

Luceat Lux Vestra

By Mark Motley

There's much I continue to learn about this grand, old Club: for instance, only early this year I learned our motto is: *Luceat Lux Vestra* : "let your light shine". It's from the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5): "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in Heaven." Today, that motto adorns our Clubhouse wall, just below the most referenced Shakespeare quote among us: "Here Comes One with a Paper".

Similar mottos include Yale's: *Lux et Veritas*, "light and truth"; Columbia University's: "In Thy Light Shall We See Light"; and UCLA, Berkeley's: "Let there be light."

Tomorrow is the Winter Solstice, December 21st, shortest day of the year, but this year, the longest night of the year is tonight. So, tonight let's talk about light, central to every celebration of this season.

Diwali is also called the Festival of Lights and is the Fall/Winter holiday of India observed by Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists. It symbolizes victory of good over evil. There are fireworks and family gatherings decorated with rows of lamps representing each person's internal light.

Hanukkah is also called the Festival of Lights. At the rededication of the Hebrew Temple in 164 BCE, only enough oil for one day was found but, the lamp burned for eight. To commemorate this small but meaningful miracle, the Festival of Lights runs eight days, with the lighting of an additional candle each night.

Islam's holy month of Ramadan is not always a Winter holiday, but sometimes it is since it begins about 11 days earlier each year. It's best known for sunrise to sundown fasting. But a widely followed folk traditional is the Ramadan lamp called the *fanous*. Originating in Egypt, these lamps are used in Muslim countries worldwide to decorate for Ramadan and are generally associated with "the light of the world".

Kwanza, runs from December 26th through January 2nd. Created in 1966, it celebrates African and American culture and community. Central are seven candles: each night a candle is lit, and one of seven principles is discussed.

In Scandinavia, Santa Lucia Day is December 13th, first of the Twelve Days of Christmas. A selected girl in the household dresses in white and plays the part of Santa Lucia wearing a crown of lit candles. She enters the room with her head aglow to a song about darkness soon taking flight and a new day rising from the rosy sky.

The primary Winter celebration is reported to be Hanukkah for 2% for Americans, Kwanza for 3%, and Christmas for 90%. I'll focus accordingly. Christmas celebrations include the religious and the secular in widely varying proportion. The holiday was originally a pagan Solstice festival, and the Yule log bringing both warmth and light comes from that time. It's thought formerly pagan Christian converts sought to keep some of the tradition, and the festival was repurposed to celebrate the condescension and lowly birth of Christ – but it's doubtful anyone knows. What's clear is that if shepherds were abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night, it was during the lambing time in spring, likely in April. But Spring is a celebration unto itself, needing no help. So, a Winter fest it is.

From large public light displays like the Zoo's Festival of Lights, to family Christmas trees, and house lights in every variety, Christmas lights in these long Winter nights are among the

Season's most iconic features. Most Christmas trees are topped with a star representing the new star that illuminated the Birth in Bethlehem. Christmas Lights collectively symbolize the One who said, "I am the light of the World". Seasonal lights suggest capacity to overcome darkness and offering assurance of brighter days to come. They beam the message that even in darkness, light can triumph, and we can find light and hope. In a Christmas Day sermon in 1957 that sadly is needed at least as much today, Dr. Martin Luther King taught, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that."

Beyond light-focused decorations, as you know, Christmas observance features traditional cuisine, Christmas pageants, candy canes, stockings hung with care, church services, Christmas cards, Santa, shopping, gifts, Christmas trees, and Christmas carols. Some radio stations play all Christmas music all the time through the Season. Much of this Christmas music emphasizes light. For example:

In "O Little Town of Bethlehem" we find, *"Yet in thy dark street shineth The everlasting Light"*.

From "The First Noel": *"They looked up and saw a star, Shining in the East, beyond them far; And to the earth it gave great light ..."*

"Silent Night" includes: *"Silent night, holy night, Son of God, Love's pure light"*.

"Hark the Herald Angels Sing" has *"Light and life to all he brings"*.

In "We Three Kings": *"Star of wonder, star of night ... guide us to thy perfect light"*.

"O Holy Night" includes: *"Led by the light of faith serenely beaming"*.

And one verse of “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” is:

*O Come, O Bright and Morning Star, And bring us comfort from afar!
Dispel the shadows of the night And turn our darkness into light.*

Beyond this Seasonal focus on light, light is also a central theme of much holy writ, including both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. There are many such references, but I’ll just touch on three from each: In the opening scene, God’s first words are, “Let there be light.” In Isaiah chapter 60, we find both “Arise, shine forth for thy light is come ...”, and “...the Lord shall be unto thee an everlasting light.”

Before the Birth in Bethlehem, Zacharias said the One to come would “give light to them that sit in darkness” (Luke ch. 1). Announcement of that Birth to shepherds was to great light: “and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were sore afraid.” (Luke ch. 2). And in 1st John, “...God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.” (1 Jn 1:5)

Turning now to other holy writ, the Upanishads, ancient Sanskrit text sacred to the Hindus, includes, “Lead me from darkness to light!”

