

Reflection on Acts 2:1–21
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I recently read Victor Stefensen's book *Fire Country*, a memoir of sorts that outlines the technique and principles of traditional indigenous fire practices. As a young person living in Laura Queensland, Stefensen and a few of his friends were hired by a national park ranger to help with land management prior to the summer fire season.

Though it was already late October and the land was hot, dry and full of grassy fuel, the park rangers had just received permission and funding from the government to conduct this work. So all day, Stefensen and his friends rode on the back of the rangers' Utes with flame throwers in hand, watching the whole country go up in flames behind them.

To the surprise of the rangers, the fires often got out of control, escaping the designated burn zone which then had to be put out. Stefensen remembers walls of fire fifteen feet high devouring everything from the ground up, leaving behind blackened, branchless trunks and scorched leaves in the top stories. It took months, sometimes years, for the land to begin its recovery.

Around this same time, Stefensen befriended two elders in the community known as TG and Poppy who began to teach him about culture including traditional fire practices. In his book, Stefensen writes:

I will never forget the day that Poppy lit the first fire on country in front of me.

We were standing in the middle of a small community of boxwood trees about twenty kilometres out of old Laura town. The ecosystem was only as big as a couple of basketball courts and was surrounded by a small creek and stringybark country. The grass was quite thick, dead and dry, and we were standing in it up to our knees. "I'm gonna light the grass now, like the old people used to do," Poppy said loudly and proudly. He walked over to the stringybark country and ripped off a long piece of bark for the closest tree.

"You look now." He teased one end of the long piece of bark, lit it up and then walked through the boxwood patch in a repetitive, figure eight type movement. He was almost skipping as he dragged the bark along, making the fire follow him around. I watched him dancing through the flames like some kind of fire spirit sprinkling magic dust onto the land.

I watched the fire go higher and the smoke fill the space around him until I couldn't see him anymore. There was nothing but fire in front of me, but it was only seconds before it started to calm down. Then he reappeared in the middle of the fire, walking over the flames with his bare feet, giving me the biggest smile.

The fire soon trickled out, burning a perfect circle that outlined that little patch of boxwood country.

Tending the land with indigenous fire practices requires an intimate knowledge and deep connection to country. It cannot be done from a distance—geographical or spiritual. Maps, artificial boundaries and the wish to do fire management as it fits in with human schedules and economies have no place in this process. Instead, local custodians must know their country and its seasons, be able to read the signs, and respond accordingly when the time is ripe.

I was also moved by Victor Stefensen's stories of reverence. He tells of elders kneeling on the ground and giving thanks for the grasses before lighting them with their fire sticks. They would also cheer on "brother kangaroo" as he bounced slowly away from the gently widening circle of fire. He tells, too, of the community's delight at seeing native grasses sprouting and insects and birds returning after only a few weeks—a reason for campfire, song and dance.

Stefensen's introduction to fire as a gift from the Creator, as necessary for life as water and air, comes to mind for me as we observe Pentecost. The contrast between his experience of western fire management and the cool burn of traditional practices stays with me in particular and causes me to wonder about the kindling of the spirit we celebrate today.

What do we imagine is the nature of God's renewing fire and what might participation in this renewal look like? Does the spiritual revival for which we hope and pray descend upon us like a flame thrower? Is the goal to destroy everything in and around us that might go astray, be uncontrollable, or disturb things as they are, regardless of what is lost in the process? Or might the renewal we celebrate this day bring about a greater harmony and honouring of what is, by *means that are in-tune with Christ's peace and God's good creation?*

In reflecting on the Pentecost story in Acts, Rowan Williams observed that when the Holy Spirit comes to us, we are *connected* to God and others in a new way. The Spirit ignites in us a yearning for God and a desire to abide deeply in the Holy One. As Williams puts it, we want to “gaze into the mystery of God,” to let ourselves “be swept over that waterfall into the depths of God’s everlasting love.”

The actual experience of this gazing into mystery is often not as extraordinary as we might suppose. From what I can tell, it usually has less to do with exceptional circumstances or highly emotive events and more to do with attending to the sacred within the present moment. It is like the elders kneeling in the grass and giving thanks before a burn as well as their delight at witnessing the greening health of the land as bugs and birds find a home among the grasses once again. Adoration is the stuff of campfire, song and dance before our Creator.

Spiritual renewal not only connects us to God in a different way, we are connected to others as well. According to the Pentecost account in Acts, the Spirit falls *on all flesh*—no one, absolutely no one, is excluded from the Spirit’s enfolding and gifting.

For this reason, besides wanting to gaze into the mystery of God, “the other thing we want to do, if our Christian faith is really coming alive,” says Williams, “is to be there alongside all human beings in all the variety of their experience—to be alongside human beings who are rejoicing, who are succeeding, who are making something of their lives. To be alongside human beings who are grieving, who are lost, who are despairing.”

“Adoration and compassion,” suggests Williams, are the “two great facts of Christian life.” Adoration and compassion: two kinds of connection, because the Holy Spirit is the spirit that makes connection.

It occurs to me, then, that the renewal for which we pray and give thanks today is of the cool burn kind. It does not obliterate the realities of life, but grounds us in the here and now and opens us to what is. We are invited to an intimate tending through the connections forged by adoration and compassion. This is the kind of renewal able to bring healing and life to ourselves, our communities and the land in which we live. It is our calling to participate in the very means by which God is making all things new.