



## “Fire on Fire: An Evolutionary Pentecost”

And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent, rushing wind...  
and there appeared to them tongues as of fire.” (Acts 2.2-3)

My sense of Pentecost as a young Presbyterian from a rather staid congregation was of a supernatural event in biblical times where the early disciples began speaking in tongues as a sign of the descent of the Holy Spirit. I never gave the story much more thought, since I assumed such things no longer occurred and were therefore pretty much irrelevant to my daily life.

My husband Mark, on the other hand, attended a Pentecostal church until he was twelve years old. He witnessed a charismatic phenomenon called “speaking in tongues,” or *glossolalia*, whereby certain members of the congregation lifted their arms and burst out in incomprehensible babble, sometimes disrupting the proceedings of the service. In these Pentecostal circles, a person had not truly “received the Holy Spirit” if he had not received the “gift of tongues.” But it seemed contrived: when pressured by summer camp counselors at the age of twelve, Mark found he could make the same strange utterances as the adults in church. Were they genuine or was he making them up? When he later switched to a Baptist church, the pastor told him to “test the spirits,” since what Pentecostals called the gift of tongues sometimes might be in fact an unwanted visitation from the Devil.

We cannot know exactly what occurred at Jerusalem to the early disciples, but it must have been a stupendous event, since it launched the Jesus movement and Christianity itself, a religion that has lasted over 2000 years. Today I would like to recast the story of Pentecost as a living parable for an evolutionary emergence of spirit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Let’s ask ourselves what this story might mean to spiritual seekers in our contemporary world.

According to the account in Acts, when tongues of fire fell on the crowd of apostles and followers of Jesus in Jerusalem, each person found him or herself speaking in another language. Those standing about from various cultures of the east and Middle East to Rome heard each person talk articulately in the native language of the hearer.

To understand the symbolic significance of this event, we need first to realize that the Christian Pentecost emerged out of the Jewish *Hag Shabu’ot* (Shavout) or the “feast of weeks.” This celebration, set fifty days after Passover (the Greek word “Pentecost,” meaning “fifty days”) was observed at the time of Jesus and long before by Israel to celebrate a renewal

of the covenant of the Law given to Moses on Mount Sinai fifty days after the first Passover in Egypt. It was also linked to an older agricultural festival where worshippers donated to God the first fruits of the harvest. Interestingly, Pentecost and Shabu'ot are associated in both traditions with earth wisdom permeating a community through mediation by a spiritual leader. For Judaism, this spiritual leader was Moses, but for the early church it was Jesus, their new Moses. In other words, developing Christianity transformed the Jewish Shabu'ot into Pentecost as Christians know it, a revelation of the Holy Spirit to the early church.

In mystical Judaism fire signifies the spiritual realms of God, the nameless and unnamable Holy One of Israel, and the transforming power of the divine word. The seraphim are angelic beings of divine fire. When the prophet Isaiah is lifted up in a vision to God's throne, an angel places a burning coal on his tongue which purifies his speech and enables him to prophesy. In many spiritual traditions fire represents the eternal consciousness which burns up our small egotisms and transforms them into the holy.

Notice too that in Acts Luke cites the ancient Hebrew prophet Joel about the spirit of God descending, not on priests or officials in an ecclesiastical hierarchy, but through unexpected channels: children, women, the very young, very old, and even slaves. The early Christians associated Pentecost with the ecstatic

and eschatological, or things having to do with the "end times" or end of a cycle. It is linked to the coming of mystical awareness on ordinary folk and with ultimate disclosures of a universal spirit poured out for all. Biblical scholar John Shelby Spong speaks of how the primary sign of Pentecost is that "all human barriers...fall in the power of the divine spirit."<sup>1</sup>

In Christian liturgies, the Pentecost story has been linked to the amazing First Testament vision of the raising of piles of seemingly ossified skeletons in Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones. For me as a child, the parable of the enlivened bones was a rather creepy spiritual about skeletons dancing around that went: "The hip bone's connected to the thigh bone, / the thigh bone's connected to the knee bone, / the knee bone's connected to the ankle bone, / Now hear the word of the Lord." This was indeed a puzzling lesson in anatomy. Later I came to see the vision as a symbol for spiritual regeneration—death out of life, the endless mystery. The early Christian movement believed that just as God promised that the nation of Israel would arise and regenerate, so God was creating a new thing through Jesus and his followers. The death of their master would not destroy them, but they too would rise up in a phoenix of a movement.

