


KINDLE THE SPIRIT



# WARMTH OF COMMUNITY

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"Everything is on fire," writes Irish Indian poet and playwright Nikita Gill. She wrote, "Everything is on fire, but everyone I love is doing beautiful things and trying to make life worth living, and I know I don't have to believe in everything, but I believe in that." In this time when so many unbelievably scary and discouraging fires are raging in communities near and far and in the halls of power in our nation, we must not lose sight of the beautiful things people are doing, the ways people we love are trying to make life more meaningful, the ways people are lifting up the worth and dignity of all and resisting efforts to deny basic rights and dignity. It gives us something to believe in, something to sustain our faith in humanity. So what are the people that you love doing that brings you hope and makes life worth living?

This week, as rallying declarations and executive orders have been flying out of the White House, targeting one marginalized community after another, people have reached out to care for each other saying, "I see you and I'm here for you." People have gathered in prayer, gathered for spiritual practice, knowing that we need spiritual practices to sustain us. People have created art. People have gotten down to work in service to others. People are organizing, building on the legacy of Dr. King and Cecile Richards and others who are gone from this world in body but are alive and stirring in spirit. People are speaking truth to power. Have you watched the inaugural prayer service and listened to the words of the Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde? That was a literal speaking truth to power. Bless her and keep her safe from those who are offended by her message, imploring our leaders to be merciful.

Community has always been important. From the time human life began on earth, we have lived in tribes, in community. People are not meant to navigate life alone, but this is a time when community is more important than ever. Our Unitarian Universalist community, this church, you, the people of

the flaming chalice, symbolizing the light of truth, fire of commitment, and the warmth of community, we are here to remind you of the intrinsic beauty and goodness of humanity that you can believe in. This community is one that will hold you when you need a safe place to be and to grow, rooted in our shared values. As a dear colleague wrote this week, "Return to what you know is right, and act and speak from that space. Rest in that to stay sane and live from that to retain your humanity."

There are many ways that we will need to hold each other in the weeks and months ahead. We will help each other care for our bodies in soul and souls in ways that help us be our most whole selves. Whether that's accessing gender-affirming health care or reproductive health care, nourishing our bodies with healthy food, tending to our spirits in religious community, or educating ourselves and others about healthy sexuality and relationships through OWL and WISE in the community, we will help keep families safe, safe from being separated through deportation, safe from being denied the civil right of marriage. We will care for each other and seek beauty and meaning in our midst, even as we grapple with the ugly realities of environmental destruction and climate change, emboldened hate mongering and violence and wars around the globe. We will call each other to live with integrity, focusing on the love that is the center of our faith, especially when the urge to dismiss or demonize others is pulling us to be something other than our best selves.

Here in this church, we treasure and tend the spark of the divine that dwells in each of us and moves between us. In *The Spark Between*, the reading that Reverend T. J. shared, Julián Jamaica Soto writes, "We have passion. The air without which nothing thrives, least of all the blaze of covenant, justice, and kindness we would illuminate, both with who we are and what we do. All of these an invitation to bring to life the blaze of liberation that is meant to light our way and to dispel the fog of cruelty and grief. It brings us instead to a hearth around which we gather to be nourished, energized, and warmed and where we get ready to disperse enlivened." When we come together in community around our sacred hearth, we are warmed by the spirit that each of us brings, and then we disperse, bringing this spirit, this breath that fuels covenant justice and kindness out into the world that so desperately needs it.

This week, a familiar story came to mind, one that we tell in our children's classes. It was written by Janeen K. Grohsmeyer, and it's called *A Lamp in Every Corner*. It takes place in a mountain village in Transylvania, what is now part of Romania. This is a region where Unitarianism flourished, thanks to edicts of religious tolerance issued in the 1500s, and from which Unitarianism began spreading throughout Europe. The people of this Transylvanian village were Unitarians, and they wanted a church of their own. So all the people of the village chipped in to build themselves a church. Everyone offered their gifts in some way. The carpenters and foresters created enormous beams and carved doors. The glaziers made tiny glass panes and fitted them neatly together. The blacksmiths hammered iron into tall lampstands and thin bronze into shining oil lamps. And then everyone came together to paint the church.