The Persian prophet was Zarathustra, though that was not his name, that was a title meaning “he of the golden light”. His Gathas contain 78 references to light. Here’s one example: “Through Love of fellow Man, through Service and through Truth, Raise Thou our Souls into Thy Realms of Light”.

A prominent verse in the Quran is known as the Verse of Light. It references a marvelous lamp and includes: “Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth... Light upon light.”

Among the Sufis, mystics within the Islamic tradition, Jalal ad-Din Rumi wrote,

“The light which shines in the eye is really the light of the heart,

The light which fills the heart is the light of God ...”

“Deep in our hearts, the Light of heaven is shining.” and

“Nothing can nourish the soul but light.”

Tibetan Buddhist Monk Sogyal Rinpoche wrote, “Light must come from inside. You cannot ask the darkness to leave; you must turn on the light.”

One of the Dead Sea Scrolls is often called the War Scroll but more accurately, *The War of the Sons of Light Against the Sons of Darkness*, and is a prophesy of an end-of-times battle between Light and Darkness.

The canon of my own faith, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, includes both the Old and New Testament, and other works from which these quotes come: “they were illuminated by the light of the everlasting word” (D&C 50:24); “the Spirit giveth light to every man that cometh into the world” (D&C 84:46), “Hold up your light that it may shine unto the world” (3 Ne 18:24), and “...they were encircled about with everlasting darkness ... but behold, he has brought them into his everlasting light ...” (Alma 26:15).

Shifting now from scripture to literature, in Homer’s *The Iliad*, the absence of light is death:

“The shades of death ... came over his eyes.”

Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno* begins,

“*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*

Mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,

Che la dirita via era smarita.”

“In the middle of the journey of our life
I found myself in a dark wood
For the straight way had been lost.”

From the dark wood, with Virgil as guide and protector, Dante descends into the *Inferno*, a place of “eternal darkness”, and “void of all light”. In contrast, *Paradiso* is a place of exquisite light. The last line of the last canto of the last book refers to:

“*L’amor che move ’l sole e l’altre stelle*”

“The Love that moves the sun and the other stars”.

Milton’s *Paradise Lost* includes:

“Long is the way and hard, that out of Hell leads up to light.”

Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* gives us, “How far that little candle throws his beams!
So shines a good deed in a weary world.”

In *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy writes, “He stepped down, trying not to look long at her, as if she were the sun, yet he saw her, like the sun, even without looking.”

J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* includes both “Moonlight drowns out all but the brightest stars” and “May it be a light to you in dark places.”

Light and the contrast between light and dark naturally feature in the visual arts, and Rembrandt was a master of this none has surpassed. Tolstoy, again, in *Anna Karenina* wrote, “All the variety, all the charm, all the beauty of life is made up of light and shadow.”

Light occupies a prominent place in our language as we see the light, light up, come to the light, light a fire, see something in a new light, shed light upon, go out like a light, and we bring a thing to light. We recognize a guiding light, a ray of light, first light, leading light, beam of light, the speed of Light, and various forms of light such as sunlight, moonlight, artificial light, a night light, white light, black light, fluorescent light, incandescent light, neon light, ambient light, natural light, accent light, twilight, back light, indirect light, reflected light, blue light, and visible light.

Beyond physical light in that small portion of the spectrum visible to the eye, artists through the ages have also sought to capture the essence of inner light which radiates from goodness often through representation of a halo or an aura or glow. The halo was found in ancient Egyptian, early Asian, Hellenistic, and Roman art. Most early Christian artists avoided the halo because of its pagan origins, but by the 6th century, halos were common in Christian art too.

So, why all this focus on light and it's sources in every celebration of this Season, in world scripture, in literature, and in art? Consider the properties of physical light:

All electromagnetic radiation, including but not limited to that tiny portion of the spectrum called "visible light", is an electric field and a magnetic field combined into an electromagnetic wave. Unless absorbed, light is always moving. It can't be stored like an electric charge in a battery. It moves at a constant speed and in a specific, constant direction, unless reflected. Light can heat things. It has a frequency and a certain energy. Light and darkness can't occupy the same space. But how can something intangible, even though it's a wave, do something physically tangible, such as exert pressure or cause a physical object to heat up, as if it were a particle? It's an enigma. Richard Feynman said of light, "... my physics students don't understand it ... That is because I don't understand it. Nobody does."

The characteristics of visible light that pertain to us most are that light is both something we can see and that which allows us to see other things. But light's capacity to illuminate other things can be hindered: the object can be too far, or something can block the view. Yet in our minds, reason "sees" things unhindered. In that regard, perhaps reason may be more like light than visible light itself.

