

Fire is seared into the deepest part of human consciousness. As a child, I was entranced by the flickering flames, staring at the smoldering embers, listening to voices rise and fall around me. That fascination, that pull to gather around the warmth and light of a fire, is something we all share, a piece of our childhood, our beginning. And not just our beginnings, but the beginning of all humanity, reaching back through millennia to long gone generations. They watched and wondered as lightning flashed and sparked wildfires, slowly, slowly mastering its secrets, manipulating fire for cooking, protection, and warmth. Over time, fire shaped human civilization, becoming the foundation of our society technologically and culturally.

Humanity has also been shaped by a fire within: the spark of curiosity and ingenuity, that burning desire to go beyond what is and ask "What if?". From the beginning, human beings have been filled with an innate desire to reach further, climb higher, and add fuel to the flames. In art, music, science, technology, and philosophy, our greatest achievements have come from those who pushed the boundaries of this world and dared to do the impossible, the forbidden.

Today's world, however, stamps out sparks and smothers flame. Why? Because fire is dangerous; it has the potential to destroy homes, uproot communities, and end lives. Those who do not fit society's definition of what success and happiness should be are a threat to the established order simply by being different. So, instead of staying true to our fire, we spend our time chasing an impossibly perfect life, telling ourselves that if we only worked harder, got better grades, or were paid more, then we would finally be happy. Caught up in this fruitless endeavor, we are afraid to take a chance, to step a toe out of line, to walk a different path than the one laid out for us. We go through life, never reaching our full potential, half satisfied with lukewarm contentment. Too often, we are told to tame our fire and silence our voices. Too often, we bury pain and anger and sorrow behind a polite smile, hiding our scars as though they are something to be ashamed of. Too often, we judge our self worth by how well we fit someone else's picture of success. We as a people have lost sight of what it means to be human, and traded our fire, brilliant and dangerous, for glow sticks, dim, artificial, and safe.

But we can change. To live genuinely fulfilling lives, we have to shatter this perception that there is only one way to be successful. We need to stop valuing people conditionally, based on how well they fit their assigned place, instead accepting all people as they are. There is a fire in me, in you, and in every human being on this planet. This fire is neither good nor evil, but simply part of

what it means to be alive. This fire, this burning desire to live, to more, and to reach higher is essential, and it forges us into who we are. Fire can burn and destroy, yes, but it can also create. We need fire to melt sand into glass, smelt metals, and harden arrows. Each of these requires fire, but at a different temperature and intensity. Likewise, the fire that burns in you is different from the fire that burns in me, and so we are forged into completely different but equally valuable people. Strive for excellence, but be your own excellent. A good sword has none of the same qualities as a beautiful stained glass window, but both are incredible in their own way. You are your own medium, and just as you can't make a sword out of glass, you can never truly succeed as someone you are not.

In this moment, I want you to look back on all your years, to the first fire you ever stood at the edge of. Think about all the trials and successes you've had since then, all the fires that forged you into the person you are now. Individually, as a community, and as a world, we've faced innumerable challenges, including a rising mental health crisis, environmental degradation, deepening political polarization, and a global pandemic. These fires have burned us, left us scarred and darker than we were before, but, like arrows hardened by flame, we are ultimately stronger and better able to face the difficulties before us.

I would be lying if I said everyone here would have a wonderful life, complete with sunshine and sparkles. I hope your future is bright and happy, but I can't promise that, and I know that for many right now, the future seems terrifyingly uncertain. We are becoming adults in a world that is not always kind or beautiful. But whatever darkness you may face, remember that there is a fire and a strength in you to keep fighting for who you are and what you believe. In the words of teacher and warrior Rengoku Kyojuro, "If you ever feel disheartened that you are somehow not enough, set your heart ablaze, dry your eyes and look ahead". The future waits for you, if you are willing to go out and seize it.

Tonight, I ask you to light a new fire in your heart, one that will carry you through the next stage of your life. Accept the person you have become, with your charred edges, burnt remains, and hidden strength. And then, strike a match, and ignite a resolution to always strive to be the best version of yourself. Wake up, and let your light illuminate the world around you, broken and beautiful as it is. Go, and fan your spark into flame.