



Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

“Bring It To The Fire”
Fire Communion Service
Delivered 8 January 2023
Rev. Jen Raffensperger

“Some metaphors are so deeply rooted, they persist beyond memory. Fire as defiance. Fire as truth. Fire as knowledge.

The same flame that could burn this entire village to ash can light our way through the darkness. The same flame that cooks my food can kill me.”

“And while my memory of those times has degraded a bit, one thing that will always stick with me is the fire, the circle, and the song. Don’t need any fancy equipment or know-how to do this; we just do it.”

The fire, the circle, and the song. We don’t need to be taught how to do this, how to tell one another stories around the fire, how to gather for warmth and stay for food, how to take the nourishment of fire and make connections, and from connections to grow community.

We don’t need to be taught that - but sometimes we do need to be reminded. Fire as defiance. Fire as truth. Fire as knowledge.

These words, from both today’s Chalice Lighting and our reading (thank you, Denise), are from two different poems that both appear in poet, educator, and activist [Kyle Tran Myhre](#)’s latest book, *Not a Lot of Reasons to Sing, But Enough*. This book is a cycle of poems that are set in a post-apocalyptic world, where dissenters have been removed from Earth to colonize the Moon, and a poet and his teacher - who is also a robot - move from small community to small

community, sharing their work around fire-centered gatherings. Even in this imagined distant future, humans gather in the way we have always gathered - around a fire, to share warmth and light and story. Defiance, truth, and knowledge. Each gathering starts with a blessing and ends with a bit of folklore about this future world. The entire work asks us to imagine: "Of what future are these the wild, early days?"

Well, we are now here in the year of our Lord two thousand and twenty three, and that is a number out of science fiction for me - probably for anyone who was born in a year that started with a "19." We are in the wild, early days of this year, of this century, even of this millennium! - and we are only starting to fill in our imaginings of what the future might hold.

A year, of course, can start any old day. To be annoyingly pedantic, I can say that every day IS the start of a new year. But the course and time of a year is an accepted social and cultural norm, and it facilitates communication, transportation, and yes - in some ways - imagination in a unifying way that the entire world, more or less, participates in.

We don't need to be reminded about the fire, the circle, and the song. We don't need to be taught to gather in numbers for comfort and for safety. We don't really need to be reminded of the ways we can choose to look forward, and to look back, at the arrival of the new year.

Every year it comes. The overwhelming wave of exhortations to change - to mine the self for shortcomings, to excavate our fears and our insecurities, to tie up all the possibility of change in the act or the declaration of a single day, a single frankly arbitrary moment in time.

And every year I personally want to shout out, "No!" Not because the choice to change, the choice to self-examine is not worthy - but because holding that to a single day is not only laughable but can be harmful. If I tie my own worth up in the declaration of a single day, and then in a matter of days, or weeks, or

months, I fall short of the declaration I made for myself, I can be swamped with feelings of failure.

If we create a society of people who are essentially resolving to improve their lives, who then find themselves potentially derailed by a single mistake, then we are creating waves of unhappiness that lead to further separation, isolation, and loneliness - some of the greatest ills that trouble our current society.

If we bind our worth up in promises too big to keep, and let shame at our own shortcomings overcome us, what else are we doing but removing ourselves from the fire, the circle, and the song?

Don't let yourself be drawn away from the fire. This fire, our fire, the fire of our faith into which we have cast our intentions and set free that which does not serve us, this fire is here to reflect you in your change. This fire is here to dance upon your face and hands as you gather, imperfect and understanding and accepting, as you gather in a group with others who may be seeking the same light, the same warmth, the same companionship although their own pathways may be different. We came to this fire from different places and when we head away from it, we will take different paths.

To return to the words of our chalice lighting:

“Fire resists easy labels: hero/villain, good/evil, even life/death. But no matter how nuanced our analysis, how comfortable we become with the discomfort of complexity, even the lack of absolutes contains an absolute: fire burns. It always burns.

What does this have to do with expression, with art? As always, I leave the meaning-making to you.”

I leave the meaning-making to you. That is both the great gift and great consternation of Unitarian Universalism: we do not gather around this fire to

give you the answers. We gather around this fire to light the way to your own meaning-making. What is the thing that is of most worth to you? Bring it to the fire. What is the thing that most vexes you? Bring it to the fire. What fills you with sorrow? Bring it to the fire. What fills you with joy? Bring it to the fire.

Fire always burns. Fire always consumes. Today we have let it consume some of our thoughts and our fears, we have let it consume our hopes to free them to the larger world, beyond the written page and paper, out into the great moving currents of time. We have gathered in a circle around this fire, and have sung our songs of lifting up and of letting go. We have made a collective shout to the universe.

“Shouting at the universe doesn’t change the universe. But I don’t think change happens without the shouting.

So whether it’s causation, or just correlation, I think if we shout, and sing, and talk, and listen tonight, good things will happen.”

Around this fire we’ll shout, and sing, and talk, and listen. We’ll pray and we’ll consider and we’ll argue and we’ll struggle and we’ll triumph and we’ll weep and we’ll laugh. We know the fire can harm us. We also know we can’t live without it.

The invitation of Unitarian Universalism is an invitation to join the gathering by the fire. To bring all that you have, all that you are, all that you aspire to be and all that you wish you weren’t, and to share them in the eternal gathering. To witness them on the face of others and know that you are witnessed. To lift up that which is of most worth and to let go of that where your energy is wasted. We arrive from different paths to where we have always been: the fire, the circle, and the song. Defiance, truth, and knowledge. Bring it all to the fire.

So may it be.