

## **Fired Up!** **Honoring the Four Elements, Part IV**

by  
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Our ancient forbears correctly speculated that everything in the world, no matter how complex, is comprised of more basic elements. Because they were not aware of the periodic table, or the many elements we know of today, they spoke in terms of those basic elements they experienced for themselves—earth, air, water, and fire. In contemplating the nature of these elements they believed they could also ascertain the nature of the things they composed, including human nature. Some of their doctors literally translated them into four types of human beings—dry, moist, cold, and hot. It's also easy to relate air to thought, water to emotion, earth to sensation, and fire, because of the light it sheds on things, to intuition, which happen to be psychologist Carl Jung's four function of the human personality. The word "human," itself, comes from *humus*, meaning "earth." It is also the root of the words "humility" and "humor," indicating it is human nature to be grounded, humble, and humorous—earthy. Similarly, the words for *air* and *breath* in many traditions also mean "spirit." Breath is the Holy Spirit inspiring and animating our bodies. We also know our bodies are comprised mostly of water, about 70 percent, the same amount covering the surface of our planet. Remarkably, even our blood, sweat, and tears contain the same salt consistency as seawater.

Yes, without earth, air, and water, we could not live, but without the fourth element, fire, our lives would be empty and meaningless, cold and lonely. Fire is the fuel, the energy, the passion that drives all life. It represents that which gives us our will to live. If earth symbolizes our body, air our spirit, and water our feelings, then it is fire that symbolizes our heart. It symbolizes our innermost yearnings, our hunger pains, our longings, all that causes our heart to burn.

Fire, as light, has been with us since the beginning of the Cosmos, long long before there was ever an optic nerve or neural pathway necessary to perceive it. Then it served only its first and most important function, flooding the developing universe with the energy necessary to create and sustain life. The first fire-eaters were our bacterial ancestors, similar to blue-green algae, that were already accomplished in photosynthesis just half a billion years after the Earth's first rocks were formed. Like every living cell to this day, they used certain molecules to store energy, but the energy they so wisely learned to bank happens to be the cheapest and most abundant in our solar system, sunlight. Although life has since become far more complex, many of today's life forms still eat sunlight directly through the process of photosynthesis. But even those creatures that don't, rely upon the stored energy of those that do. Every calorie consumed, either from plants or meat, is a form of stored light. All of us, plants and animals, are light eaters, and depend upon the Sun to energize and sustain us. "When you eat and drink,

you experience enjoyment and pleasure from the food and drink,” the Kabbalah says, “‘What is this enjoyment and pleasure? What is it that I am tasting?’ Answer yourself, ‘This is nothing but the holy sparks from the sublime, holy worlds that are within the food and drink.’”<sup>1</sup>

