

A SPARK IN DARKNESS

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By all appearances, it was a typical Wednesday morning two-and-a-half weeks ago at Asbury University. A religiously-affiliated school of about 1,500 students, Asbury is located in Wilmore, Kentucky, a sleepy backroad town of 6,000 located in the bluegrass region of the state. After an ordinary morning chapel service, a few dozen students spontaneously decided to stay and continue singing and praying.

Word of their gathering spread over social media, and more students joined them throughout the day. The singing and praying continued, interspersed with heartfelt testimonies and tearful confessions. An extraordinary spirit seem to be moving among the students. By nightfall, some of the students were carrying mattresses and blankets into the chapel to spend the night.

Over the following two weeks, this casual lingering after an ordinary chapel service had exploded into what some scholars are now calling our nation's first major spiritual revival of the 21st century. As of this past Thursday, Asbury University estimates that more than 50,000 people have converged upon the chapel from across the country, leading the university to cancel classes, install large-screen monitors and heat lamps outside the chapel, set up banks of portable toilets, and call on the Salvation Army to distribute food and beverages.

Many of the participants are members of generation Z, a generation most notable for being religiously non-affiliated and non-participatory. Even so, many came to Asbury on a search. "We've been beaten up by life — we all have been over the past few years," one participant said. "Everyone is looking for healing."

Speaking to Ruth Graham of the New York Times, Asbury University president Kevin Brown observed, "Never could I have imagined what we are experiencing now." He added, "There's a deep hunger born of this trenchant dissatisfaction and disillusionment with what has been handed down to the younger generation, and I think they're just raising their gaze to higher things."

It remains to be seen whether this nascent revival will spark a larger spiritual awakening in our nation — and if it does, whether the awakening will help unify our nation or divide it further. But in the meantime, it's worth noting that the spontaneous actions of a few have had a profound impact upon the lives of many.

Sometimes, it only takes the spontaneous actions of one. Four months ago in Beijing, a physics and philosophy enthusiast named Peng Lifa, who appears also to have been a stockholder in a small tech company, hung two banners on a highway crossover in central Beijing. Inscribed on the banners were slogans Peng had drafted to protest the

Chinese government's deprivation of human rights. "We want reform, not Cultural Revolution," the banners read. "We want freedom, not lockdowns. We want votes, not a ruler. We want dignity, not lies. We are citizens, not slaves."

Not surprisingly, both Peng and his banners have disappeared. The Chinese government has never acknowledged Peng or his actions, and no one knows where he is or what has happened to him. But his actions have sparked the biggest protests in China since Tiananmen Square in 1989.

"No matter where you are," wrote one Chinese human rights advocate in a tweet addressed to Peng, "please take a look at this: your voice has spread all over our country, our own China." Many now referred to Peng as "the man who lighted the spark in darkness."

Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani student who attended a school for girls founded by her father, also lighted a spark. Through blog posts and public speeches as a 10-year-old, Malala became a well-known champion of girls' education. When the Taliban ruled that girls were not allowed to attend school, Malala remained defiant and continued her advocacy.

A year later, when Malala was 11, the Taliban tracked her down and shot her, but she survived the shooting. She went on to become the youngest person ever to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. "This award is not just for me," she said in accepting the award in 2014. "It is for those forgotten children who want education. It is for those frightened children who want peace. It is for those voiceless children who want change. I am here to stand up for their rights, to raise their voice."

Mohammed Bouazizi, a 26-year-old fruit seller who lived in a scruffy and notoriously corrupt little town about 175 miles south of Tunisia's capital, also lighted a spark. Since age 12, Bouazizi had been the sole breadwinner for his mother and five siblings, along with his disabled stepfather and uncle. They lived together in a four-room house.

One ordinary morning in 2011, Bouazizi's cart was laden with the best fruit he had ever seen. Along his way to the market, two police officers stopped him and demanded his fruit. Bouazizi's uncle intervened and later lodged a complaint with the chief of police, who berated the officers.

