

Danville News Column  
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"Christmas Candles"  
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Christmas Eve, appropriately yoked at it is with the winter solstice, is the night when many of us appreciate light the most, even if we don't feel particularly filled, thrilled, instilled with the holly jolly Christmas spirit. Did somebody pour molasses over our souls? Please remind me the difference between dormant and dead. When was the last time you had a good, refreshing, cleansing belly laugh?

Christmas Eve, this longest day of dark, also is when we have the chance to discover the properties of light. Every church ought to have a house physicist. Our house physicist, a retired professor from Bloomsburg University, has taught me about a few aspects to the science of light.

We cannot touch light, he advised, unless it is concentrated into a beam, such as in a laser beam or when I would hold grandma's magnifying glass up to the sun. That which is untouchable, the incorporeal, indeed the spiritual, gets form. Not a miracle, but nature. Perhaps, then, given the season, we ought to include a thank you for the magnifying glass of Bethlehem (even if this Jesus burns at times).

Neither can we see light, but, rather, we see by the light source. The source, by the way is separate from us. By our retina, we (who can) absorb the light that comes from the source, whether the source be the Sun, candle, light-bulb, Son. Thus we gain the sensation of sight. We only are able to perceive others because the light reflected by the other (you) enters our eye and is absorbed. I like the explanation that we absorb your shine.

It comes as a certain relief to recognize that I am not the source. Good thing too because right now I'd be a lousy source, dim as I am. If I have any fire at all it is because of the sun. Science affirms it: the sun's energy is the source for all earthly light.

We are not the source, but we may be the reflector. A perfect reflector, a perfect mirror, will produce an image of the source with the same luminescence or brightness as the source. Of course, a perfect mirror is imaginary, un-natural.

So we natural, imperfect ones muster up the faith to do our best, however smudgy, rumped, dented, dull we all are. However inadequate we may be, the light still is reflected. I may lack magic but the source doesn't. This little light of not mine, I'm going to let it shine.

The source remains constant; we aren't. For, as I know too well, I flicker way too much.

I, mere candle, build up too much wax in my life and drown the flame.

Yet, as the physicists and theologians remind me, darkness cannot snuff out the light. Darkness lacks such capacity. But those whirling winds of hatred, negativity, callousness, they can gust and snuff out the flame. Our hurts, antagonisms, our teeth-clenched defensiveness can blow it out. Sometimes I'm uncertain if what I'm looking for is a vacation or escape, respite or retreat? So too those blustery fears of risking love, risking care, risking compassion, risking to forgive those who themselves cannot forgive. So too our refusing to step out of ourselves and see the world from their eyes, even when such can get too much. How ever did Jesus do it?

Or then the tears of sadness and loss rain upon the frail flickering flame leaving us all in the dark.

It can be difficult for modern us to grasp darkness, we who are surrounded by artificial light. So take away our street lights and bulbs and electricity. Return us to the times when the only artificial light in our homes may have been mere candle flicker, or, imagine deeper a small bowl of oil with one frail burning wick. A dimly burning wick. Sometimes when hungering for shadows, I will flick off the switch, ignite the candle, cherish the flame.

Only the absence of light keeps us in darkness. You cannot fight darkness with darkness no more than anger can counter anger, or hate remove hate, or disappointment dispell disappointment. I require the re-kindling that results when waxy me comes toward the source and leans toward the fire. I must come to it. I must bend.

Nor do I particularly like the reality that the price of being a candle is that I must melt. I must give up myself for this light to shine.

Funny thing about candles: they cannot ignite themselves.