

## **Tend This Flame by Rev. Christopher Watkins Lamb**

Delivered at UUFP on April 9th, 2021

In the fall of 2018 I was struggling. I felt unsure of my life's direction, devoid of inspiration, and stuck in a painful place. I remember taking a walk around the unfamiliar neighborhood in which my host family's house was located. Some kind members of the congregation in which I had my internship offered to host me a few nights a week so I did not have to make a long commute to work so often. I took a walk around the neighborhood, looking for some kind of sense of where I was heading on my life's path. Then, I realized I was lost. Now I was not only metaphorically, but truly physically unsure of my place in the world! And it was starting to get dark. Then I heard it, the call from above me. Hoo-hoo-hoo! It was the call of a great-horned owl perched in a tree nearby. I stood there, awestruck, listening to the owl, then watching as the owl alighted and soared gloriously above my head. After a few moments of wonder I struck out along a golf course path in the direction that I suspected might be my temporary home.

It was then I noticed a flash of rusty red among the small hills of the rolling green. Was that a - yes it was! Two, no three little foxes were playing and exploring the territory. I discretely watched them from a distance, delighting in their presence and totally in the moment, grateful to be a part of their world. When they finally wandered off further than I could follow, I came back to my body and found myself transformed.

Now perhaps you can relate to my feeling of elation and awe, or maybe you're wondering just what happened out there on the golf course. For me, owl and fox have long been animal guides, particular presences that I have cultivated relationships with and looked to for support. And so, seeing them both on one evening stroll sent me a clear message: I am on the right path, and though I cannot see what comes next, I must remain open. Although everything did not feel resolved in my heart, I felt I could relax and trust the path that was unfolding before me.

Not long after this incident, a song came to me. It came one evening, nearly all at once and fully formed, as songs sometimes do. And because I'm going to spend some time today talking about a few lines of this song and what they may mean, I need to clarify for you how I understand the nature of creative inspiration. I see the songs that come to me as independent entities, existing outside myself. Sometimes, when my inner radio dial is tuned to the right frequency, I pick up a transmission. The song is mine not because I created it from within my own mind, but simply because I put in the labor to bring it into the material world.

In this way, I do not have the final word on the meaning of a song I write. It is fully possible to bring a song into being without understanding it at all. I only know what I experienced when it came to me and how I have experienced it since. Can you relate to this? For those of you with children, you know how much effort we put into growing and raising these little beings and yet we cannot fully know them and we certainly do not control them. They have lives of their own.

I was born to tend this flame / Ancestors danced and sang / what seeds now must I sow? / Oh, my love it's time to know

The melody of this song is significant to me, the way it dances and reminds me of old-time American and Irish fiddle tunes. It's reminiscent of a style of music that lives in my bones, a part of my ancestry and an ongoing source of inspiration. And although all the verses of this song are of value, I want to talk today only about the first verse, for in some ways I think it contains everything.

The song starts with the line, "**I was born to tend this flame.**" Right away the protagonist makes a claim, that indeed they were born with purpose, that they are here, in this moment, with a job to do. Does this feel true to you? Do you believe you have a purposeful existence? Were you born into this purpose?

For Unitarian Universalists, our first principle affirms the inherent worth and dignity of all people, and our 7th principle affirms our relatedness, our connection to all things. I would argue that these two truths, our worth and our relatedness, necessarily suggest purpose. Simply by being in community, the spark of meaning is created. We are here with each other, and perhaps for each other.

The line goes further, claiming that I, you, all of us, were born for something, and that something involves tending. This suggests a through line, a connection that existed before we were born and will continue after we are gone. Perhaps this life is in some ways a relay race, taking the torch for a while and then passing it on to others. Simply by proclaiming "I was born to tend this flame," we are saying something about our relatedness to those who tended that very flame before us and those who will tend this flame after we are gone.

I think about Russel Means, a Lakota elder and activist who was instrumental in the American Indian Movement. He wrote "our ancestors are our constant witness and companion. They know everything. They are part of us, as we are part of them. In this way, an American Indian is never a solitary or lonely individual. Existential angst is unknown. We know who we are and we are never alone. We are part of something greater than ourselves."<sup>1</sup>

If you're listening to this, I'm guessing you have at times felt completely alone. I'm guessing you have wondered who you are and what all this is for. And although Means is talking about the Lakota people in his book, I believe that all of us come from cultures and peoples that at one point in this past, held a similar concept of relatedness across time. What would it be like to have constant witnesses and companions?

That brings me to the second line of the song "**ancestors danced and sang.**" I invite you to entertain the notion that when you were born, your ancestors danced and sang, celebrating your entrance into the world. How does that feel? Perhaps it seems absurd, or perhaps you feel it is

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<sup>1</sup> If You've Forgotten The Names of the Clouds, You've Lost Your Way by Russel Means.

deeply true. However it lands, I invite you to notice your reaction in your body. Your ancestors danced and sang.

The second line of Tend This Flame invites us to consider that the past is not gone at all, but in fact is right here with us, even partnering with us in this life. We have inherited both burdens and blessings from those who came before, and patterns established long ago continue to play themselves out moment-to-moment in our lives. When it comes to trauma and cycles of harm, we of course want to seek to heal and transform the hurt. Yet I do not think it is helpful nor possible to seek to free ourselves from the past entirely.