When we are hungry, it is light that fills us, and when we are spiritually hungry for meaning in our lives, it is the fire of our passions that fulfill us. This is why religious language so often uses fire as a metaphor describing the Divine spark that invigorates us from within. Hildegard of Bingen wrote, “I, God, remain hidden in every kind of reality as a fiery power. Everything burns because of me.”<sup>2</sup> But like Moses’ burning bush, this divine fire burns, but does not consume. Again, as Hildegard, who described the Holy Spirit, as a “Burning Spirit,”<sup>3</sup> put it, “God says: I am the supreme fire; not deadly, but rather, enkindling every spark of life.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the 14th century English mystic, wanderer, and hermit, Richard Rolle, once described a religious experience of heat so intense it was difficult for him to know whether it was physical or spiritual. “When I first felt my heart wax warm,” he said, “and truly, *not imaginably, but as it were with a sensible fire*, burned. I was forsooth marveled, as this burning burst up in my soul, and of an unwonted solace; for in my ignorance of such healing abundance oft have I groped my breast, seeing whether this burning were of any bodily cause outwardly. But when I knew that only it was kindled of ghostly cause inwardly, and this burning was naught of fleshly love or desire, in this I conceived it was the gift of my Maker.”<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, virtually every tradition comprehends the Divine in terms of light and fire. An Egyptian psalm, for instance, dating between 1550 and 1305 BCE compares God to the sunrise, “Beautiful you rise, O eternal living god! You are radiant, lovely, powerful. Your love is great, all-encompassing. Your rays make all radiant. Your brightness gives life to hearts.”<sup>6</sup> This “brightness” that “gives life to hearts” is, again, the fiery passion that fills our lives with meaning, whatever the source of that passion might be. In Hinduism, the supreme god Krishna is called “the source of light in all luminous objects... situated in everyone’s heart.”<sup>7</sup> The Jewish Kabbalah teaches that creation is formed from divine sparks of God transformed into the four elements. “You should aim,” it says, “to raise those divine sparks hidden throughout the world, elevating them to holiness by the power of your soul.”<sup>8</sup> If, as Erich Fromm has suggested, the greatest problem facing people in modern society is “boredom,” then the solution is to reawaken our divine passion. Mechtild of Magdeburg said, “lie down in the fire,”<sup>9</sup> and the Sufi poet, Rumi, said, “I must be consumed by fire.”<sup>10</sup> It was Rumi, who also said, “My soul’s a furnace; it’s a happy fire,”<sup>11</sup> who was most unafraid of his passions, of the fire in his heart raging out of control, who advises us, “Drink all your passions and be a disgrace.”<sup>12</sup>

He did not fear his passion because, like other mystics, he understood that such passion burns but does not consume. It engulfs us, but does not injure us, or others. In today’s society many of us, like people of all ages, want such passion, such meaning in our lives.

We want to escape the tedium, the routine, the boredom, by discovering our reason for being. Unfortunately, we don't always know where to look. We try stuffing our space with things that entertain us ever so briefly before quickly losing their luster to also become boring. We try filling our time with activities and distractions that help us temporarily avoid that lingering feeling that there must be something more to our lives.

Such avoidance, ultimately, comes from our fear of passion, the fear of allowing the authentic self to truly shine forth. Ever since we were children we learned to hide our light under a bushel in order to be accepted by others; in order to meet the expectations of others. Our true thoughts, feelings, and desires became repressed, relegated to the realm of what Jung called the Shadow, the unconscious, the opposite of light and fire. Yet even there, in our own darkest recesses, lies the divine spark, for it is out of darkness that light first emerged. Even so, our fear of fire, of being consumed, of blazing glory, has inflated the divine spark therein to what it sees as the "fires of Hell," as divine punishment, rather than a divine gift. But, as Jean Shinoda Bolen reminds us, "research indicates that the pre-Christian 'hell' was a uterine shrine or sacred cave of rebirth, denoted by the Norse *hellir*. The Earlier notion of *Hel* was a cauldron-womb filled with purgative fire."<sup>13</sup>

So we fear Hell, because such fire threatens to burn away the falsehood, the superficialities, the lies we have deceived ourselves with throughout our lives. The greater culture, especially, turns the divine spark hidden in the shadows, the light at the end of the tunnel, the sacred womb of rebirth, into a place of eternal punishment, because it must maintain the status quo by supplanting our own authentic thoughts, feelings, and desires with those it requires of us. Thus, it teaches us that we ought to be ashamed of our authentic thoughts, feelings, and desires, and that, should we express them, should we release these demons from the dark dungeons of our own inner hell, then we will ourselves be eternally punished in the flames Hell. That's why Rumi, who saw through this ruse, could say, "drink all your passions and be a disgrace."<sup>14</sup>