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<sup>1</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*. NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992, 183.

The early Christian Pentecost event was seen as the unifying mystical experience of proto-Christianity, the communities that eventually emerged to become the established church. It was an event in the collective psyche of the new Christian movement that revealed the wisdom manifested through Jesus as universal rather than merely tribal, since it spoke one universal truth in various languages. The transformation happened not just to individuals in their homes in private moments but was a collective visionary experience. We have to remind ourselves that at that time the event was supposed to have occurred, the institutional Christian church did not exist, so the event is about a small community of Jewish Christians in Jerusalem who were experiencing the universality of the teachings of their Lord and offering them to the world.

According to the story, not everyone witnessing the event agreed that this was a revelation of spirit. Some thought the early morning revelers were quite tipsy. The little quip from Peter about how these people must be intoxicated at nine am on Spirit, not “liquid spirits,” reminds me of the mystical symbolism of drunkenness in the poetry of Rumi where the lover becomes drunk on the wine of Allah, the Beloved. From the author of the Song of Songs, to Rumi, to Leonard Cohen, wine and drunkenness symbolize divine intoxication. It is important to recognize that the early Christian movement was mostly about being madly in love with the divine rather than embracing abstract theology. The

early Christians were mystics on fire because of their direct experience. After centuries of theological doctrine and dispute, we tend to forget that Christianity is at base a mystical religion.

The question put before us today by these Jewish and Christian stories is this: Can the old bones of our various spiritual traditions undergo spiritual renewal and transformation? The answer that comes is: only if they move to new paradigms, to what our minister Bruce Sanguin has been calling an “evolutionary” perspective and way of being. Therefore, I would like to propose that we gather up old and new to celebrate today an evolutionary Pentecost, a Pentecost with much wider implications than the old, one that includes not only other religions, but the earth, other species, the entire planetary community.

So what would an evolutionary Pentecost look like? An evolutionary Pentecost would have to be an integral mysticism of ecstasy and joy. The event of Pentecost in Acts too is essentially a symbol of unity in diversity and diversity in unity, a mystical union where separate tongues and articulations of the divine don't separate people but are understood to proceed from a common source. Reading the story in this way is rather different than interpreting it as the coming of the Holy Spirit exclusively to the Christian church. Whatever the politics of the day in which the story was framed, the time is past for proclaiming Christianity's superiority over other faiths. The time has come

to place it among the various spiritual revelations of the planet, to see how it is unique and what it looks like in relation to all the other stupendous revelations of spirit.

Can a new Pentecostal awareness permeate the old structures and birth a transforming vision? Can these dead bones rise? I believe they can, but individually and collectively we will have to shed exclusivist and tribal thinking. What will arise is not the Church as we have known it. The answer is yes if we let go of attachment to dogmas, creeds, and insistence on beliefs about Jesus. The answer is yes if we embody in our lives the universal cosmic Christ while honouring the revelations of other spiritual traditions. Doing so doesn't involve a watering down or loss of the uniqueness of the revelation that poured through Jesus of Nazareth or reducing spirituality to a naïve syncretism, but a going forward into the new. In a new Pentecost, there are many tongues, many ways of expressing God or the One, but all are grounded in ultimate reality. Such a multi-dimensional unity is not really that hard to imagine, since any of us who enjoys eating "fusion cuisine" in this city understands fully that there can be a coming together of foods that only enriches the flavour of each.

