

THE SPEED OF LIGHT

A sermon by F. Jay Deacon
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I remember one bitter day twenty years ago when all doors seemed to have been slammed in front of me, and my life-work seemed at an end. I had no money, nowhere to go but an unheated pigeon-infested building owned by a friend in Dorchester — I'll spare you the details — and I walked into the Boston Common, down the familiar foot-paths through the Public Garden to the swan pond. There was a dense fog — it shrouded everything, hiding anything that was more than a few feet away — it was perfectly surreal. I stood in the middle of the city of Boston, but I saw, in place of the accustomed cityscape, pure light. There, a visible realm so private I shared it only with a few ducks and swans — the layers of my outward life were stripped away. I can never forget that moment that fused the reality of light with that of mind and soul.

I would not mention this, except that I know that you have been somewhere like that, or you will be. You and I may be there again.



Here is a truth we should learn in loss: that loss leaves us as it finds us, neither better nor worse. But it is in the stripping away of the *not*-us and of the transient accidents of our lives that the deeper fog of our distorted perceptions can melt away.

I didn't leave the Garden any more jubilant than I entered it, but I left it different. The loss, the fear, and the disappointed hope were still there, but there was something else more fundamental than any of these.



It's a season of light, but light isn't always visible. And light is more fundamental than time and space.

Light is more fundamental, and it is everywhere. It's just that we can't see it.

THE READINGS

*Sampson Reed,
Observations on the
Growth of the Mind, 1826.
A passage that deeply
affected the young
Waldo Emerson.*

The mind has attained an upward and onward look, and is shaking off the errors and prejudices of the past. . . . The loud call on the past to instruct us . . . comes back in echo from the future. . . . We appear to be approaching an age which will be the silent pause of merely physical force before the powers of the mind, the timid, subdued, awed condition of the brute, gazing on the erect and godlike [human form][form of man].

Aurobindo, The Life Divine

We speak of the evolution of Life in Matter, the evolution of Mind in Matter; but evolution is a word which merely states the phenomenon without explaining it. For there seems to be no reason why Life should evolve out of material elements or Mind out of living form, unless we accept the Vedantic solution that Life is already involved in Matter and Mind in Life because in essence Matter is a form of veiled Life, Life a form of veiled Consciousness. And then there seems to be little objection to a farther step in the series and the admission that mental consciousness may itself be only a form and a veil of higher states which are beyond Mind.

If evolution is the progressive manifestation by Nature of that which slept or worked in her, . . . it is also the overt realization of that which [Nature] secretly is.

If it be true that Spirit is involved in Matter and apparent Nature is secret God, then the manifestation of the divine in himself and the realization of God within and without are the highest and most legitimate aim possible to man upon earth.

Continued

The light that strikes the eye is known only through the energy it releases — which is translated into a physical image — which appears to be composed of light. But *that* light is a composition of the mind; we never see “the light itself.”



Why am I telling you this?

Because there is something more fundamental, more elemental, than what we can see or hear or taste. But sometimes we can know it.

Even space and time, and matter and energy, are only manifestations of a deeper underlying continuum. But everywhere there is light.

There is an obvious parallel between light and consciousness — something that is equally mysterious to us. Neither light nor consciousness is quite part of the physical universe. Mystics, East and West, have long linked light and consciousness. In Christian churches during this Advent season, the first chapter of the Gospel of John is read. It speaks of the Word that was at the Beginning as a Light that shines in the dark, and the darkness has never overcome it, a Light that comes into the world and enlightens us. Images of light are everywhere, from the ancient Gnostics to the Hindu festival of lights last month.

The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation speaks of “the self-originated Clear Light, eternally unborn . . . shining forth within one’s own mind.” A great Sufi mystic¹ spoke of his experience of a light “gleaming in the Unseen. . . . I gazed at it continually, until the time came when I had wholly become that light.”

A ground whose essence is light.



