

# Breath of the Spirit: The Light That Comes from Within

This reflection combines traditional mysticism and contemporary physics to remind us that the Scriptural call for us to be “light” to the world is not just metaphor, but metaphysics – both symbolic and literal truth. In so doing, this reflection challenges us to let our light shine forth, and so brighten the world!

Based on the readings from  
February 5, 2023: Fifth Sunday in Ordinary  
Time, Year A  
Isaiah 58:7-10  
Psalm 112:4-5, 6-7, 8-9  
1 Corinthians 2:1-5  
Matthew 5:13-16

I hear “you are the light of the world,” and I think of an old country western tune that goes,

***“You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. You make me happy, when skies are grey. You’ll never know, dear, how much I love you. Please don’t take my sunshine away.” (Listen to Gene Autry’s version [here](#).)***

That little song always made my mother cry – that is, since Labor Day weekend of 1960. It was then that one of my brothers died in a car accident. He was eighteen. I was eleven at the time.

Our mother, whose mental health never was very good, was absolutely broken hearted. Her grief was overwhelming. She wept when she heard that tune, because shortly before that horrible weekend, Tommy (my brother) was sitting with her and playing a

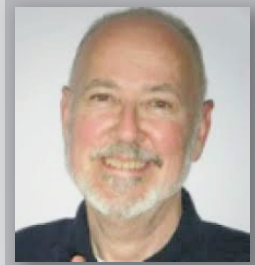
guitar. He was trying to learn how to play the instrument, and he was practicing by strumming the chords to “You Are My Sunshine” and singing it. I wonder if, in our mother’s mind, he was telling her that she was his sunshine, the light of his world.

Now, Tommy often acted badly – a rebellious teenager who was always getting into trouble, defying authority. But no matter how much he disappointed her, she loved him. I think that simple practice session with the guitar kind of redeemed him in mom’s eyes. Perhaps she saw it as a sign that he was growing up, coming to realize that his mom wasn’t so bad after all, that maybe she was smarter, more of a source of light, than he had given her credit for. But regardless of what that musical moment really meant, she tearfully honored that memory to the day she died.

Light is an archetypal symbol, meaning it is ingrained in human consciousness – the psyches of ALL human beings.

The light/darkness theme is central to all the world’s religions. Because it is so essential, it makes its way into many of the world’s sacred stories and sayings. For example, the Jesus of John’s gospel says, “I am the light of the world.” In Matthew, he preaches to a great crowd and says, “You are the light of the world.”

Light in biblical times was important and valuable and precious, so this was Jesus’ way of saying just how important, valuable, and precious each of us is as a source of light.



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*Richard was honored with a President’s Award at the 2022 Dignity National Conference in San Diego.*

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Dispelling darkness and its potential danger was everybody's concern in the ancient world. After sundown, all you had was the moon – if it was shining. And if you wanted more than that, you needed to build a fire.

Homes were lit by lamps that consisted of a kind of receptacle for some plant-based oil (for those who could afford it) and something dipped in it that was lit. It was placed on a stand to give light to the whole house. That's it. That's all anyone had, and it was precious.

Why would they hide such a valued commodity under a basket? Nobody does that, Jesus says. Without fire, one lived in complete and utter darkness – a darkness that is hard to imagine now, as electricity and fossil fuels and solar power all fill the planet with what some call light pollution. We can't possibly appreciate light the way biblical folks did. No wonder it's an archetype, a symbol that sparks the imagination. To call someone light, to see someone as your sunshine, would be a high compliment indeed. You, like Jesus, are such a light – the light of the world.

But “light of the world” is not just a metaphor made up by our ancestors, sadly watching the sun disappear each evening. Scientists tell us that we really do glow! Often, we look at someone who is extremely happy or “in love” or see a young pregnant woman and remark that such a person is glowing! But that is not just true figuratively, we are literally full of light. The esteemed astronomer, Arne Wyller, author of *The Creating Consciousness: Science as the Language of God*, wrote that :

***“light is a vital ingredient in all atoms and in the molecules and life forms – including humans – that are made up of atoms... Light is by far the most preponderant particle in the universe.”***

Light is precious, but it isn't scarce. It's literally in every one of us.