Seeking to cut all ties only leaves us unmoored and in denial about the ways in which the past is still with us. Perhaps instead we can seek the companionship of those allies who celebrate our existence. For me, I see this as a reciprocal relationship. In every moment, I imagine that my ancestors are singing me into being, helping me to be incarnate on the earth. Whether you take this literally or metaphorically, it puts some weight to this life, a sense of healthy responsibility. I was born and nurtured into life based on the efforts of others, gifted a chance to be here, now.

How do I respond to this sense of giftedness? In my best moments, when I am in touch with gratitude, I want to feed and nurture the life within me and around me. As my ancestors dance and sing for me, I dance and sing for them, and for all my relations. This cycle of reciprocity allows life to flourish.

The next line of the song is a question: **“what seeds now must I sow?”**

This question is so basic, yet deeply crucial. If indeed we are all here for a purpose, partnering with a helpful cloud of witnesses and active supporters, what, then, do we work towards? While the specifics are unique to each of us, I wonder if all our work can be summed up in two words: culture building.

You may wonder what I mean by culture building. Let me start with the wisdom of author, activist and therapist Resmaa Menakem. In his book, *My Grandmother’s Hands*, he writes: “Trauma decontextualized in a person looks like personality. Trauma decontextualized in a family looks like family traits. Trauma in a people looks like culture.” Resmaa teaches that the only way to change systemic cruelty, for example, a culture that perpetuates violence against black and brown bodies, is to build a different culture.

We must do the work of culture creation if we have a prayer of not passing on the same pain patterns to future generations. We desperately need cultures that can hold and metabolize difficult emotions and traumatic experiences.

Here is the question that I believe is driving Tend This Flame: *how do we do the work of culture building and create the communal resilience necessary for life to thrive?*

We are in a global crisis on so many levels, and so how we answer this question is of no small significance. Resmaa Menakem reminds us that we do not need to answer this with strategies and plans. In fact, that level of thinking will not bring us any closer to a solution. The work of culture building starts in our bodies, and grows when we come together and interact with intention and awareness.

So, then how do we know what to do? This brings us to the last line of the verse: **Oh, my love, it's time to know.**" The best time to know is right here, right now. And the best time to know gives us a clue as to *how* we know. We know by showing up and being present to this moment.

We are entering into an emerging future, and the plans and strategies of the past are not sufficient if we are to create a world where all life can thrive. So when we hear the line "Oh my love, it's time to know" it's important to explore what type of knowing we are talking about. We have all been faced with situations in the past couple of years, I would suspect, that our previous experience did not prepare us for. How are we to know what to do in these spaces? These spaces in which we have no map to guide us?

We must access a kind of knowing that lives in the body. And for our bodies, who have no concept of past or future, right now is the only time. So when we practice being present, we can begin to let our bodies inform our actions. It's a slow process, for most of us to get in touch with our bodies with the kind of awareness and subtlety this work requires of us. Even a simple practice like trying on a truth by speaking it aloud as if it were true and noticing how true it *feels* in my body has taken me years to cultivate.

What practices do we need so that we can stay in our integrity and maintain connection with others when something new arises, when we are startled or challenged, when we are fearful, when we're confused, so that we can say, ok, in this moment, I don't know the next right step. But, I know how to settle and I know how to listen and I'm willing to stay with this until the next right thing emerges. I'm willing to let truth unfold.

When we are able to settle in our bodies, to access a sufficient sense of safety to move away from reactivity, we begin to get in touch with our own purpose. We are able to remember, or to discover, who we are and live into who we are called to be. I believe that if we get together and practice, it is possible to build a new culture. And for Resmaa Menakem, he says the work of healing racialized trauma will take at least 400 years. The other traumas woven into our societal frameworks aren't likely to move much faster. So don't expect to solve it all tomorrow.

Yet, it's time to get a move on. Take a stroll through unfamiliar territory, asking for a sign. To what have we promised ourselves?

I return to the words of Rev. Theresa Soto:

*Some people are used to keeping rules; don't cross the street when the light is red, only sensible. It turns*

*out that keeping rules isn't the same as keeping covenant, which asks us, instead of keeping a bright line, to keep our promises.*

*To what have we promised ourselves? To this moment in time and place. To this community and even, tenderly interconnected, this planet.*

*We promise ourselves to the idea that we are each and all human beings. We promise that there is something moving between us that we cannot tame and cannot measure. The chalice is a reminder that what flame we keep inside us cannot light the way.*

*The light must spill to shine.*

*The thing you must be is yourself. Unadulterated, shedding the willingness to journey alone, as though you are made of something hard and unforgivable. You are human. You belong, right here, right now. And together, we will chase away the sickness, the secrets, and leave only the open Possibility that the future is a space for growth.*

The working of building culture and creating communal resilience starts right here. It starts with recognizing the spark of life that you were born to tend. That flame grows as you perceive that you are never truly alone, but part of a larger family, connected across time. As we show up together to chase away the sickness and the secrets, we trust that we have what we need inside of us.

In January of 2020 I recorded *Tend This Flame* in a professional studio with my band. We recorded not just the one song but a whole concept album of that title. I felt strongly that the message and the music needed to be expressed, to uplift and encourage all who will listen to spill their own light. And then, of course, a pandemic hit and the album release was lost in the cacophony. That's the way of the world sometimes. The impact of that effort may not show itself for years to come. As Jewish tradition teaches us, "It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it." Tending to your piece, your patch of earth, your flame, is enough.

And so here we are friends. The time is now, the knowing is with you, the flame inside you. Let's sow new seeds together.