

Lighthouse Lessons in Gratitude

November 20, 2017 By [Liz Fisher](#)



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Whether we celebrate Thanksgiving or not, this is the season when we are encouraged to be grateful for the bounty of the harvest. I confess I've always felt a bit uncomfortable with the term gratitude. It almost seemed like a word of privilege, as if it was made only for those who have what they want in life. When things go wrong for no fault of our own, the call to gratitude can feel a bit like a betrayal.



Over the years, however, I've come to the conclusion that looking for something to be grateful for in difficult situations can be a positive antidote to injustice. I've always been impressed by the way some people who are in prison can find meaningful and uplifting aspects to their lives, even when they have been wrongly incarcerated.

So I decided, as part of my spiritual practice, I will find the lesson to be grateful for in any situation. I have seen throughout my life that when something negative happens, it's easier to regain my balance if I can keep centered in my positive intention for change.



In this effort and because of where I live, in a coastal town in California, my attention has been drawn to lighthouses, especially to their metaphorical and spiritual symbolism. They act much as a candle does in our own personal lives, providing a way to see in the darkness that allows us to draw strength from its fruitfulness. Rather than obliterating the dark, lighthouses give us an opportunity to avoid the obstacles that may be hidden if there is no illumination.

Symbols can be used as triggers for positive emotional responses that can help us resolve a perplexing situation. The physical reality of the symbol often holds the clues to the emotional state this symbol activates.

Here's a story about a lighthouse I have come to know well, Point Pinos Lighthouse in Pacific Grove, California, just a few blocks from where I live. It is the oldest, continuously operating lighthouse on the West Coast of the United States. Since February 1, 1855, its beacon has flashed nightly as the guide and warning to ships off the rocky California coast. It still operates today with its original lens in the original building.



Ghosts at the Lighthouse

As we move through the decades of the last century we have seen many changes in the way women and men participate in the culture. Yet even today at many levels we continue to confront conflict over this aspect of social norms. Role models from the past can be human beacons.



A woman lighthouse keeper in 1893 was indeed uncommon. Emily Maitland Fish took on this responsibility at the Point Pinos lighthouse. She is one of the ancestors who inspires women to take on roles that were once called “non-traditional” for women.

Emily Fish broke the mold in the 1800s. She traveled to China. When her sister died in childbirth, she adopted her child and raised her. She moved from Michigan to the West Coast where she and her husband became very socially involved in the San Francisco Bay Area.

When he died unexpectedly, she was able to go on with her life. Circumstances allowed her to move to Pacific Grove to take on the role of lighthouse keeper. She also, while being an effective lighthouse keeper, made sure that the small lighthouse was a sociable place. She often held salons attended by local artists and writers.

Emily was involved in starting the Monterey-Pacific Grove chapter of the American Red Cross, with other prominent women on the West Coast. Her daughter Julia’s husband died in a war in Manila. Then Julia took on the role of lighthouse keeper at Angel Island in San Francisco Bay.

These women have strong personalities, taking on responsibilities and positions that few did at the time. When we consider their



lives today, we realize these pioneering women caused important shifts in the cultural milieu of the times.

Each generation continues to move forward. We are now still confronting gender inequality of opportunity but there are many of us who act as challengers just as Emily Fish did. She challenged because she desired to live a full life. So do we.

Rugged Places and Times



Coastal areas, like phases in our lives, can become ever more rugged. In earth-centered spirituality we seek balance but also acknowledge the power and worth of changes. By valuing the beauty and support in difficult event, we grow into more adaptability, gaining the power to synthesize the wisdom life gives us.

According to Celtic legend, “thin places” are areas where two disparate worlds touch, such as land and sea. In these ethereal places the boundary between this world and the next seems almost non-existent.

Along the rugged Big Sur coast, not far from where Emily Fish held her salons, is another lighthouse which has exerted its influence on me. Big Sur is both spectacular and inspiring. But beauty is often intertwined with what needs to be avoided, the metaphorical hazardous rocks. The Point Sur Lighthouse, which stands on a rock protruding into the sea, is said to be haunted by ghosts of those who lived here and survived despite the lack of normal comforts. They were keenly aware of their surroundings.



The rocky shores were often treacherous for ships sailing along the coasts. There are also stories of those who, regardless of the help of the lighthouse, crashed on the rocks and did not survive. What makes a site magnificent can also be dangerous if happened upon in a vulnerable ship. We all have opportunities to hear stories in our own home

towns and social networks. These varied tales often have something to teach, inspiring us by offering insight, comfort and wisdom when we most need it.

In our modern society we don't see these historical threats as contemporary ones. Yet we live in a world where there is much danger to our physical well-being, our psychological equilibrium and community welfare. By keeping the image of the lighthouse in our thoughts, seeking places that illuminate the rocky shores, we discover opportunities to avoid obstacles so we can navigate more successfully as well as aid others in doing so. At the same time, we also respect the darkness, the mysterious unknown, which is actually the source of much of the beauty that we "see" in the daytime. Remembering the lighthouse in these times of strife gives a deeper meaning to the concept of gratitude.

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