Hanukkah begins next Wednesday evening, you know.

The Hanukkah Menorah stands as a symbol for all those forces that, twenty-two hundred years ago, surged up within the human spirit and met a corrupt and oppressive regime that seemed immovable.

Later, some wise rabbis wanted a new symbol of liberation. They wouldn’t focus on the famous Hasmonean liberators who, in the end, had actually betrayed them. They came up with a symbol whose central theme was something more essential, something less transient, than that rebellion, because in the end, the rebellion, too, had failed, *it* had been corrupted.

They created a story about the eight-day festival that the triumphant Maccabees held when they won freedom so many generations before. It wasn’t so much about the Maccabees, but about a miraculous pot of oil that kept the Temple’s Menorah burning for eight nights even though there was enough oil only for one day.

*My colleague
Lynn Ungar,
“Chanukah”*

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.
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.

They wanted to say that there is something more fundamental, more elemental about Life Itself, that *demand*s freedom, and justice, and wholeness, and fulfillment. Beyond any particular party or army or hero or cause, there is something elemental that yearns and strives and perseveres and never ceases.



Emerson says that fire is the most compelling symbol of what *we* should be, “the sign of a robust, . . . burning, radiant soul.”

The light of fire seems to tell so much of our story, the ascent of life on earth. It’s the story of a marvelous light that has now created a creature unlike any other we know of: a creature with moral capacities and aspirations, with the light of consciousness, and with inconceivable creative powers, godlike powers for good — or for ill.

It has been fourteen or so billion years since this adventure, this experiment — got underway. The light exploded into the inconceivable darkness and all this universe was born, in a moment. Its first moments happened fast, if there is any point in talking about time in that inexpressible unfurling of being from potentiality.

But then a dramatic change in the pace. For millions of years there were only the simplest elements, hydrogen, helium, floating around | before more complex atoms, like iron, began to show up.

And then, it was *billions* of years before the next epoch, when the lighter elements formed stars,

and then the stars collapsed in on themselves and became supernovae

and from that came the heavier elements like cobalt or nickel or copper or gold or uranium.

Then, the scene shifts to swirling dust and water on an obscure planet. Once the hundred or so elements known to us came to exist, another billion years brought the first living cells; and another billion, photosynthesis.

From there, it was not billions, but only millions of years that separated the appearance of bacteria that breathe oxygen, and then multicellular organisms and crustaceans, and then fish, and then dinosaurs. We might think dinosaurs were one of Nature’s failed experiments, since they’re gone now, but they lasted for maybe 170 million years. And then there were mammals. And then: the impenetrable mystery of consciousness.



Now there’s a British scientist² who’s laid all these epochs of development out from the Big Bang to now as though it were the 108 floors of the World Trade Center. Which is at least a little bit spooky, because he published his work only three years before it became a dramatic symbol for sudden and monumental change. Kinda makes you tremble.

And the story up to this point has brought us to the top floor. The first living cell would have been at about the 25th floor, the dinosaurs on floors 104 to 107, and mammals wouldn’t come until 108, the top floor.

But there would be no homo erectus standing on two feet until a few inches from the roof on the top floor, and the Neanderthals with their bigger brains and tools wouldn’t come until the last quarter-inch and the Pharaohs would rule Egypt a fiftieth of an inch from the top, the Greek and Roman empires a hundredth of an inch above them. The Renaissance happens within less than the thickness of a layer of paint.

The whole of modern history would play out in the thickness of a microscopic bacterium.

The age of the microchip and global warming and the Internet — invisible to any but the most delicate of scientific instrument.

Here we are, tucked away in the tiniest of spaces in time, and it’s the scene of the most monumentally consequential of events. Like the climate negotiations at Bali that begin this weekend.

