

Reading to the Indianapolis Literary Club
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Oct. 21, 2019

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD

It was four letters, and started with an "F."

Whatever might that first word have been?

"Food," perhaps? Always essential, and needing a word by which to ask for it.

Or maybe that first word was "Fear." Fear has been a powerful and constant force, always.

Of course, the first four-letter "F" word might have been the one that first came to your minds, because it, too, was so important. For our propagation, you know.

But I prefer to believe that our original four-letter "F" word was "FIRE."

If it were permissible, I would have a wood fire right here, preferably aromatic Indiana hickory, and I would be talking to you through its smoke and glow, which is mankind's traditional way to communicate:

AROUND THE FIRE.

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Having spent my adult life thinking of, traveling in, and writing about the dimension of Time, I've come to believe that everything that makes up humanity and human civilization began as storytelling.

And for most of human existence, all that storytelling was done around a fire.

Man surely separated himself from the other animals when he became conscious of his consciousness: when he realized that he was thinking. At that time, as it was put so poetically by the great scientific writer Loren Eiseley, man stepped out through a leafy curtain, and the foliage closed behind him.

And we have never been able to find our way back through. We're lonely for the animals we were before we emerged through the curtain.

So we turned our faces toward fire, and found that it helped dispel the loneliness.

Ever since, on the banks of the long River of Time, we have huddled together around campfires, cookfires, hearthfires, looking across the firelight at each other and trying to express this humanness in which we find ourselves.

Imagine yourself as your earliest and most primitive ancestor. Your name might be Grok or Moomah, or Adam or Eve, or Fred or Wilma. You wander alone in daylight through a wilderness of forms and stimuli that are nameless -- because you don't have a language yet -- looking for food, looking for a mate. In those ways, you're still like the other animals. You're learning through your senses and instincts what is good to eat, what is comfortable, what stings or bites, what pleases the eye or ear, what makes you salivate, what makes you yearn to mate.

You hear wind in the trees, birdsong, trickling water, thunder, the rustle

or growl of an animal in the grass. You smell a flower, a rotting carcass, rain-freshened air, smoke, the estrus of a female. Feelings stir and change inside you. Fear. Belly-hunger, other hungers. An itch, or many itches. Unlike the other earthbound animals, you might yearn to rise up and be where you see a hawk soaring.

When night falls, you join your family in the cave or under some sheltering roof you've made, and there is a fire in the center. You are unlike the other animals in that you use fire, and you gather around it with your pack of kin. You look around at them, and you have an urge: You want to share what you learned or observed or wondered about out there in the woods and fields today. In other words, you have a story to tell.

You can mime. But you'll need words. You'll need names for things. You can't tell a story until you have a language.

And so it begins.

Hunters tell how they succeeded in catching and killing an elusive prey. Gatherers tell of finding a way to collect a particular kind of grain kernel in great quantities. Such food-getting tales told around the fire become the information that we now would call their "economy." A flint stone is broken to make a sharp edge; "technology" is born.

Women find that willow bark can make a pain go away, or that bear grease protects their skin from bug bites and sunburn; such stories become

"medicine." Men complain of other men's behavior, say they should be made to behave better, and those stories become rules for coexistence, and thus "law" begins to evolve. Families boast of the strength and bravery of their fathers and grandfathers, and "history" is invented. Tribes from beyond the mountain describe what was there: "geography." Someone imitates a birdcall, and there is the beginning of "music." The music stirs someone to move gracefully, and there is "dance." A baby pees on his grandfather's knees, somebody imitates an ape, the others laugh, and "comedy" is born.

People try to comprehend what they hear in the wind, see in lightning or the sun and stars and the changing shape of the moon, what they sense in birth and death, and when they realize that some Great Unseen Something haunts the material world and makes life, they give it a name that means "God," and "religion" enters into their being. Likewise, "philosophy," and "ethics," and "trade," or any belief or system by which we function.

And the stories themselves, by which all these civilizing categories began, they were told over and over, and new ones entered the repertoire, becoming "lore." A way to write it down was devised, and "literature" was under way, which meant there would eventually be a need for "writers," leading to "readers," and "literary clubs," which brings us to this topic of keenest interest: ourselves.

That's why I say storytelling is the origin of everything meaningful to the human race and that it all began and developed around a fire in the center.

Fire itself has been an inspirational or legendary spirit; it has been deemed a gift from the Creator, to help Man survive. Sun-worshipping cultures believed that fire was a tiny bit of the sun, seized and used by Man alone among the animals, to hearten and sustain us in night and winter. Most cultures have a version of that legend, probably composed under the inspiration of the hearth fire itself, and told as the storyteller's eyes gleamed in firelight.

Many an early philosopher or scientist tried to understand whether fire was itself a form of life. Why not? It's born in a spark, it grows, it eats, it changes its food (fuel) into waste, it starves and dies if not fed, it talks to us, it helps us as a friend helps us, but can turn into a destroying enemy. To many tribal ancients, fire was not just alive, it was sacred. American Indians have to instruct their guests not to throw cigarette butts, wrappers, or any other trash into the campfire, or spit in it, or extinguish it by peeing on it, as beer-drinking campers like to do.