Our eyes see the visible spectrum in many colors. Light frequencies higher than those visible to the eye include ultraviolet, x-ray, laser, and gamma-rays. Longer wavelength, lower frequency, invisible portions of the electromagnetic spectrum include infrared, microwave, mobile phone, TV, and AM and FM radio frequencies.

When a writer references a twinkle or a glimmer in the eye, a glow within, a radiant face, when a painter seeks to portray the same with a halo, a glow, or an aura, perhaps what they perceive and seek to express is a form of light outside the spectrum detected by the eye or anything else physical, but which may be perceived by something finer within. Consider the possibility this light so frequently referenced in holy writ, literature, song, and art, is actually something perceived, absorbed, and reflected by all. If so, perhaps like electricity, this spiritual light is also attenuated or diminished by resistance, and perhaps this resistance or lack thereof is related to character. When an object radiates light, it's said to be luminescent. Perhaps when a person radiates this inner light, it could be considered spiritual luminescence.

These sayings are from Anasazi teachings:

"As great as is the light above us, greater by far is the light within."

"The outward light is but a reflection of the inner."

"Light chases away darkness." and

"Just as the morning light sweeps away the night, the darkness within me began to be chased away by a dawn in my soul." [Anasazi Foundation]

T.S. Eliot's wonderful "Choruses from The Rock" ends with:

"Light Light The visible reminder of Invisible Light.

O Light Invisible, we praise Thee!

Too bright for mortal vision."

Writers, note: in *The Belle of Amherst*, William Luce wrote, "To find that phosphorescence, that light within — is the genius behind poetry."

The source verse for the admonition of our motto, is "let your light so shine before men, that they may see". The last phrase makes this an earnest invitation to be more intentional about helping others see. But we must strengthen our light within to have light to share, and among those things that fuels the light within is reading best books – great literature. Of the written word, Ezra Pound wrote, "Man reading should be man intensely alive. The book should be a ball of light in one's hand."

Now a story: Ten-year-old Bonnie's father was both a farmer and a local lay church leader. Once, he hosted a global leader of their church. That evening her family and that of their guest enjoyed her mother's apple pie in their living room as the visitor recounted church travels in faraway lands. Bonnie was mesmerized. But eventually her mother broke the spell, calling her into the kitchen to ask if she had fed the chickens. Her heart sank; she hadn't. It was getting late. Not wanting to leave, she suggested perhaps the chickens could fast until morning.

Then, the visitor entered the kitchen and with an enthusiastic voice asked, "Did I hear someone needs to feed the chickens? Can my son and I join you?" Her chore suddenly became a joy for Bonnie! She took the flashlight and led the way, skipping ahead on the

familiar path to the chicken coop. Flashlight swinging in her hand, they passed by the corn patch and through the wheat field.

Arriving at the small irrigation ditch that crossed the path, Bonnie jumped over it as she had many nights before, oblivious to her eminent guest's efforts to keep up on a dark, unknown path. Her dancing light did not help him see the ditch. Without a steady light to see, he stepped in the water with a groan. Mortified, she turned to see her distinguished visitor pull a wet foot and muddy dress shoe from the ditch. Sloshing, he graciously helped her feed the chickens then in a kind tone instructed, "Bonnie, I need to see the path. I need the light to shine where I'm walking."

She had been shining her light but not in a way that would help anyone. Realizing he needed her light to navigate the path, she focused the flashlight just ahead of him so they could return without incident.

The invitation to let our light shine is not about randomly waving a beam of light, making the world a generally brighter place. It is about focusing our light so others can see the way - the next step forward.

In his book *The Light of the Heart*, Roy Bennett wrote, "Learn to light a candle in the darkest moments of someone's life. Be the light that helps others see ... To shine your brightest light is to be who you truly are."

The One born in Bethlehem later declared, "Behold I am the light; I have set an example for you." Consider one of those examples: The Woman at the Well was a Samaritan, an outcast in His society. But He met her where she was. He initiated the conversation, speaking to her of water, something familiar. Then He led her to increased light and declared Himself the "living

water”, compassionately aware of her and her needs. Afterward, she went to the city to testify of Him. Because of that conversation, she discovered more light, and became an instrument of light herself, illuminating the way for others to see.

The wise grandmother of a friend said, “Be kind. *Everyone* you meet is fighting a hard battle.”

We can shine light so others may see by extending a listening ear, a helping hand, an invitation – perhaps an invitation to visit the The Club. We can walk the journey with those taking a halting step. This may require stepping out of comfort zones, but we can follow that example to be aware of those around us, looking for opportunities to let our light shine that others may see the way.

*In this season when the dark outlasts the day,
we need light from other sources than the sun.
As we navigate these shadows on our way,
Embrace the inner and the outward lights as one.*

In her children’s book *The Tale of Despereaux*, Kate DiCamillo gives advice that could have been written for Literarians: “Stories are light.” She wrote, “Light is precious in a world so dark. Begin at the beginning. Tell ... a story. Make some light.”