Enraged, the officers found Bouazizi again, seized all his fruit and his scale — his entire business — and then beat him with a baton. One hour later, Bouazizi sat down in the market square in front of the police station, doused himself with paint thinner, and set himself on fire to protest this corrosive injustice. His action sparked what became known as the Arab Spring, which eventually turned out mostly to be a return of Arab Winter. Even so, his solitary defiance gave hope to millions of people suffering under the scourge of oppression and injustice.

In an essay titled "The Law of Love and the Law of Violence," the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy says, "The most important acts, both for those who accomplish them and for their fellow creatures, are acts that have remote consequences."

In other words, you never know what the consequences might eventually be of a word you speak or an action you take — or a word you withhold or an action you don't take.

On this point, I'm still haunted by an article from many years ago in the *New Yorker* about people who commit suicide from the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. The article describes an interview with Jerome Motto, a retired psychiatrist who had been part of two failed efforts to have suicide barriers constructed on the bridge. Motto had two patients who committed suicide by jumping, and it was the second death that most affected him. Motto said, "I went to this guy's apartment afterward with the assistant medical examiner. The guy [who jumped] was in his thirties, lived alone, pretty bare apartment. He'd written a note and left it on his bureau. It said, 'I'm going to walk to the bridge. If one person smiles at me on the way, I will not jump.'"

Sometimes, perhaps often, it only takes a spark to dispel the darkness. Of course, darkness comes in many different forms, and clinical depression is only one of them. All of us will eventually face what one ancient mystic called the dark night of the soul, when we have lost our way in life, or when we feel bereft or betrayed, or when we've been traumatized by other people or brutalized by life's indifference to what we need.

In one such time in my own life, someone dispelled the darkness for me — even though I didn't yet know that darkness would descend. I was twenty-one years old, a junior in college with plans to go to seminary, and I was working as a part-time minister of a small Mennonite congregation in rural Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. I had just announced my engagement to the eldest daughter of the chair of the Board of Trustees. It seemed like my life was unfolding in a promising way for someone who intended to join my father, my maternal grandfather, and six of my uncles as a Mennonite minister.

Then Doc Herr invited me to lunch. Doc and his wife Lois were by far the most cosmopolitan members of the blue-collar congregation I was serving. Doc had been to college and then medical school. He and Lois were well-read and widely-traveled.

At lunch, we talked about my future. Doc told me that some of the decisions I had made about my life might not always make sense. The path I had chosen for myself might not always be the right one for me. When the time comes to make a change, he said, you'll know what to do.

Five years later, my life as I had imagined it had crumbled to dust. As I graduated from seminary, I realized that the faith of my upbringing wouldn't work for me. It required me to deny my own experience of the world, both intellectually and existentially, which I was no longer willing to do. I left the Mennonite church, and I left my family and my marriage as well. Soon thereafter, because of woefully inadequate preparation, I was forced to withdraw from the PhD program in classics I had entered after seminary.

After a lifetime of academic success, I had failed utterly. I had no church community, my family was mostly estranged, and my academic career had crashed. I had nothing left.

Through many lonely days and sleepless nights, Doc Herr's words kept me company. "When the time comes to make a change," he had said years before, "you'll know what to do." His confidence in me gave me courage as I eventually found a way to make a new beginning.

It only takes a spark to dispel the darkness — and we never know where the spark will land or when it will catch fire.

On these terms, it's a daunting responsibility to walk among the people we meet and places we frequent from day to day, all the while realizing that we could provide the spark someone desperately needs. Our words of comfort or encouragement could be the words they need to hear. Our acts of care and kindness could be the gestures they need to receive.

When people work together to dispel the darkness, it's easier for sparks to catch fire — as the revival at Asbury University illustrates. We gather as a congregation with other like-minded seekers because together we can produce more light than any one of us can produce individually. Together, we can eventually change the world.

The words of our closing hymn today were penned by the 20th century British Unitarian minister John Andrew Storey, who wrote fourteen of the hymns in our hymnal. He writes:

The human touch can light the flame,
Which gives a brightness to the day,
The spirit uses mortal flame,
life's vehicle for work and play.

May all who come within our reach
be kindled by our inner glow,
not just in spirits words we preach,
in human touch life's faith we show.

Let's sing together.