Jesus is light, and he tells us that we are, too. But The First Letter of John, which says that “God is love,” also proclaims that “God is light.” Divinity itself touches me when I am in the light. Popular author Joseph Callender, who is a retired engineer with a background in physics, wrote:

***Prophets and visionaries throughout history, as well as millions of people who have had so-called near-death experiences..., have consistently reported experiencing God as light – light that is qualitatively and quantitatively different from the light we ordinarily see.***

Many of them, including Augustine of Hippo, Hildegard of Bingen, and Joseph Smith, have reported seeing and/or traversing a “conduit” or “tunnel” to a realm of light and love where they met a being of light (Christ). ...Examining Christian faith in terms of the scientific properties of light provides answers to many of the deepest mysteries of God.



You know that there are sounds that we cannot hear without special equipment. Just because we can't perceive them doesn't mean they aren't real. In the same way, there are forms of light that the unaided eye cannot see, such as infrared and ultraviolet.

And there are some kinds of light that exist in the realm of the Spirit that science cannot verify. They ALL exist just the same, and mystics intuitively know that. The light that is Christ, that is God, that is all of us is real, even when we can't see it.

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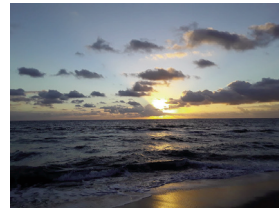
Perhaps insights from prominent scientists can give us new ways to understand our first reading and our gospel today: ***“Share your bread with the hungry. Shelter the oppressed and the homeless. Clothe the naked when you see them, and do not turn your back on your own. Then your light shall break forth like the dawn.”***

Isaiah was on to something. He affirmed that there is light within you: YOUR light, in every atom of your body, and it can “break forth.” “Light shall rise for you in the darkness,” the prophet says, when you lovingly serve the poor. Isaiah, of course, knew nothing of atoms and molecules, but because of what we now know, we can see that living justly, loving deeply, has a Divine power and an energy that does actually light up our world – in a way that is both literal and figurative, even when we can’t see it.

And Matthew’s Jesus teaches that, like that light on a lampstand that demolishes the darkness, “your light must shine before others, so that they may see goodness in your acts...” Matthew, who was no scientist, knew that each of us has light within, a divine gift. We have come to know that light as the most vital ingredient of the universe and that it can change the world, even when we can’t see it. “All living creatures,” said the mystic Hildegard of Bingen, “are sparks from the radiation of God’s brilliance, emerging from God like the rays of the sun.” This from a woman who also predated our knowledge of atoms. But I believe her faith transcended her scientific limitations, and she learned that light can shine before others in ways that are more than symbolic, ways that are real and even revolutionary, even when we can’t see it.

But what about what we CAN see? What a blessing it was for me to see even a little of the sun this past week! I live in a Great Lakes state, where every winter is full of overcast days, making the sun’s limited daily appearance in the southern sky that much more ineffective. It gets downright gloomy, so light is also truly a seasonal preoccupation. I’m grateful for that light, because in it, I find God. God IS light.

“God’s brilliance,” as Hildegard called it, can warm and heal. It can stimulate the production of vitamin D and make photosynthesis happen. It can treat our seasonal affective disorder. It can lift our spirits. It can make my husband giddy with delight as he makes plans for his garden. It can replace our dirty fuels and give us all the power we need. It can motivate us to do environmental justice. A story says that a light once went on in the head of a fossil fuels executive, when he observed that if God had wanted us to stop extracting energy from oil, God would have put a huge nuclear reactor in the sky. Oh, wait a minute... God DID do that! So, for the light we can see and for that which we can’t, for the light that expands the mind, we give thanks.



Is it possible that my brother Tommy could actually perceive the radiance of the atoms and molecules of our mother, when he sang that prophetic message: “You are my sunshine?” Could it be that her love was shining a literal light on him, and he could see it? There are those who say they can actually see a person’s aura, a kind of light energy that surrounds us – the halo that is commonly in images of the saints.

Did he see an aura around our mother? Regardless of what he saw, he let his light shine as well, because he gave her a sweet memory that she would treasure forever, especially when she would miss him most.

Maybe in those special moments when we are most mindful, most spiritually aware, most fully alive and self-actualized, when we “glow” with joy and peace – maybe those are the times that we are emanating a kind of divine light that physically can’t be seen – a light that is more than a metaphor and as real as the sun. Jesus urges us to not hide that light, but to let it “shine before others.” For the sake of our world, may we comply.