

Medieval Lighthouses

The Last Word

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In the Stygian darkness of the clouded, moonless night, the early hominid and his shivering family huddle together in the cave. The air, pleasantly warm in the day, has gained a chilling edge. The warmth of their bodies is their only comfort as, in their smothering blindness, they try to sleep, fearful of the monsters and spirits that prowl the void. Theirs is to be a short, hungry life of survival in a world they can never understand. Their days are filled by the search for food and shelter. Their nights are interminable baths in the blackest ink, awash with dread.

It will be a thousand lifetimes before they find fire - that mysterious saviour that enables so much more in their lives. At first it is the fire of surprise, from a natural event like a lightning strike, or a bush fire when molten lava comes close. They learn to revere fire, but they cannot create it; and when, for those precious times that they borrow it from nature, it seems uncontrollable. But fire is good. Fire is God-given. On those rare occasions when they find fire, they try to keep it alive, but when it dies the darkness returns and brings back blindness and fear.

Thousands of millennia pass.

One day, he discovers that two rocks struck together make a spark. And if there is some dry material nearby it might initiate fire. It is a miracle. The rocks are special: he doesn't know their names - flint and pyrites. Found only in special places. He has no science. He will never know that fire is a trilogy: Fuel, air, spark. Fuel to burn, an oxygen atmosphere of at least 15% (air has 21%) and a spark of heat. This is magic. This is good.

To his search for food and shelter, he now adds the hunt for the driest, most combustible materials (tinder). With no spark there's no fire. So this magic sets his descendants on a different path to the future. With fire available at will, the world is a different place. Food can be cooked instead of eaten raw. That will keep him and his family alive longer, and they will enjoy the warmth and companionship of others as they sit in darkness by the fire. But it is the effect of fire on his soul that he does not recognize; alleviating darkness, giving warmth and comfort. And protection from evil.

Control of fire has so many uses. Fire is everything when you have nothing. But there is something much deeper about fire.

The world's religions and cultures all embrace fire. In Greece, Hestia is the goddess of the hearth and Prometheus the bringer of fire. In the Hindu religion Agni, god of fire, is central to Vedic rituals. In Zoroastrianism, fire is a symbol of truth and purity. And in the Roman world the Vestal Virgins tend the eternal flame of Vesta. Fire, the life-giver. Fire the language of the gods.

Are we surprised that this part of the human story has planted something deep in our subconscious minds? The ability to create light is positive, something good. Darkness is negative, something bad. Metaphors abound for right and wrong, good and evil, positive and negative - even knowledge and ignorance. And with all these associations the lighthouse stands out from almost everything else embedded in the motifs of associations and social cultures.

The use of matches to make fire has been with us for only two hundred years. Before then the making of fire was one of life's essentials. The tinder box. Fuel, air, spark. Throughout history.

But so much more than that: the ability to make light. In the first four verses of the Bible, God creates heaven, earth, water and light. And the contrast between the associations of light and darkness are the same in Islam as in Christianity. And in Buddhism too light represents wisdom, dark represents ignorance. Wherever we make light, we are being positive, fighting the evils of darkness. For the same reasons, light is life and darkness is death, and so when humans enter dark spheres they have always sought light for guidance. These are the true origins of the lighthouse. In a sense, the principle of the lighthouse was born when that early ancestor discovered fire and how it gave light. Since that time it has been about opportunity, and those opportunities have been limited by the availability of resources. The structures were irrelevant. It has all been about light.

And, until the arrival of electricity, the light was fire. This has been a book about fire.