Things are happening fast. Ray Kurzweil, the Boston inventor, has said, “we won’t experience 100 years of progress in the 21st century — it will be approximately 20,000 years of progress (at today’s rate).”³

There’s a story astronomers tell. Once at an astronomy lecture somebody, looking very very worried, asked the speaker, “how long did you say it would be before the sun burns the Earth to a crisp?” And the lecturer says “six billion years,” and the questioner, looking awfully relieved, says “thank God for that, I thought you said six *million*.” At first some of this may seem just as blazingly irrelevant to our actual lives.

Yes, but I’m talking about the next twenty years. Or the next five or ten. Today the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change issued its most frightening warning yet, though you will have to look at British and European newspapers to read about it, as the American media remain nearly silent on what is happeningfs.

The next moment for life on Earth turns “critical” because in the twenty-first century, humanity is more at risk than ever before from the misapplication of our great powers.⁴



A lot has happened in these 14 billion years.

The basic elements appeared, and there was the dispersal of stars, and the appearance of biological life, and of human consciousness. There was the Agricultural Revolution and the Industrial and Information Revolutions.

Every one of these hugely important developments brings new human possibilities and civilizing influences, and each one happens in something like one-quarter to one-tenth the time the previous one took. The intervals drop on a curve until the intervals approach zero.

It’s mind-boggling. A compression inconceivably different from previous time. Are we ready? What are we supposed to do?



We know the horrors of history, enhanced by misused technology. Stalin’s tanks and Hitler’s trains and ovens used technology. Today the policies of our government regarding energy, technology, and profit versus the natural order amount to weapons of mass destruction: — as if there were to be no future generations.

And so sometimes we get to thinking of the human presence as the problem, as a curse on the world’s life.

At a series of brilliant midweek conversations⁵ I’m a part of at Cambridge, we’ve been talking about the difference in the environmental movement between “dark green” and “bright green.” We understand what is at risk right now and we tremble. We see the devastation we’re wreaking. “Dark Green” seems to think it really would be better if humans had never evolved out of that first light. “Bright Green” believes humans can yet create a brilliant future.



William Ellery Channing — the great Channing, the real father of Unitarianism in America — said this:

The Infinite Light would be for ever hidden from us, did not kindred rays dawn and brighten within us.

We believe in the Divine infinity through something congenial with it in our own breast. . . . To me it seems that the soul, in all its higher actions, in original thought, in the creations of genius, in the soarings of imagination, in its love of beauty and grandeur, in its aspirations after a pure and unknown joy, and especially in . . . the spirit of self-sacrifice . . . , has a character of infinity. There is often a depth in human love, which may be strictly called unfathomable.

It isn’t that we have *fallen*, as the old theology believed, from some original perfection. No, the light of human consciousness has come to shine ever more radiantly. The answer

doesn't lie in reverting to some earlier stage of our evolution —

— When no one imagined a world beyond the one that worshipped tribal warrior-gods who sent them to wars of conquest — not that much of the world isn't still there, but now another, finer vision has begun to take hold.

The answer doesn't lie in reverting back to a time when gods demanded human sacrifice —

— back to some archaic order when slavery was taken to be the normal order of things —

Before any emancipation from brutal political systems, before the rallying cry of Liberty, Equality, brotherhood and sisterhood and the rise of constitutional democracies; before the recognition of the rights, dignity, and equality of races and genders and sexual orientations —

Before we knew enough even to think about these things: —

No, I won't lament the human presence in this world. Nature itself can be brutal and cruel. Before the human presence there was no moral creature, no ethical vision.

The advancing light of higher consciousness can be seen here and there in the darkness, but will it advance quickly enough?



We grasp what is at risk and we tremble. Something has to change. It's time for another revolution.

Prophets and seers have always seen beyond the present darkness and yearned and reached for a better day, a wiser, nobler human, a new development in human consciousness and culture — something they sometimes called the Kingdom of God. The gospel writer sees a "Light that shines in the dark, and the darkness has never overcome it."

In our moments both of private and public anguish, remember the light that is everywhere.

