

The Streetlight, the Searchlight, and the Lighthouse: Three Ways to Shine Our Light

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Opening Words: The Parable of the Lost Keys and the Street Light

Tell us, Master, the disciples asked, How shall we find Truth. And he told them this tale:

A certain traveler, a Samaritan, went forth one night and came upon a man, his head bent to the ground, who walked downcast in circles beneath a streetlight.

Hello, said the traveler, why do you walk in such a way?

Well, said the man, I have lost my car keys and cannot find them. Everyone has passed me by, but nobody will stop to help me.

My brother, said the traveler, I shall help you. And this he did do. He bent his head and looked. He poked into the gutter. But naught availed.

Truly, he said, this is a puzzle. We both looked and did not find the keys. Are you certain that this is where you dropped your keys?

The man arose and pointed to the far end of the block. Down there, he said, down there is where I dropped my keys. That is where I lost them.

And the traveler flew into a rage. Down there! Then why are we looking here?

And the man explained and he said, Because there it is dark. Here is where the light is.

The Streetlight, the Searchlight, and the Lighthouse: Ways to Shine Our Light

There are three important elements in this morning's "reading" about the keys. First, the guy knew he was missing something and *was looking for it*.

Second, there was a disjuncture between what he needed to find and the resource he was bringing to bear. He used what light he had but he was using the wrong tool – a streetlight. If he had a flashlight, he would have likely found his keys.

Finally, he was in the wrong place. Even without adequate light, he would have had a better chance of finding his keys if he looked where he dropped them! Even a powerful light in the wrong place won't do you any good. So it's important to be in the right place for your quest.

As I'm sure you already know, what I've just said is not a prelude to an impassioned plea for more streetlights. What I have to say is part of a larger religious and philosophic exploration that asks fundamental questions: What is true and how do we know? What

¹ The reader is reminded that this is the written text of an oral address and remains in that style. While the speaker's presentation marks have been redacted, there has been no attempt to edit it into an essay.

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tools do we have to illuminate our quest? How do we move forward confidently but not arrogantly?

This is a particularly important question to us, and the light metaphor is particularly important, because we are people who view our world as knowable if we make the effort. As Davidson Loehr, minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Austin, Texas, wrote

Everything we need is always before us. It takes only the eyes to see and ears to hear it. We gather to practice learning to see and hear with those eyes and ears.²

I like that image. Having "eyes to see and ears to hear" is more complex than it seems, but if "we gather to practice learning to see and hear," as I hope we are doing this morning, we will get better at it.

Religion is a source of light that helps us look at our world and to find answers to our questions. How do I lead an ethical life? How do I bring up my children? What are the demands of justice and mercy? What beliefs resonate with my intellectual quest? What is life all about? Is there something after this life? What is the good life? What does it all mean? What are my obligations to the poor, to ending injustice? These are big questions, which call for careful exploration.

We need to use all our tools to find the answers we need, and we need to use these tools correctly.

In a nutshell, this is what I want to say today: there are many ways to seek insight and guidance on life. Using the metaphor of the streetlight and the searchlight, I'll talk about these ways. They all have advantages and limitations, including the limitations of our own perception and sometimes our cluelessness about what we are looking for. Despite these limitations, we are inevitably lighthouses.

The Streetlight

I first heard the looking-for-keys-under-the-streetlight joke from a friend and colleague who was a physicist. He liked it as an example of how science worked. Much of the investigations of our world is done by just such methods, whether we are involved in the physical sciences, the social sciences, or even philosophy and religion. We use whatever light we have that is close to the problem we wish to illustrate.

Here is an example from my old day job in health policy. I read a study called "The Landscape of Health Disparities Among Older Adults." The study's authors noted that data on the health of Hispanics, Asian Americans, and Native Americans were "sparse at best." We have the most data on African American and white populations, but even these data have problems. The authors warned us of these limitations, and then plunged ahead anyway. Otherwise, we would shed no light, rather than an imperfect light, on an important topic. They used the nearest streetlight that they could find?³

A lot of inherited wisdom is streetlight wisdom. It reflects the labor and intellect of previous generations, and much of it is useful illumination. But sometimes, like the old oil lamps that used to be on street corners, the illumination is inadequate. Sometimes we know that, but need to use the light that we have.