When it was finished, they celebrated with singing and dancing. A village elder invited everybody to return home and eat and to come back later for the first service in the new church. So the people went down the hillside to their homes to eat dinner, everyone except for one little girl named Zora and her

father who stayed behind to eat their picnic of bread and cheese that they had brought. They ate on the hillside and then went inside the church building to admire its beauty. And Zora noticed something. She said, "But father, we haven't finished." "What do you mean?" he asked? "Well, there are these tall iron lampstands all along the walls, but no lamps" said, Zora, "The church will be dark when the people come back." Her father replied, "Oh no, Zora, the light of the church comes from the people. You will see."

When it was time for worship, they rang the bell and then went back out onto the hillside, and they saw in the darkness little points of light coming from many directions and moving steadily up the hill. Each family had a lamp which lit their way to the church. Can you see this in your mind's eye? It's a beautiful image. The lights moved closer gathering into one moving stream, all headed at the same way, growing larger and brighter all the time. Zora's mother arrived with their family's lamp, and she lifted Zora up to help place it on one of the tall iron lampstands. All around the church, other families did the same until the church was bright with light in every corner. The lights flickered and glowed throughout the worship service. And when it was finished, each family retrieved their lamp and it lit their way home.

As Zora was getting ready for bed that night, she said to her mother, "Father said the light of the church comes from the people, but also, the people take their light from the church. And we have that light every day." "Yes," said her mother. "And even when we're not in church, even when our lamp isn't lit, we carry that light of truth and love in our minds and hearts. That light will never go out. This bronze lamp, it will last for many, many years. When you are grown, we will give the bronze lamp to you. And when your children are grown, you will give the lamp to them, and all of you will carry it back and forth to church every time." "But there's only one lamp," said Zora. "So make another," said her mother, "and let the light grow, and someday tell your children to make more lamps too. Good night now, Zora."

So that is what Zora did. The light nurtured by their family shared at church and carried out into their lives continued to grow and light the way for them and for many generations that followed. Zora knew, and we know, that there's something holy that happens when we come together. Each of you here today brings some light to this church, some warmth that you can offer to others in community. And I hope that you, when you come here, experience a warm glow that you take away with you from this community and that you help to grow.

This growth could take the form of something as simple as a smile or a warm welcome given this morning at church or through compassion that comforts another in pain. It could be passed through generosity or service to others. You might carry and pass the light by looking for the good in others and in yourself, or through truth-telling, bringing honesty and greater understanding to some matter. Or you might pass the light through sharing a vision of a better world and cultivating the courage to work toward that vision. Just as no one villager in Transylvania could light the whole church with their lamp, no one individual can do this all alone, which is why we have each other.

Earlier in this service, the members of our congregation said to the newly joining members of our church community, "We pledge to offer you support in times of sorrow, laughter in times of joy, encouragement in times of doubt, and to hold our lamp high to light you on your way." This is one of my favorite parts of any ritual we do in this church. We pledge to hold our lamp high to light you on your way until you bring your own lamp to our community and light the way for others who will come after. This is how our church has carried on for 125 years through highs and lows, through transitions in leadership, through changes in our city and our country and our world, and it's how we will carry through much, much more in the years to come.

So let this church be both your launch pad and your refuge. Some of you are fired up and ready to act, or at least discerning how you can bring your light to dispel the fog of cruelty and grief. And some of you need to be held to lay your burdens down and rest, to lean into a place where you belong, to warm your weary heart by the hearth of this beloved community. And there is room for both of these things in this church, and there is a need for both of these things in our world. So be here. Be here fully. Be here with your mind and heart and spirit. Bring your light and join it with others to generate a powerful warmth that none of us can alone. I don't know about you, but what we are creating here gives me hope for humanity. It is something I can believe in, that love will guide us through the hard night. May it be so for all of us. Amen.