

Phoenix People

Fire Communion

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

30 December 2012

Reflection for Fire Communion

Earlier, we set aflame
those things we wished to leave behind in our lives.

Even though we used magic paper—
which was consumed by the fire in a flash—
there was something, some small bit of residue left behind.

The fire scorched the sand of our chalice.
There is a faint remnant of ash that remains.

While we may wish there was no sign left,
no trace that lingers on, it is the way fire almost always works.

Indeed, there's something to be said
for how the ashes of a great forest fire
go on to nourish the ground that will, in time,
give rise to new trees, new vegetation, new growth, a new forest.

So often, in the past, I've been initially irritated
when I've been out on a hiking trip and reached a spot
where a fire has ripped through a forest
leaving behind only the charred remains
of what once had been beautiful green woods.

For the longest time, I felt I was getting a bad deal.
I thought Mother Nature was being very unfair.
After all, I figured if I had trekked all that way
that I somehow deserved to see a verdant forest in all of its glory.

I was wrong.
None of us is promised always to see the show we came for.

And, of course, my disappointment was misplaced.
It kept me from seeing the miracle that was on offer—
the glory there to be seen if I simply opened my eyes to it.

In more recent years, I've come to appreciate
that there is a certain precious gift to be found
by walking through a burned out forest.

There is promise and potential all around.
There are lessons of life's resilience and determination
written into the very landscape.

After a raging fire, with the great trees gone and the sky suddenly open,
the trained eye can spot the sprouting of hope.

It is to be found in the marvelous new green shoots of life
that emerge from, quite literally, the ashes.

We now know, of course, that fires are a healthy and necessary part
of maintaining the vitality of a forest.

If there's been too much prevention, too much fire suppression,
park rangers set controlled burns to carry on the natural work
that fires bring about: clearing out brush from the forest floor,
revitalizing the soil, and heating certain types of seeds
to a point where they begin, at last, to germinate.
So may it be for our lives.

Though we have burned away our regrets and bad habits this day,
may we also honour the life-giving power of fire.

In the ashes of our short-comings and mistakes, may we recognise
the very thing that can best nourish our dreams for the future.

Henry David Thoreau once said we should:
"Make the most of [our] regrets;
never smoother [our] sorrow, but tend and cherish it..."

He said that to "regret deeply is to live afresh."

May that be our goal, as we turn to embrace 2013.

With hope refined in the crucible of our past,
may we live into the coming year with strength and commitment.

May we resolve with all that is within us
to rise from the ashes of our life
and live ever-more boldly all the days we are given.

Amen.