² "What's the Good News?" Sermon before the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Austin, TX, May, 18, 2003

³ Keith W. Whitfield and mark Hayward, "The Landscape of Health Disparities Among Older Adults," *Public Policy & Aging Report*, vol. 13 No. 3 (Summer 2003), p 3.o

Streetlights represent a social commitment to lighten the dark. Congregations are like utilities. They are here for you. They might not be quite the light you're looking for, they might have been placed there to light a way that has become outmoded, but they're there to shed what light they can. We can respect the labors of those who installed those streetlights, even if we believe they cast a distorted, harmful light, even as we seek to replace the old and inadequate with lamps that create clearer vision.

The Searchlight

If the streetlight stands for static illumination, the explicitly named searchlight is another. Searchlights are good when we ask specific questions, as when we struggle with ethical issues. Our questioning, our struggles, our attempts to grapple with issues are our searchlights. I think the searchlight is an apt metaphor for religious exploration, because:

Where you aim the light determines what you see. The light only illuminates where you point it, and that sometimes only fleetingly. If the object is far away, it might not illuminate it very well. What I'm trying to say here is that what we know is what we can see and examine. In this sense, I'm advocating an empirical religion. I might have *faith* in things unseen, but faith is not knowledge. Someday, we might have more powerful searchlights, and be able to see farther. For example, think of the Hubbell Space Telescope as a kind of searchlight in space. I think that our knowledge of what is up there has only increased our sense of awe, reverence, and mystery for the universe.

Many lights are better than one, whether we are talking about institutions or individuals. If we think about the anti-aircraft searchlights of World War II, we know that batteries of lights placed some distance apart, work better than solitary lights or lights placed too close to each other. Reality is complex. No one perspective, no one searchlight can illuminate it all. I have faith in the power of my light, but I'm also aware that another searchlight, some distance away, might catch a glimpse of reality that I have missed from my location. I adhere to my own religion, but I acknowledge that no one religion, including my own, has perfect vision.

If no religious tradition, even one thousands of years old, can offer perfect vision, we can hardly expect, as individuals, to have perfect vision. What we see involves not only what is "there" but also what is "here" – in our own minds. As neurologist and essayist Oliver Sacks writes, "... we deceive ourselves if we imagine that we can ever be passive, impartial observers. Every perception, every scene, is shaped by us, whether we intend it, know it, or not."⁴

We can enlarge this generalization about individuals to include whole cultures. We filter through our individual sensory apparatus and, also, through the sensory apparatus of our culture, that is, of our time and place in the world. Consider, if you would, that at one time the finest minds of our civilization would shine their light on their world and see demons and witches, or see justification for racial inferiority and sexual discrimination and other things that we do not see nor believe are there.

Yet, sometimes the finest things we "see" are the products of our own minds. For example, we "see" or "discover" the concept of human worth. We invent and give life to abstractions that we then "see," such as justice and – more visibly – injustice.

Finally, and most profoundly, the searchlight illuminates what it shines on, but darkness remains where the light does not reach. Part of the job of religion (as for

⁴ Oliver Sacks, "In the River of Consciousness," *New York Review of Books*, vol. 51, no.1 (January 15, 2004).

science) is not only to explain the illuminated areas but also to imaginatively but reasonably think about what is in the dark places. This is not the same thing as knowing. This is hypothesizing. It is important to be able to say that we do not know, and perhaps cannot know, what is outside our lights.

This sense of not knowing is very important. From very early on, Felix Adler, the founder of Ethical Culture, grounded his philosophy on the idea of the supersensible – not the supernatural, but the supersensible: there are and always will be things that are beyond our ability to perceive with our senses. As he wrote toward the end of his life, "Unqualified admission of the incompetence of the human intellect to resolve the world riddle is the determining factor in the more profound humility which characterizes the religion of ethical experience."⁵

But if we can't know everything, we can know something, and that if we really look, we will learn more about our world. As the great physician and medical educator, Sir William Osler said, in the medical context; "We miss more by not seeing than we do by not knowing."⁶ But it gets tricky. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel cautioned, "What impairs our sight are habits of seeing as well as the mental concomitants of seeing. Our sight is suffused with knowing, instead of feeling painfully the lack of knowing what we see. *The principle to be kept in mind is to know what we see rather than to see what we know.*"⁷

It might be clear by now that I am not a believer in the overhead light view of religion. There's no single source up there that illuminates the whole thing – the whole thing being those questions we have about our existence and how we lead our lives. To return to today's "text," we don't have to stay under the streetlight because that's the only place we'll find what we're looking for. Instead, we can use the searchlight of our fallible intelligence to seek to answer these questions that now are hidden in the dark.

