

A Single Point of Light: May 30, 2020

We are back sleeping on the screened-in porch where, tonight, I gazed at the Strawberry Moon's dimming light in a hazy sky. The moon vanished behind clouds as I fell into slumber. Then at midnight, exactly, I was awakened by a single flickering point of light which beckoned. Wawatési, (Potawatomi for firefly) is back. Unlike in recent years, and in particular three years ago when my mother lived her last days with us, and when fireflies in great profusion awakened me nightly, there is just one this night.

What does a solitary living point of light in total darkness mean? Perhaps it is acknowledgement of my day spent tending and securing a small raised bed of full of strawberry plants during a strawberry moon? I have been disappointed with my strawberry non-harvests of recent years. Chipmunks seem to think that we raise strawberries just for them. They wait until the berries ripen and then gnaw each one as it reaches the peak of perfection. This year there is a profusion of chipmunks. I was nearly tripping over them as I worked in the garden. Without the fine wire mesh cage I have placed around and over the berries, we two-legged would have none. I hesitated to barricade what must be a seasonal treat for adorable little rodents. But this year wild strawberries are everywhere in great profusion. Those delectable and accessible wild berries will be more than adequate for our smaller kin. Please Mother Earth, let us also enjoy our healing strawberries this Strawberry Moon. In 2020 we need this traditional healing medicine more than usual.

Perhaps it is such healing, and such a healing message, that Wawatési brings to me tonight? If so, it is a comforting affirmation of the message hanging in our house entryway, printed on a poster from the Bread and Puppet Theater which gifts Vermont with its presence in the town of Glover, near our northern border with Canada.



Photographer: Etienne Georges, Image courtesy of Bread and Puppet Theater

This is a welcome echo of other hopeful aphorisms about light in times of darkness. "Tis better to light a single candle than to curse the darkness." Or "a thousand points of light". President George H. Bush invoked the latter notion repeatedly, and even created a Points of Light Foundation to officially recognize volunteer efforts aimed at community improvement. A small college where I taught nominated me for the award because of my involvement in local grassroots environmental work. I was unaware of their effort to bring attention to one of their faculty until my consolation prize arrived in the mail. I was not an official Points of Light awardee. Instead, I was given a facsimile signed card with a raised golden embossed presidential seal and some nice

words about my work being “a shining example for us all”. I felt like a tiny birthday cake candle rather than a lighthouse beacon.

I have struggled, my life long, with local grassroots efforts which sometimes feel like “a candle in the wind”, to borrow yet another light metaphor, this one from Elton John’s song of the same name. Recently the headwinds have felt like they pack hurricane force. And holding that flickering point of light, so that it does not go out, has too frequently seemed next to impossible.

Until earlier tonight. I attended a demonstration in the nearby town of Middlebury, Vermont. The impetus for my action was the death of George Floyd, the latest in a growing list of black people who have been murdered by police. I was concerned that only a few dozen dedicated members of our local social justice advocacy community would show up. But, hundreds of people of all ages, and many racial and ethnic backgrounds, lined our town’s streets and bridge holding signs protesting the continued senseless violence and an affirming that “Black Lives Mater”. I carried a sign stating “Native Americans for Racial Justice”.

It was comforting to be surrounded by so many points of light in a small town of only 8,500. Masked and socially distanced, we were never the less emotionally and politically close to one another. Such individual actions, flickering points of light holding their own against the headwinds, really do matter. That is the message that Wawatési affirms this night. Miigwech, Wawatési. I needed to be reminded.

***** **Related**
Background on Native American Culture

Strawberries, or “heart berries”, are considered medicine in many indigenous cultures across North America. June is known as the “Strawberry Moon” in some Native American calendars, particularly amongst peoples of the eastern woodlands and Canada. The Cherokee consider strawberries to be bearers of good luck. For the Navajo they are sacred life medicine, and they are being grown as part of Navajo efforts to address problems of living in a food desert. (There are only about a dozen food stores serving 15,000 tribal members spread out over the nation’s largest Indian Reservation with an area nearly the size of the entire state of South Carolina.)

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