

Why Do We Turn Off Unneeded Lights Before We Leave a Room, or Before We Sit?

The Case:

When, fundamentally, there are no lights. Why would (almost) any of us stoop to save a sentient being, when, fundamentally, there are no beings to save?

The Poem:

As the World Burns

The old masters, we hear,
avoided challenging
 the status quo,
as they also
avoided contact
 with women,
and refrained from
social activism.
 Considering
the crimes of history,
the Buddha wondered
 what to do. Thus
we sit, pursuing personal
self-cultivation –
 serenity
as proof of some
transcendental virtue.
 “In the great
kalpa fire, when all is consumed,
is *it* consumed as well?
 Sit with this.”
Outside: the peasants
pass buckets
 hand to hand.

Commentary:

Western culture first, and now global culture, has embraced conjuring as its principal form of magical practice. Conjuring means giving form to abstractions. We may call it Faustian magic, and contrast it with two other mythical shamanic practices in the Western Tradition: the way of the singer—

that is, the path of art, typified by Orpheus; and the path of plant medicine and visionary practice, typified by Eve.

Conjuring is all about us—language conjures up ghosts, consciousness itself conjures up perhaps the greatest of all hallucinations—all given substance by our story-telling. Demystifying conjured ghosts is the practice where art (including poetry, music, and theater), meditation, and philosophy intersect—what we could call “unbinding magic.”

While, in various degrees, all concepts are conjured—some, like money, and the corporation, have been given bodies and autonomy. A corporation’s body has now been given the rights of citizens—conjuring indeed—but what is the spirit that has thus been brought forth?

The spiritual essence of a corporation is craving—by its charter a corporation can never have enough. It is the spirit that Buddhists call the *preta*, or “hungry ghost,” denizens of one of the six realms of existence. Out of compassion, Zen students make a small grain offering to the hungry ghosts before each meal. But to give the hungry ghost a body (with jaws and a large throat), autonomous life, immortality, the rights of citizens, a ruling position at the center of society with free access to feed and prey on the world of sentient beings is delusive madness. They will consume everything: earth’s resources, her plants and animals, her peoples, and her cultures.

This corporeal entity, we might say, is a burning light bulb, or a huge wrecking machine, left on auto-pilot and clear-cutting the earth. While we must sit to become intimate with our own greed, we should also, first, turn off the lights. And lend a hand in putting out the fire. And right now that takes political action.

--Dale Pendell