This suggests (and indeed, we proclaim) that we will grow in understanding, that new light will be shed on old beliefs, and that even our deeply held beliefs are to some degree contingent. We are willing to test and change, to hold ourselves to the light.

This further suggests that we can't just hang around waiting for the perfect vision or final wisdom in order to act. We need to take our religious insight, contingent though it might be, and show it to the world.

This leads me to the final metaphor: the lighthouse.

The Lighthouse:

The lighthouse sends a powerful beam of light out into the darkness. The purpose of the light is not to enable the lighthouse keeper to see others, but for others to see the lighthouse. Its light does not illuminate the "out there" but gives people out there a point of reference. Sometimes it warns them of danger, sometimes just-but a very important "just" – letting people know where they are. The job of the lighthouse is not to force ships to go this way or that way, but to let them see its light and be guided by it. It is the same for us:

⁵ Felix Adler, *An Ethical Philosophy of Life*. (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1918), p. 357.

⁶ "S.R. Roberts, "William Osler, Clinician-Teacher," in M.E. Abbott (ed) Sir William Osler Memorial Number. Bulletin No. IX of the International Association of Medical Museums and Journal of Technical Methods. Montreal; Privately Printed, 1926:423. Thanks to Lisa Sanders, M.D., for the source of the quotation.

⁷ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, (Jewish Publication Society of America), p. xv. Emphasis supplied.

We, as religious individuals, are lighthouses. We are lighthouses in an obvious way in our social action, and less obvious, but no less real, in our daily lives. You might not see yourself as a lighthouse, but your actions influence your family, friends, coworkers, and the entire community. Indeed, I think it is an article of our faith that we *can* influence the community.

We shine our light knowing that our view is incomplete (remember the dark spaces that our searchlights don't reach) and that our perception might not be accurate, or, for that matter, our behavior exemplary. To anthropomorphize, the lighthouse knows where it stands. To anthropomorphize further, the wise lighthouse knows the Spanish proverb that says, "At the foot of a lighthouse one finds darkness."⁸ We cast our light to the world, but we acknowledge the limitations of our knowledge. We stand with certitude, but can never have a demonstrable certainty.

Conclude

John Dewey pointed out that if we think about religion as a tool, we would pay as much attention to its design as to any other precision instrument.⁹ I've spent my time this morning talking about various sources of light as tools. I think it is a very useful metaphor for what we are trying to do.

All that remains now is to return to the story of the lost keys in the night. The poor guy in the story was in the wrong place, using the wrong tool (the streetlight), but *at least he knew what he was looking for*.

How many of us have found ourselves at some point in our lives feeling that we were in the wrong place, using the wrong tool, and not even knowing what we were looking for? In our search, we were drawn to this streetlight.

One of the things that any of us as individuals and as members of a community such as this might do as part of that search is to ask ourselves periodically, "What keys am I looking for?" We might discover that we've already found the "keys" that we were looking for when we came, but now, with added insight, or because we're at a different point in our lives, or because the times call for a new kind of witness, that we need to look for a different set of keys. Unlike the frustration of looking for actual lost keys, this metaphorical quest can be richly rewarding.

For me, and I hope for you, this is the right place. I think it is the right tool.

May your search be fruitful, and your witness a shining light. May this society be a prism to magnify and reflect your light, for the brightest light of all is the magnified blaze of our own separate lights. Let it shine. Let us shine together.



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⁸ H.L. Menken (ed), *A New Dictionary of Quotations on Historical Principles* (N.Y.: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946), p. 597

⁹ John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (1929). Cited in Steven Fesmire, *John Dewey & Moral Imagination* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003), p. 37.