

Loving Fire

Sitting around the summer fires at the orphanage was the nearest I came in childhood to religious meditation. My thinking did not necessarily happen in my head. It happened all over, the fire itself compelling it, compelling grace, love, warmth, hope, imagination or memory, which are in essence either the same thing or aspects of the same thing. I sat and watched and listened and dreamed. Now and then I looked up and saw the sky splattered with stars, brighter stars, nearer stars, and these too seemed to burn and make light. The fireside singing of the orphans was in celebration of beauty, truth, hope, and love, no matter what the song happened to be. The arrangement was entirely sensible and satisfying, a large fire at the center of a large circle of boys and girls, all of them home, with friends, deeply alone and true, near memory and love.

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The fire made light, it made heat, it soothed and encouraged memory and imagination. The light and heat bathed both the body and the soul in a liquid of love, relaxing nerves and muscles, smoothing out the lines of anxiety in the face, so that soon every boy and girl had no reason to pretend anything about himself, or to be watchful of others, or to be fearful of them, or to feel the need to strain at any business of enduring. Voices grew softer around the fire. Eyes became brighter, gentler, more earnest, more loving, more tender, more humorous. Hands ceased to be imminent weapons of offense or defense and became forms of grace and kindness, whether scratched, the nails bitten, or covered with warts.

(p 90-91 , The Bicycle Rider in Beverly Hills.)