Exodus story as a miracle of paying attention is a compelling for us. What is on fire in our own lives, perhaps an out of control problem in our lives we are so intimately close to, but are afraid to face? What is on fire in our world, a volatile blaze we are aware of but fear truly seeing? What are we afraid of that we are being called to pay attention to? What might happen if we do?

I think back to the poem “Rabbits and Fire.” The poet is revealing something that has been hidden from our view, something violent and terrible and yet so very real. As the listeners, we are forced to pay attention as the horror unfolds. Albert Rios does not leave us with a charge, as God did to Moses. We are, instead, made to sit with the uncomfortable and painful reality of nature’s indifference.

I wonder if the crisis of anti-black racism is one of those fires that is raging out of control in our world. Just a year ago, we watched in horror as fires raged in the streets of Ferguson after Michael Brown lay dead in the street for 4 hours, and his killer, police officer Darren Wilson, was not indicted. “We don’t want our city to burn,” a Ferguson activist shared on camera for a short video called “Ferguson Speaks.” This spring we watched as cars and a CVS in Baltimore

burned after another unarmed black man, Freddie Gray, died in police custody. These fires were not acts of God, of nature's indifference, they were a perfect storm of fuel, wind and righteous rage at injustice which exploded into destructive and consuming blazes.

Like we can't un-know how the jackrabbits get caught in the flames of the desert fires, we can't un-see the anti-black violence close at hand. With technology and social media, the police abuse that was at one time hidden is now in full view. I'm not sure about you, but I can open my Facebook every day to see videos and pictures of black people, of every age and gender expression continuously brutalized and killed by the police, caught in the flames of a dehumanizing and increasingly militarized criminal justice system. As Sandra Bland's death remains a mystery, the video of her brutal arrest burns in our memory. One day after, 18 year old Kindra Chapman was found dead in her jail cell in Texas, and Sunday another black woman Ralkina Jones has died in jail. The call to "say their names" is to make the humanity of each of these people a reality, to restore their dignity and resist letting their unique personhood fade into statistics. "Each life is like a fire," says the poet Joy Harjo. "We must take care of it."

Remember the Exodus story of the burning bush. God says "I have seen the misery of my people . . . I have heard them crying out and I am concerned about their suffering." Each time we witness a racist incident, as Moses did will we have the courage and curiosity to pay attention to what we are seeing? Might we even hear a prophetic voice calling to us from within the fire? Will we take up to the charge, knowing we don't fight alone?

Or will we find ourselves strangers to the fire close at hand, hiding our faces to try to un-see what we have seen, running away in fear that we are not the ones who have the power to help. Will we deny we have been beckoned—thinking the call is meant for someone else?

Richard Halsey, the chaparral ecologist, writes about how we can misunderstand fire and its power to teach us about nature, and ourselves. Paying attention to the burning chaparral, he reminds us of the miracle of nature's resilience. "Metallic-colored fire beetles conduct frantic mating displays on still smoldering stems and underground bulbs explore with floristic ecstasy on fire-blackened slopes."

I wonder what might happen if we take the time to listen, to really see, to speak with bravest fire and to join our own suffering to the suffering of the world. Might we experience a different kind of fire ecology in our own lives, and in our world—a new kind of miracle to see what has been burned, but not consumed—a liberatory power of beloved community, rising again from the flames, beginning again and again in love.

Blessed be, and Amen.