Going through Hell, through the cauldron womb of rebirth, then, can be a painful stripping away process, even if it doesn't destroy or injure us. So, part of our reluctance to go through it, in addition to worrying about what others might think, stems from the simple fear of letting go—letting go of our own lies, the habits, the unhealthy comfort food that numbs us to the truth that we are living as automatons in a consumer culture. Nevertheless, this is what we are called to do, not from without, but from within, from the tiny spark of the divine, that hot ember at the seat of the soul yearning to rage. As Meister Eckhart put it, "I would rather be in hell and have God, than in Heaven and not have God."<sup>15</sup> Indeed, it may be that going into hell is the only place to find God, to discover, or rediscover that divine spark some of us have forgotten about. San Juan de la Cruz, famous for his poem, "The Dark Night of the Soul," understood the pain of hell better than many. He understood the difficulty in letting go of comfort, acceptance, belonging, in the name of something greater and much more satisfying. "O burn that burns to heal!"<sup>16</sup> He exclaimed, "We must be filled with a burning fervor full of

anguish.”<sup>17</sup>

But this is not a call toward pointless suffering as some of the ascetics practiced. The anguish San Juan spoke of refers to the process of letting go, of purgation, necessary to every authentic spiritual journey. As Master Ueshiba explained, “Iron is full of impurities that weaken it. Through forging it becomes steel and is transformed into a razor sharp sword. Human beings develop in the same fashion.” And just as swords shine and reflect light, our lives too can radiate and reflect the divine spark, the light, in each of us.

Indeed, as science now confirms, life is light, and we are beings of light. Matter is really energy,  $E=mc^2$ . It’s what physicist David Bohm has called “frozen light.”<sup>18</sup> This is so because, as author David Talbot has noted, “every cubic centimeter of empty space contains more energy than the total energy of all matter in the known universe!”<sup>19</sup> This is also why Einstein, who concluded that it is no longer possible to believe matter exists at all, that energy is all there is, said, “all I want to do is study light.”<sup>20</sup> Today light is the answer to many of our global problems. If we can learn, as our most primitive bacterial ancestors learned billions of years ago, that light is the only abundant and sustainable energy source in the world, then we could stop the destruction of our planet, not to mention put an end to poverty and world hunger. But it is also the answer to many of our individual needs. Though it is ultimately impossible for anyone but you to determine the nature of your passion, what gives true meaning to your life, it is certain that such passion, such fire for life, is necessary for our health and wholeness as human beings. “What was in that candle’s light that opened and consumed me so quickly?”<sup>21</sup> Rumi asked, “Stay in the spiritual fire. Let it cook you...<sup>22</sup> Don’t stop at my mouth! Don’t listen to anything I say. I must enter the center of the fire. Fire is my child, but I must be consumed and become fire.”<sup>23</sup>

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1 Fox, Matthew, *One River, Many Wells*, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, NY, 2000, p. 64.

2 Ibid., p. 70.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Underhill, Evelyn, *Mysticism*, Dover Publications, Mineola, NY, 1930, 2002, p. 193f..

6 Fox, *ibid.*, p. 50.

7 Ibid. p. 61.

8 Ibid. p. 64.

9 Ibid. p. 70.

10 Rumi, *Like This*, versions by Coleman Barks, Library of Congress Catalog # 89-092393, 1990, p. 59.

11 Harvey, Andrew, *Teachings of Rumi*, Shambhala, Boston & London, 1999, p. 111.

12 Rumi, *ibid.*, p. 35

13 Shinoda Bolen, Jean, *Gods in Everyman*, Harper & Row, San Francisco, CA, 1989, p. 100.

- 14 Rumi, *ibid.*, p. 35
- 15 Underhill, Evelyn, *Mysticism*, Dover Publications, Mineola, NY, 1930, 2002, p.209.
- 16 *Ibid.* p. 236.
- 17 *Ibid.* p. 203.
- 18 Fox, *ibid.*, p. 53.
- 19 Talbot, Michael, *The Holographic Universe*, Harper Perennial, New York, NY, 1991, p.51.
- 20 Fox. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- 21 Rumi, *ibid.*, p. 28.
- 22 *Ibid.* p. 13.
- 23 *Ibid.* p. 59.