

Fiddling While Rome Burns

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Did you know that the Arctic is on fire this summer? I didn't. Over 400 fires—wildfires—are burning above the Arctic Circle. Right now! 13 million acres of Arctic boreal forests are on fire. NASA is monitoring the plume of smoke by satellite. They've been burning since June. This is not a this-week news flash; all summer these fires have been burning and the plume of smoke now has a footprint that's bigger than the size of all of Europe, all the European Union countries combined.

When that smoke and ash eventually settles down again in the Arctic it'll settle down on what had been white snow and ice, now darkened by the smoke from these fires, and, of course catch more sunlight, and melt the ice and snow even faster. This June was the hottest June on record. Somebody posted a meme on Facebook that really got me. They said, "Don't think of this as the hottest summer of the last 125 years; think of it as the *coolest* summer of the *next* 125 years.

We know about the fires in the Amazon. Why? Because the French president made a big deal about it. I'm not even sure why, but probably for political reasons rather than environmental ones, and the shit-show that our political theater has become just crowds out all other important news from our awareness. News like, "The Arctic is on fire!"

This month, August, is the 414th consecutive month of above-average global temperatures. That's not random chance; you can't roll a die four hundred fourteen times and get a one every single time. And it's not just climate that suggests to me that our world is on fire. Fascism is on the rise; the nuclear arms race is back (but now we're targeting civilian satellites like the GPS system and communication systems), and nuclear weapons are going to be in space, according to the current plans. Don't get me started on extinctions. We now know that over a million species are on track to be extinct within a decade or two. Not long from now.

The world is on fire. This is not the first time this has happened. In the year 64 of the Common Era, as far as Western Europeans knew The Roman Empire was the entire world. On July 18th of the year 64, the capital of the Roman Empire caught fire. The capital of the world was on fire, and legend has it that the Emperor, the guy responsible for the entire world as far as Europeans knew it, is thought to have fiddled as the capital of the world burned.

When I was in tenth grade, we had a brand new principal in my high school. We all would discover in short order that he was quite inept at being a high school principal. One of the first things he did was something I regarded as extremely unjust. There were two twins that had just moved into the district, and he did something that that was unfair, at least to my 10th grade perspective. I no longer remember exactly what. So I did what any reasonable sophomore in high school would do and I wrote a two-page letter to the principal about how unjust it was and how he misapplied the values of the school.

I turned it in at the office with shaking hands, because I was so enraged about the injustice. The only way I knew that he had even read it is that the next time we passed in the hall, kind of over his shoulder he said, "Don't try to save the world, John. There are enough people doing that already." Now, be careful what you tell teenagers because some things will be remembered for their entire lives.

From that moment on I knew that I was going to be one of those "enough people already" trying to save the world, because it was clear to me before and since that there *aren't* enough people doing that.

It's Labor Day weekend. When you're trying to figure out what you want to do with your life as an adult, that's what labor is: what you're doing with your life, right? For the last 24 years what I have done during my working hours—school year, school day hours—is worked in education, doing my best to save the world by helping the next generation be the best people they can be, with the knowledge and the skills and, more importantly, the integrity and the values and the agency to go out into the world and make a difference, make things better.

In my free time for the past seven years, I have done my best to offer to the world that there are profound spiritual implications to be found from science, or, from the natural universe as science describes it. Starting in February I had a strange but very strong calling, a passion for becoming better at encapsulating difficult ideas and emotions in a very concise and direct way called poetry. I wanted to be a better poet. I still have a passion for being a really good poet, for working that craft and perfecting it.

Then, sometime in July I learned that the Arctic is on fire. I've known about climate change for quite a while. I've done a little bit of action and activism. I follow what Rachel and Michael are up to, sometimes show up to their events, not as often as I should (hold that thought) but something got triggered in me at this image of the Arctic on fire. We know about the rainforest, we know about slash-and-burn, but the Arctic on fire flipped something over for me, and I started to question: "What am I doing? What am I doing?! The world is on fire!"

