

July 31st, 2022 Sermon
Unitarian church, Ithaca, NY
“Illumination” by Alice McDowell

Reading: I’ll read three short passages.

1st Reading is from the Book of Exodus 34:29

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tables of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.”

2nd reading is from Matthew 17:1-2

And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain apart. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light.

3rd reading is from a Disciple of Saint Seraphim of Sarov—Russian Orthodox Church—early 19th century—Read DOL p.97

I looked and was seized with pious fear. Imagine the face of a man speaking to you from the middle of the sun, from the brightness of its dazzling midday beams. You see his lips moving, the changing expression in his eyes, you hear his voice, you feel his hands holding you by the shoulders, but you do not see those hands or the body of the man who is speaking to you, nothing but the shining light that spreads for many yards around him, revealing with its beams the snow-covered field outside and the white flakes that steadily go on falling

Sermon

From these readings, can you guess what I’ll be discussing today?

When I thought about what’s happening both in the world and within ourselves, I knew I had to speak about light.

You might think from the passages I read of light radiating from a person only happens to the great masters. Maybe the light radiating from these high

beings is stronger and more adamant, but I've seen light radiating from a person coming off a five-or-more day retreat.

Sometimes "ordinary" individuals who are not particularly spiritual have experiences of light the surrounds and permeates them. Read DOL p.95

I was a girl of 15 or 16. I was in the kitchen toasting bread for tea and suddenly on a dark November afternoon, the whole place was flooded with light, and for a minute by clock time, I was immersed in this, and I had a sense that in some unutterable way, the universe was all right. This has affected me the rest of my life, I have lost all fear of death, I have a passion for life, but I am in no way afraid of death, because this light experience has been a kind of conviction to me that everything is all right in some way.

Of course, we've heard people who have near-death experiences often see light or a being of light after they've been declared clinically dead. Here's a quote from Raymond Mooney's classic book, *Life after Life*:

What is perhaps the most incredible common element in the accounts I have studied, and is certainly the element which has the most profound effect upon the individual, is the encounter with a very bright light. Typically, at its first appearance this light is dim, but it rapidly gets brighter until it reaches an unearthly brilliance. Yet, even though this light is of an indescribable brilliance, many make the specific point that it does not in any way hurt their eyes, or dazzle them, or keep them from seeing other things around them.

Despite the light's unusual manifestation, however, not one person has expressed any doubt whatsoever that it was a being, a being of light. . . .[the dying person] senses an irresistible magnetic attraction to this light. He is ineluctably drawn to it. P. 58-9

Thankfully, we don't have to experience near-death to have an experience of light because this light is within all of us; it's a matter of accessing it. As my opening prayer says, "Disclose to us thy divine light that is hidden in our souls, that we may know and understand life better."

The 14th century Sufi poet, Hafiz, confirms the existence of this light within each of us when he says: [DOL p. 96]

I wish I could show you
When you are lonely or in darkness
The Astonishing Light
Of your own Being.

Ladinsky, tr. *I Heard God Laughing*

I love this. Don't you wish you could show a friend who is in sorrow, discouraged, or depressed their inner light? *You* see their essence. *You* see their beauty. *You* see their true nature, and yet they don't see it in themselves. One way to help them is to connect with your own light as you sit with your friend. Your light vibration can act like a tuning fork which raises their vibration to a higher level.

Aldous Huxley asks: "Why are precious stones precious?" Hmm. Why *are* precious stones so precious? Similarly, why do we enjoy watching a fire in the hearth? Why do we take pleasure in witnessing fireworks, or seeing sunsets? Did you ever wonder about this? The answer, according to Huxley, is that these experiences remind you of the light that is within your own being, the light that is in all things, and the light that approximates divine reality.

Why do we not experience this light at all or only sometimes? Sufi master, Hazrat Inayat Khan gives us a clue. [and I quote] "There is a light within every soul.

It only needs the clouds that overshadow it to be broken for it to beam forth.”

DOL p.94

Ahh, this is the crux of the spiritual journey, namely to dispel the clouds. Christian mystics call it purification or self-simplification, Buddhists, detachment and Sufis, the polishing of the heart.

I spend four of the fourteen chapters in *Dance of Light* on this purification stage of the spiritual journey because we spend most of our time here and there's a lot that needs to be cleared away. Examples are negative ideas about yourself, addictions, unproductive habits, anger, fear, anxiety, unhealthy beliefs, self-importance, self-centeredness, need to control and so on. Whew, you can see why so much of the journey involves clearing away of all the stuff that doesn't serve you.

Such clearing helps you access this light more often and for longer periods of time. However, you can also access this light directly by engaging in certain practices. Using both methods of dispersing the clouds *and* directly accessing the light yield the best results.

So, how do we connect with our inner light directly? Some of the following appear in exercises at the end of the DOL chapter on Illumination. Let's do a few of these now.

--Breath in light. Breath out light. Feel light fill you as you do this. You don't have to see light but just sense it or imagine it.

--You could repeat the phrase, "My body, heart and soul radiate divine light," and imagine light shining from you. You could imagine seeing yourself in difficult situations radiating light. Such a practice can easily become a reality. Studies of athletes show that when they visualize their performance ahead of time, they actually achieve better results.

--Elisa Keeler has created a song that I love called "Light Chant," which is based on the movements of the Sufi zikr. Zikr means remembrance; remembering your Divine Source. The song appears in her album, *Songs for the Circle*. The melody somehow sticks in my mind and helps me carry the idea of light throughout my day.

The words are

Light around me
Light above me
Light within me
Radiating from me

The head movements are. . . .

Sara will play the simple melody first and then we can join her with the singing and head motions.

Stay present to the what's happening within you as a result of this chant.

Say silently: "My body, heart and soul radiate divine light."

Send this light to friends who need healing and to troubled places in the world.

Amen.

Thank you.

[*Dance of Light: Christian, Sufi and Zen Wisdom for Today's Spiritual Seeker* is available at Buffalo Street Books, Odyssey Books and Amazon.]