At this point I'd like to briefly name some qualities of an evolutionary Pentecostal awareness: it is inter-spiritual, tolerant, inclusive, and non-dual. The Christ energy is a global power and presence of burning, leaping, dancing incarnate love. It is intensely aware of our interconnection

as beings on a fragile and beautiful planet. It is a universal feast of fiery love flaming for all, a celebration of creativity that doesn't deny the uniqueness of each path but cherishes each one as a jewel in a single crown of light.

A new Pentecostal community would face the fear that opening to difference will entail losing something precious. In fact, what is lost is often merely ideological rather than the essence of spirituality—mutual love. Rather than merely agreeing to disagree, we need to focus on agreeing to agree on what we experience of the divine directly and letting dogmas "take their place with grace." Rather than talking about the Buddha versus Christ, we need, like Vietnamese monk and poet Thich Nhat Hanh, to bring together "Living Buddha and Living Christ." In Yann Martel's 2002 novel *The Life of Pi*, the protagonist Pi relates how in his youth he embraced simultaneously Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. When confronted with the apparent contradiction of his practice, he states, "I just want to love God".

Another example of inter-spirituality occurred at a talk when Buddhist Thich Nhat Hahn was challenged by someone in the audience. If we welcomed all religions wouldn't we be left with nothing but a "big fruit salad"? He paused a minute, smiled, and laughed, "What's wrong with fruit salad?" Since I am a poet and believe Pentecostal fires are fires of creativity, I'd like to share with you a couple of poems I wrote when I began moving in a "new Pentecostal"

direction. I remain deeply grounded in my Christian faith and practice, but I have worshipped with Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, Sufis, and Buddhists over the years and all these experiences have only deepened my love of the cosmic Christ. This poem “Besotted with Jesus” was inspired by Thich Nhat Hanh’s story:

### **Besotted with Jesus**

Still besotted with Jesus after all these years despite the unfashionableness of such love unconscionable history of the Church, sad path of pillage, persecution, crusade racism, war and rumours of war.

Despite heart horrors held in continuance some record and reverberation extends shimmering to the enemy (ourselves).

What a Mediterranean peasant began remains untried except in the shock and awe of saints those human frailties, marginal men and women

(Francis, Teresa, Gandhi, Mandela, Weil) stunning the warrior Hate (healers, transformers).

Call me Christian Jew Buddhist Hindu Sufi (whatever you like) big fruit salad of the Spirit every flavour savoured drenched in a common juice culled in unnamable mind (Krishna Waka Tanka Gaia Dionysius Sophia)

Peerless Peer all and none of the above but first and foremost besotted with Jesus.

Years before, when I was in my twenties, my spiritual mentor, Olga Park, a Christian mystic living in Port Moody along the Burrard Inlet, shared a vision where Christ, Mohammed, Buddha, an aboriginal shaman, and other spiritual masters were all seated on a hill having a picnic, discussing spiritual matters but not fighting over anything. This short poem I wrote about Olga’s experience emerged years later:

Just the Other Night I saw Jesus, Buddha, and Mohammed on a tufted slope overlooking a city which could have been Jerusalem but was not, sharing a coffee in brown stoneware mugs they had ground from earth’s sweet coffers.

And none of them was preaching or arguing with the other about anything because they were tracking the course of a small black ant struggling to attain a crest of its choosing.

How to help without interfering was all their talk, and admiration of the rich soil which cupped them all like unbroken shards against a sea-dropped sky.<sup>2</sup>

It isn’t that we can’t argue or disagree on spiritual matters, but that we need to acknowledge a place of wisdom where disagreements stand stunned before the direct experience of the holy. Our traditions have to be sufficient containments to preserve the

<sup>2</sup> McCaslin, Susan. *Veil/Unveil*. Toronto: The St. Thomas Poetry Series, 1997, 14.

best of the past but sufficiently open to allow the creative spirit in once again. May the Spirit gather up all the differences in our language and terminology, and infuse us with an expanded, shared understanding. May we on this Pentecost Sunday move from the flames of indifference, hatred

and fear into the transfiguring fires of love that as the poet Dante sung, "burn without singing a single hair." This would be a new Pentecost based not merely on tongues but on an expanding consciousness bringing peace and reconciliation. May it be so...