This is an emergency; this is all hands on deck! When your house is on fire you don't hold committee meetings. You don't tell the kids, "Look, this is a fire." You grab a bucket, right? I started to think maybe everything I'm doing, even though it's aimed at making a difference in the world, maybe it's all basically fiddling while Rome burns. Maybe becoming a better poet is an indulgent pastime of a privileged white guy. Maybe even traveling around talking to people about the spirituality to be found from the natural universe is just self-indulgent. Maybe even working with children, thinking ahead 20 or 30 years, is not the best place to put my time and attention and energies, when *the world is on fire*.

Obviously I'm a little emotional about it, I think reasonably. Since you don't write poems when the world is on fire, I'm gonna read you a poem that I wrote. [laughter] You won't be laughing at the end, I don't think. This is called "Not a Poem."

This is not a poem—
desperate tropical families swarm north
hothouse survivors fleeing drought, famine
—it is a plea.

This is not a poem—
four hundred wildfires rage in Alaska and Siberia
bruising the skies of three continents
—it is a siren.

This is not a poem—
mountains of unspawned salmon die
belly up on balmy Yukon stream-banks
—this is a requiem.

This is not a poem—
flailing children's outstretched arms sink
below savage brown floodwaters
—it is a scream for mercy.

This is not a poem—
I fiddle with poetry, while Rome
quietly burns in my nice, comfortable furnace
—this is a confession.

I did warn you that you wouldn't be laughing at the end of that! Is it indulgent? Am

I wasting my time? Should I drop everything, quit my job and become a full-time activist? Rachel is nodding! It does seem like when your house is on fire, you should drop everything and do something, *something* that's related to putting out that fire. So this is my quandary. I've been wrestling with this for a couple months now, and I've noticed some things in my wrestling.

One thing I noticed is that I think congregations, especially Unitarian Universalist ones but maybe all progressive congregations, wrestle with a similar quandary. It's not quite the same but it's similar. I know this congregation has it but isn't wrestling with it. We have people in this congregation who very reasonably view church, the purpose of church, as being a place to come and be grounded and be inspired—be grounded and energized—just a break from all that crap out there. Once a week to get grounded and recharge so they can go out into the world and do that social justice and cultural work towards saving the world. A much-needed break. And then we also have people in this congregation who view the purpose of church as being a place to do that work together in community. They recognize that there's power in numbers, there's power in working in concert together, and they view the purpose of church as being the place to do that. There's tension in this congregation, from my perspective at least, between those two perspectives. It's not quite the same as my quandary about whether what I'm doing is indulgent while the world is on fire but it's similar; it's related in some way.

I notice that fire fighting is not a singular skill. When there's a fire to be put out we need some really strong and big people to carry that heavy hose from the tanker truck to where the fire is, and then to work in a team holding the nozzle of the hose still as the water gushes out, so it doesn't turn into some kind of dangerous snake. We need people who are fearless about climbing those teetering boom ladders up on top of the house, to spray water down. We need people who are good at putting on scuba gear and going inside a raging inferno looking for people or animals that might need to be rescued.

If it's a wildfire we actually need people who can fly airplanes, and people who can jump out of airplanes, people can read maps and figure out where the nearest lake is. We need people who can navigate, who can tell the pilots how to get to those lakes and we need people who can use radios to get the information to them. A great diversity of skills and talents and passions goes into fighting fires.

I also think, although I'm not sure about this, that there's a reason we're called to do things, even if they seem superfluous or indulgent. Forest Church, the famous Unitarian Universalist minister, now gone, wrote, "Don't try arguing with tears; they come from someplace deep, and they almost always matter." I think the

same idea applies to our passions and callings: “Don't try arguing with calls; they come from someplace deep; they almost always matter.”

So I have a passion for poetry. As indulgent as that may seem, I have to trust that in some way, somehow, it's something the world needs. I also know about complexity theory—also sometimes called chaos theory. You've heard about the butterfly effect. The idea is that complex systems like human history have so many different factors that they're highly sensitive to tiny changes, tiny perturbations in the status quo. The butterfly effect is called that because if the butterfly flaps its wings in New York it can actually affect the weather in Japan a month later. What that means is everything we do matters, but we can't really know *how* it matters.

