

*“This cosmos, the same for all, no god made and none made of earth or sky; but always it was, and is, and shall be: an ever-living fire, kindling in measure and going out in measure.”*

— Heraclitus

# The Ever-Living Fire

*A further statement of belief — on the one fire that runs through myth, physics, and the heart, and on resurrection as the deep pattern of all matter.*

James Mulhern · September 18, 2026

## I. The Fire That Persists by Changing

I have come to believe that the oldest Greek thought and the newest physics are listening to the same fire.

Heraclitus said you cannot step twice into the same river, and that the whole order of things is an ever-living fire, kindling and going out in due measure. Two and a half thousand years later, the physicist looks at light and finds that it will not consent to be one thing: it is a particle and it is a wave, a stone and a motion, the two at once, and the same. The two claims do not merely resemble each other. They are the same sentence spoken in two languages, one very old, one very new. Both are saying what I have spent my life trying to learn how to say — that nothing real is ever finished, and nothing real ever begins from nothing.

So when I look at a grate of embers, I am looking at the whole of my belief. A flame is not one thing that lasts; it is change that keeps on happening. The little tongue of fire you saw a moment ago is already gone, and yet the fire does not die, because going out is not the opposite of burning but its method. We speak of sparks kindling and failing, rising and falling, and we imagine that we are describing a small and perishable domestic fact. We are describing everything that exists. Birth and death are not the border of the

fire. They are the shape of it.

## **II. Resurrection Is the Fire Telling the Truth**

The Christian imagination has never allowed death the final syllable. It tells us of a teacher whose short and violent life did not stop at the tomb but moved through it and out the other side, and of a morning on a mountain when his face shone like the sun and his common clothes burned white and did not burn away — the moment the Church names Transfiguration, when an ordinary body showed itself to be light without ceasing to be body.

That is the entire secret held in one scene. Matter does not have to be thrown away in order to become radiant. It has only to be seen for what it already is. Resurrection, understood in this light, is not a miracle placed against the grain of nature but nature telling the truth about itself, once, aloud. The embers that sink are the same embers that rise. The body lowered into the ground and the body lifted up into light are not two different events with a gap of silence between them; they are the one motion of the fire, seen from below and then from above.

I was raised in an Irish Catholic house where this was never quite stated and never quite forgotten — where the dead were spoken of at the table as though they had only stepped into the next room, and where the ordinary bread and the ordinary light and the passing of a day were treated, without any fuss, as the very place where the sacred waits. I have never found a reason to leave that belief. I have only found more languages for it.

## **III. One Story, Told Forever, in Every Tongue**

Myth is the deep well from which every people drinks and finds the same water.

Joseph Campbell spent a lifetime showing that beneath the thousand heroes of the world there runs a single road — the call, the descent, the ordeal, the return — and that the hero who comes back bearing the gift is the same figure in Sumer and in Ireland and in every village that ever told a story after dark. The old books call this the eternal return, and it is no accident

that the phrase survives in every mythology we possess: what returns is not repetition but the same meaning, wearing a new face, arriving again the way a season arrives.

Carl Jung found this recurrence by looking inward, and named it the archetype — the abiding forms of the human heart that rise in every dreamer, in every prayer, in every people, because they belong to the whole species and not to any one of us. And Rupert Sheldrake, nearer to our own laboratories, proposed that form itself is held in a field — that when a pattern has been made once, it becomes easier to make again, that nature keeps a memory in which every new thing is secretly an old thing returning. What these three are describing, from inside the story, from inside the soul, and from inside the science, is the same fact my own long work has circled without ever quite naming it: that there is no such thing as an altogether new thing. Every face is an old face come again, and this is not a limitation. It is how spirit comes to know itself.

#### **IV. The Wave and the Particle, Reconciled**

Hegel taught that opposites are not two answers waiting for us to choose between them, but two halves of a whole longing to be reconciled — that a thing and its contradiction are always on their way toward a third thing that keeps and honors them both. This is exactly what the light shows us. The wave and the particle are not rivals; they are the one reality refusing to be seen whole from any single side. And the physics of emergence follows the same grammar: the whole is more than the sum of its parts, and yet nothing in the whole is foreign to the parts. Unity and difference are not enemies. They are the two wings of one bird.