And we ourselves are the most astonishing,

the most powerful, the most potentially creative expressions of that light. Something creative is at work in the dark: only now, the next magnificent advance won't "just happen." The great power of human consciousness and culture will now drive the continuing evolution of this world of life. Now it's us who will create the future. Not somebody *out there*. Us. We, in whom the Divine is embodied and expressed, must decide what the future will be.

Does that scare you? Worry you? Leave you feeling: *I've got enough to worry about already without the fate of the world darned world of life!* ?

Well, it kind of puts the meaning of our lives and the purpose of our days in a different light, doesn't it?

It is not mere pulpit rhetoric to say that it is time for a spiritual revolution, a Revolution of Consciousness. It is time, and it is, I believe, the meaning of these times. But it will have to come soon.

Will we have the time? Across the long journey of life, the shifts have come faster and faster, the intervals drop on a curve until the intervals approach zero. How can there be enough time?

Human consciousness advances when the old order no longer works.

In our lives and in the life of the world, the faster things get worse, the faster the new consciousness can come, if we want it. It can come like a great dawn that starts as a very gentle glow on the horizon.

We know what's at risk and we tremble. The trembling is good. Once we've been shocked out of our embarrassment at talking about it we can take our place in the making of a new consciousness and a new culture.

Communities of consciousness around the world — Unitarian Universalist congregations among them — have got to be in earnest about this. Must not be too skeptical about the power and consequences of what we're doing in this time.

The change will come when a changed, a larger, a more far-seeing consciousness, changes the culture. A culture is created wherever people come together. A spiritual community like this can create a new culture and change the culture around it. And that's what's going to save this world of life.

The spiritual quest is about grasping who and what we are, and what it is that moves and surges in us, yearns and strives in us, that Light of which we are expressions, that is everywhere, even in the dark.

Is it some ragtag army of farmer-priests in ancient Jerusalem? Is it Martin Luther King declaring that he has a dream, and a multitude of people who share it?

Maybe it's you, not sure if there is really life after some heartbreak of loss, or facing something that must be called by every customary definition Failure, or maybe success, but something in your gut calls you on, to take the next step, to speak the word or do the work only you can do.



What is it that glows in these faces and enlightens these minds and fires these hearts? Can you see it here today lighting these faces?

When I walk the Boston streets where the small, frail man we remember as William Ellery Channing once walked, I am breathless when I contemplate the change in consciousness that great man set in motion. His message was that we are godlike, we are not fallen sinners but sometimes erring expressions of that Immensity that he called God.

In his time, superstition reigned, and slavery, and archaic, barbaric images of the universe and the divine. Mr. Channing saw beyond the horizon and his vision was infectious.

We are different people and our nation is different and our world because of him.

Those who heard him learned to ask the questions no one had dared to ask; and they caught a vision of beauty that melted away the vengeful, parochial vision of the God who sent nations into war and whose pulpits taught his believers to hold slaves. In its place was planted an anthem that rang from the very depths of existence with all the sorrow and pathos, but it was a gentle sweet song of love and beauty that began a work of transformation. And the new strain was taken up and expanded and enriched by those he inspired. Light streamed from their minds — as, perhaps, it will from you.

That light is in you, and you — *you* — are the light of the world.

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¹ Abu'l-Hosian al-Nuri.

² Peter Russell. *Waking Up In Time*. Novato, Calif.: Origin Press, Inc., 1998; reprinted from original title *The White Hole in Time*, Harper San Francisco, 1992.

³ Ray Kurzweil: *Are We Spiritual Machines*, Chapter 10: The Material World: "Is That All There Is?" Available at: <http://www.kurzweilai.net/meme/frame.html?m=10>

⁴ Martin Rees. *Our Final Hour: A Scientist's Warning*. New York: Basic Books, 2003, p. 186.

⁵ At EnlightenNext, 38 Cameron Street in Cambridge, near Davis Square. Come along if this interests you!