So maybe I show up at the Almost Uptown Poetry Cartel, which meets at Midtown Scholar on Thursday evenings, and I read a poem—maybe about climate change—and somebody hears it and it gives them an idea, and they share that idea with their brother-in-law who happens to know somebody who writes songs in Nashville, and so on. The whole point here is that what you do has an effect, and that effect is almost completely unpredictable. Actually complexity theory says it's impossible to predict.

I was kvetching about something else on the Religious Naturalist listserv online, my colleague Jeremy Sherman (author of a great book about the beginning of life on this planet titled *Neither Ghost Nor Machine*) wrote back, “JD, I think there's a true Religious Naturalist spiritual practice to be found in fighting the good fight knowing that you may end up having wasted your whole life barking up a wrong tree. We're all trials in a trial and error process; we're all members of a search party, and even if we aren't the ones to find what we're searching for, we are still essential to the party.”

We're still essential to the party. I wish I had a pat, sterile answer to this quandary, to this question. This may seem like a cop-out, but I gotta tell you: I think the answer to the question is in the question; it's in struggling with the question. I've been struggling with it for two months now and I notice that because climate change is on my mind, it's also in everything else I do. It's showing up at school. It's showing up more and more in my work with science and spirituality, because it's a spiritual crisis too, and above all, I can't seem to write poetry about anything else. It's on my mind, and the struggle, the struggle with the question of what I should be doing—given that the world is on fire— informs and enriches everything else in my life. The answer to the question is to struggle with the question.

So how does that relate to congregations? I think this congregation has experienced some tension about the purpose of church, and I don't think we are struggling with that question openly as well as we could be. I don't think we're having the loud boisterous conversation that we could be around "what is the purpose of church?" Are we here to reflect and recharge and be inspired, or are we here to do social justice and cultural work as a group together?

I think if we struggle transparently and openly with that question, which we really probably should have done in the visioning process. We still have a missioning process coming up. By the way, I happened to be at the Congregational Life Team meeting this past Monday and I heard a very similar sentiment from them. We're all aware of that tension, but we haven't really been having it out like we could have been. So I dare you—I challenge you—during coffee hour today to have conversations with at least three people about the purpose of church.

You don't have to find an answer, that's my whole point this morning! Struggling with the question is enough because as we struggle with it together, openly and transparently (maybe loudly), bringing our unique resources and talents and passions to that question, both individually and as a group, maybe as the opportunity comes along we'll make better decisions than we would if we just ignored it, or if we pretended that it had been resolved already.

Nero could not possibly have been fiddling while Rome burned. The violin wasn't invented till a thousand years later. But you know, there's another meaning of the word fiddling, like "fiddling around," which is surely what they meant. The "they" here are three journalistic accounts that were Nero's contemporaries, and all three of them are compromised by their own political biases. Two of them hated Nero and one of them was a supporter of his. They all differ a little bit. They all talk about him fiddling but it's not clear exactly what that meant.

I want to point out that it was not Nero's job to pick up a bucket and fight the fire. His role— oh I forgot to mention when I was talking about fires: one of the roles that needs to happen is a commander, that somebody or somebodies who are strategizing about how to approach the fire. You also—and this is very important—you need some people to recognize that they don't have fire fighting skills and to get out of the way of the firefighters.

Anyway, Nero's job was to remain in the palace and get reports not only from the firefighters, but also from commanders and diplomats, people from all over the world as they knew it. He was doing his job by staying in the palace. But there is some good evidence to suggest that at some point he had a moment to just breathe and reflect, and realized that the fires he was witnessing outside the

palace windows were very similar to the destruction of Troy, which had happened previously. He may, during the week of those fires, have been reciting the poem Troica which you can read on the internet right now. It's a poem that has informed and enriched people for two millennia. Maybe he wasn't fiddling while Rome burned, but ironically—for me at least—he may have been writing poetry.

I'm gonna leave you with that very Unitarian sentiment about how we love questions more than we love answers. This is a prime case where “struggling with the question” has been the answer I was seeking. I plan to continue struggling and I encourage you to as well.

[note: when I wrote and delivered this sermon in 2019, a seemingly-reputable source led me to believe Nero wrote Troica. Revisiting this in 2022, I cannot find that source, and most other sources describe Troica as being Greek and predating Nero. I regret the error, and will correct it in future.]

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Parting Words/Benediction: