

LIGHT IN THE WESTERN SKY

Opening the door to my small office in the house, I immediately felt bathed in an eerie orange glow. The spring green trees of a quilted wall hanging that my wife had made now appeared emblazoned in the colors of autumn. The monochromatic light drew out aspects to the room that I had never noticed, despite my years of occupancy. Not wanting to diminish this power of revelation, I refrained from turning on the overhead fluorescent light.

I repositioned my office chair slightly for a more complete view out the window and took in the sight of a magnificent sunset. A lone, large buffalo grazed at the top of the hill, but it was barely visible. Several trees stretched out from the dark with their silhouettes. As purple clouds soon mixed with the orange, an odd band of almost pure white rays appeared beneath the orange and purple, stretching across the sky and beyond the frame given me by the office window. Even odder, as the sun finally slipped completely below the hill, the band of white rays remained. Wonder prompted me

to leave my chair and walk outside where I saw the white rays, now alone against the dark sky, extending fully across to the eastern sky. There have been a few incidents in my life when I found myself just standing in awe of something I've seen. This eerie spectacle certainly qualified as one of those occasions.

The dusky scene pulled a few thoughts from inside my sometimes-cluttered mind:

What would the early pioneers and settlers heading west across America have thought of such a scene? Would they have looked at it with awe like I just did? Was it possible that they could have considered it a sign from their Creator guiding them to their own Promised Land farther west?

At the same time, I pondered a different light in an earlier history. The pioneers' counterparts in my parallel thoughts came from the east as well. Wise men saw the light of his star and followed it until it came to rest over the place in Bethlehem where they found the child.

Eventually, the white band of light left the night sky, and I walked back into the house,

making my way back to my office. With the flip of a switch, the darkened forms of the room came to life in the light from the fluorescent fixture overhead. While waiting for the computer to boot up, I glanced around the room and took in the previously mentioned quilted wall hanging where the trees now stood a vibrant spring green.

When the “Welcome” screen appeared on the monitor, I knew I had another minute or two before I could start work. I looked over at the library wall and surveyed the shelves of books. About halfway down the middle shelf, I saw several versions of the Bible with some accompanying commentaries. Just below that shelf stood my Louis L’Amour collection, a book about Lewis and Clark, Mark Twain’s classic about his travels out west—Roughing It, and a few Zane Grey favorites.

As I still waited for the computer to obey my first command, my old Golden Retriever came strolling into the office. She rested her head on my leg for a minute so I could scratch behind her ears and then she collapsed down at my feet. Eventually, the computer stood ready for work, though it seems like it’s taking longer to do so every time I turn it on. I do know it’s getting old, just like me

and my dog. With seven dog years per human year, Goldie would be 91, and I am old enough to get discounts at some restaurants. I don't know what the year conversion factor is for computers and humans.

I clicked the word processing program and waited for it to appear on the screen. While I was waiting, though, I turned my attention away from the computer and looked back at the bookshelves. I thought it kind of funny that a few minutes earlier I pondered the two parallel thoughts of the light in the western sky and now on those two parallel shelves of books, I saw volumes on those same two parallel thoughts.

Not quite ready to concede that maybe God was trying to tell me something, I entered into a test of the memory as to how many times the Bible referenced light, both metaphorically and descriptively. Some passages came easily to mind, such as in the beginning, "And God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day . . ." And then, of course, Jesus said, "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in

darkness, but will have the light of life.” After establishing the fact that my memory on such matters had clearly lacked exercise of late, I resorted to pulling out Strong’s Concordance for a more comprehensive list. Besides this list where passages clearly contained the word “light”, I thought about other instances where light entered into the equation—the Transfiguration of Jesus, the dazzling appearance of the angel at the tomb, and so on. Then I gave consideration to more contemporary subjects such as the Shroud of Turin and the possibility of how a light may have been a factor in the image’s formation, as well as the most common witness of a bright light that people who have had an after-death experience have proclaimed.

By that time, my computer got tired of waiting for me and it slipped into screensaver mode. Normally, that might be a point of little significance, as a simple movement of the mouse would bring the word processor screen back up; however, I would be remiss to not mention that the screensaver scene showing on the monitor comprised a wagon train throwing up a dusty haze on the trail as it headed into a bright orange sunset of a wide open prairie. Now I know there is probably

someone out there who will see this scene as being highly contrived, but I assure you, while I may be prone to exaggeration once in a while, I rarely venture into contrivance, at least not enough to consider in this instance. The average person might see nothing sinister in the mere coincidence of that particular screensaver coming up at that particular moment in time, but it is also within the realm of possibility that someone else might see the first inkling of the artificial intelligence of the computer gaining a foothold over the natural intelligence of man. Of course, pointing to me as a prime example of the latter is hardly a fair representation. That I then revisited the shelf housing my western and pioneer volumes could only have been, once again, pure coincidence. At least, I think that to be the most plausible explanation.

I spent the next three hours poring through some of the works of authors in the western genre, both factual and not. Naturally, I shut down my computer prior to starting this exploration to eliminate the possibility of undue influence by subliminal machine forces—just in case. For the people of that era, the Bible certainly served as the primary educational resource. A general belief in God

formed the core facet of lives filled with both hopeful anticipation and long hardship. They recorded little in the way of deeper theological discussion among the pioneers and denizens of the west. Granted, there were differences in beliefs among the denominations around at that time, but they seemed secondary to whether a man just believed in his Creator and the Good Book. When the tragedy of death struck, and it often came early and suddenly, denominational lines disappeared as the survivors paid their respects. The way a man lived his life seemed to carry more weight to the folks out there than did his exact theological makeup. Something that Mark Twain said came to mind, “Let us endeavor to live that when we come to die even the undertaker will be sorry.”

The heavy burden of sleepiness put an end to my rambling thoughts for the night. When my head hit the pillow, I didn't know if a fresh day would enlighten me further or not.

If you will pardon the pun, the light of day strengthened my resolve to find more common ground in my parallel thoughts. I even came to believe that the star of Bethlehem and the light coming from the western sky would leave their straight

paths in history and merge at some point. Perhaps they would vacillate from parallel lines to merge multiple times.

In light of all this thought about light, I am contributing a selection of stories to The Collection that I believe illustrate how the “Light of the World” shown in the lives of the people of the American West. As with any such collection of work, there is always the possibility that exaggeration may seep into the body of the work occasionally. I leave discernment on what to take literally in the mind of the individual reader.

Finally, I encourage you to enjoy the beauty of every sunset that you can. Just as that light in the western sky on that evening drew out aspects to my office that I had not previously noticed, opening the shades of your mind may allow the light to reveal truths that you had not previously considered.

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