In Greek mythology, the titan Prometheus stole fire from the gods and made a gift of it to man. In the Lenni Lenape (Delaware) Indian story, all the two-legged human people were freezing to death in winter darkness until M'Noukahaszh, the Crow, the bird with the sweetest song and the most colorful plumage, volunteered to fly to heaven and ask Creator for sunlight for the People. Creator had been annoyed by the People, and

refused. So, Crow stole a stick, lit it from the sun, and fled earthward with it.

And thus it was Crow who brought Man that indispensable gift, but in his long dive back to earth with the burning brand in his beak, his gorgeous feathers were blackened and his melodious voice was made hoarse by the soot and smoke.

In the stories of other aboriginal peoples, fire is brought from the sky by the Thunderbird, perhaps reflecting their observation that prairie and forest fires often followed lightning storms.

In the old days before matches and cigarette lighters, fires were hard to start, so certain persons were designated Firekeepers, with responsibility to keep tribal fires from dying out. Nomadic and hunting peoples designed painstaking ways to carry embers from place to place.

From then onward, through hundreds of thousands of years, any story would be warmed and lit in the center by fire. Until the invention of furnaces and electric heat, geothermal and flameless heat pumps, families had living flame as their intimate and essential home companion, arguably rivaling Dog himself as man's best friend. You can't envision history accurately without the sight, sound, smell and feel of living fire -- candlesticks and lampwicks --not to mention the wonderful change that cooking made in our food. Fire is perceived by all the five senses, and it's evocative of the sixth.

A storyteller could hardly ask more of any single thing. What a worthy first "F" word was fire!

But after all the ages with fire in the center of the story, the light is now changing: now the light in the center of the home, gleaming in the eyes of the family members, the light by which we get our stories, is no longer fire. It's electronic. It's the television or computer screen. Or it's several of them, one in each family member's room. Each member focuses on a different aspect of the culture: one on video games, maybe, one on a football game, one on a NASCAR race, one on American Idol, one on a chat room, another on Facebook. With the fire gone, the family conscious is dispersed. The light before their eyes isn't drawing them together, but apart.

This might seem normal and acceptable to the very young, But to those of us who have sat telling and listening to stories by the fireplace or around a campfire, it's sad and disturbing.

My wife and I still like watching the fireplace more than television. Our motto is, "Home is where the hearth is." We can see anything we want to see in flickering flames. At all ages of my life I've watched campfires and home fires, at church camps, beside canoeing rivers, at Indian powwows and sweat lodge ceremonies, in historic re-enactor encampments, on honeymoon nights, in state and national parks (in varying degrees of sobriety). And when I gaze into a fire, I feel connected to all the people who have been gazing down into flames and up at soaring sparks for tens of thousands of years, telling or listening to the stories by which

we've become human civilizations.

The storyteller's fire is older and more constant than even the Eternal Flame that burns at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Whoever that Unknown Soldier was, we can be pretty sure that he, as he was growing up to become a corpse on a battlefield, learned much of what he knew and believed by looking into a fireplace with his family, or a campfire with his comrades-in-arms. Everything is story, and it should always be in fireglow.

Now, the fire inside: Anyone who ever heard stories by firelight must have thought, at least once: I am a fire, myself!

Most of us understand intuitively that to be alive is to burn. We are warm because we are burning the fuel we call food.

If our lives are good, we will give off some light that will guide our offspring. If our lives are bad, our fire might burn down things and blacken other lives. And in the end, each life will die out and leave its ashes, but the fire, the spirit, will have ignited the next generation, which will then ignite the next.

If you're a history writer or reader, or just a grandpa telling an old tale, fire might appear in your story in many dramatic forms -- smoke signals, a whale oil lamp, an oven, a volcano, a burning house or a burning ship, in the heating of water for a childbirth, or of iron for sword-making, or

turning a sword into a plowshare, in a vicious arson, in the burning of Atlanta, in the cauterizing of wounds after a battle, in the muzzle-blasts of a duel or fratricide, or, at last, the cremation of the corpse.

But the most dramatic single thing that ever happened by firelight didn't happen in a flash. It was slow, oh, so slow. It had to happen so that the storytelling could begin and go on:

I mean the growth and nurturing of language. We must marvel at this, because it was a miracle.

It must have taken thousands of frustrating years for those earliest storytellers around their campfires to build the vocabularies and forms of speech with which to tell the stories, to express the wonderment, to build oratory by which to persuade and lead. If you've never pondered the miracle of language, well, start thinking about it!

It's what we all live by, not just writers. All languages are intricate, beautiful, rich, old, and new. The one I'm using here, English, is deemed the most effective and evocative of all. Certain outstanding writers who began in their native tongues -- Conrad in Polish, Nabokov in Russian, for two examples -- adopted English because they felt they could do so much more with it.

Language itself is like fire, enriching and enlightening our lives, forever changing.

I mean, dude, language is, like, you know, awesome!

If you aren't in awe of language, if you take it for granted, if you hope to get through life with a minimum command of it, if you're lazy and sloppy with it, then you aren't fit to be a historian, a novelist, a teacher, or even a parent. If you should be expressing something important to a child, but instead just shrug and say, "Whatever," you don't even deserve a role in this long, beautiful, ghastly, poignant stream of storytelling that was, is, and forever will be the human tale, the one beginning by firelight, like this:

Once upon a time...