It is here that Descartes, for all that he opened the modern mind, stands as the necessary temptation and the necessary error. “I think, therefore I am” founded the separate self — the lonely I that takes its own thinking as proof of its own aloneness. I honor it as the honest beginning of a long inquiry, but I have come to believe it mistakes the wave for the whole ocean. The I that thinks is real, but it is not separate. It is one flame in a fire that was burning

before it and will burn after it. The very act of doubting — the act Descartes took to be most privately his own — is itself a current in the one stream.

## **V. One Substance, Transfiguring into Many Forms**

The Orthodox tradition has always insisted on what the other traditions keep returning to from their own direction: that matter is not the prison of spirit but its sacrament. Nothing is lost in the transfiguring of a thing. The wood of the icon remains wood; the wheat of the loaf remains wheat; the body that prays remains body. And yet each is lifted into light without being unmade. It is the same teaching the chemist signed his name to: nothing is created, nothing destroyed, all is only transformed. The molecules of a saint and the molecules of a stone are one family — the same substance passing through endless forms, none of them final, none of them wasted.

The Buddha saw this from the far side and called it impermanence, and did not mourn it; he called the separateness of things an illusion and offered release from it. Lao-tzu saw it and called it the Way, a water that goes where the land gives it room, doing everything by yielding, never forcing, always arriving. And all three — the chemist, the Buddha, and the sage — are saying what the fire has said from the beginning: hold nothing too tightly, because nothing is meant to be held still. The one thing that does not change is the changing itself, and even death is only the fire turning over in its sleep.

## **VI. The Nine Faces and the One Light**

Even the self, which we prize so highly and so precariously, turns out to be one thing seen from many sides. The Enneagram names nine types of person, and I find them beautiful the way I find the old myths beautiful — not as boxes to put people into, but as the faithful partial faces through which a single light shines. Each type is a way of being a whole person, and none of them is the whole of the light. Jung knew this before there was a name for the map: the archetype is not your private self but the shared self visiting you, and your own small type is only the particular window through which the one fire is glimpsed.

I have come to believe that this is the deepest courtesy one person can show another: to know that whoever stands before me is a wave of the same sea as myself, a particle of the same light, one flame of the one fire — and to treat that person accordingly. Which is to say, as scripture has always recommended, with the tenderness we would wish for ourselves.

## **VII. The Spark**

And so I return, as I always do, to the ordinary, which is where all of it lives.

A flame and a river and a risen body and a hero's road and a wave that is also a particle and a loaf that is also more than a loaf — these are not five mysteries but one mystery, wearing five faces. It is the mystery of a love that nothing can finally lose, of a life that passes through every death, of an order that includes the falling ember and the rising spark without breaking. I believe the dead are not absent but changed, that nothing loved is ever lost but only carried forward, that all life is resurrection, and that recurring experience is transfiguration. I believe there is a single essential spark unifying time, and that we are all of us embers of it, kindling and going out in measure, and never, not once, going out forever.

And the name I have chosen for this one fire under all its names is the name my first and best teachers would recognize: the Oversoul — that common heart of which all sincere conversation is worship, and to which all right action is submission. It does not ask to be believed in the abstract. It asks only that we notice it, here, in the kitchen light at six in the morning, in the faces we pass and fail to see, in the small domestic liturgies we perform without knowing we are performing them. Attention is the whole of the discipline. The rest is mercy, which is only attention, carried toward another person, and held there a little longer.

I write, finally, to practice that attention — to watch a small thing until it discloses what it is actually for, to summon a character into fuller being rather than into a verdict, to grant each figure its wound and its reason, and to leave no one written off. Because the fire that burns in the page is the same fire that burns in the world, and the mercy I manage to show a flawed

and fictional soul is the mercy I have been trying, all my life, to learn how to show the living, the dead, and myself.