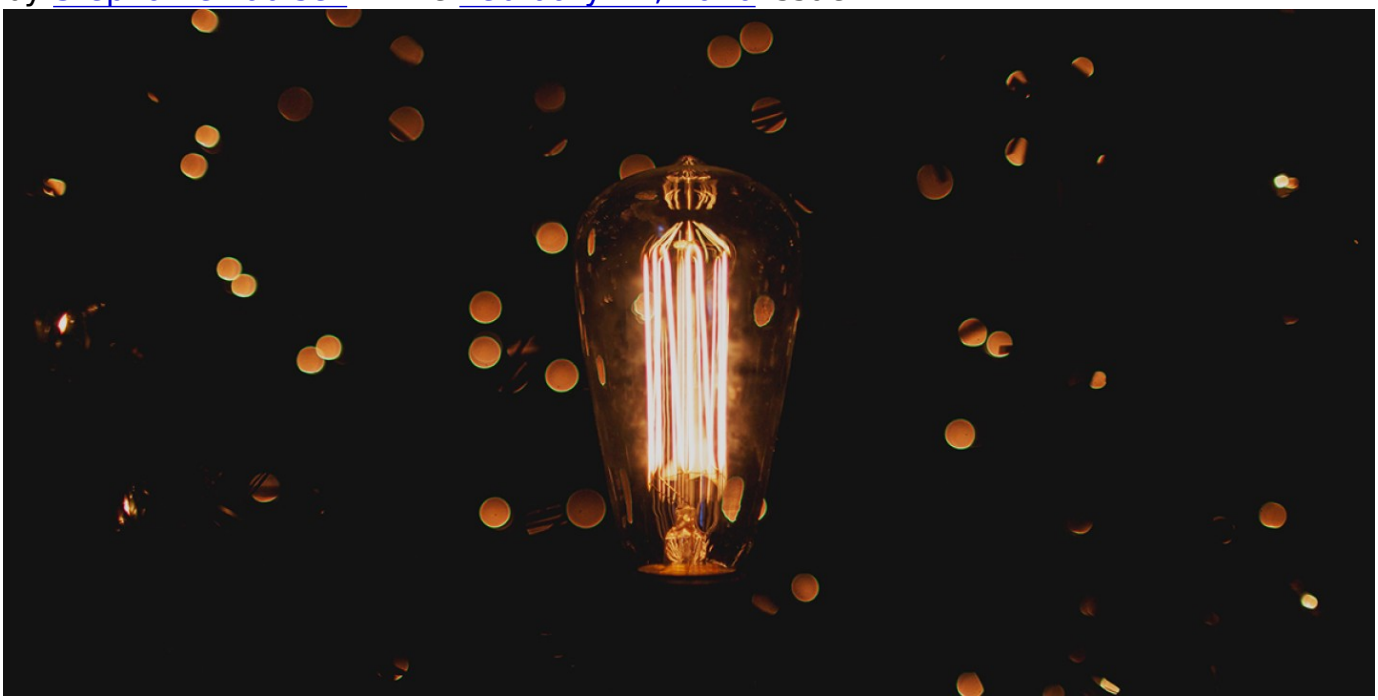
Making a habit out of Epiphany

Epiphanies flare up and fade. How can we keep them in our everyday vision?

by Stephanie Paulsell in the February 12, 2020 issue



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On Christmas morning, after we had unwrapped our presents and feasted on sweet rolls, my daughter and her Italian girlfriend compared their families' respective celebrations over Skype. Amanda held up her now-empty stocking to show Alessia. "Your stocking?" Alessia asked. "Don't you have Epiphany?"

Well, sort of. But not like the Italians, for whom Epiphany is both a religious and a national holiday. In Italy, Epiphany even has its own gift giver—La Befana, an old woman who housed the Magi during their journey. They invited her to come along as they followed the star, but she declined because of all the housework she had to do. Later, she wished she had gone with them. On Epiphany Eve, she searches for the Christ Child in every child, leaving toys, candy, and *carbone*—sweet lumps of candy made to look like coal—in their stockings. (Not as binary a thinker as Santa Claus,

apparently, La Befana recognizes that everybody's been both bad and good!)

Epiphany doesn't stand out sharply in my memories of the religious observances of my childhood. We sang "We Three Kings" on Christmas Eve and put the Magi side by side with the shepherds in our nativity scenes. By the time January 6 rolled around, we had taken the lights out of our windows, packed away our ornaments, and put our tree out by the curb.

It's easy for Epiphany to get swallowed up in the return to work and school after the beginning of the new year—to say nothing of the season of Epiphany, which for many Christian communities is still going on and will continue until Lent. Can you still feel the light of the Magi's star shining? Epiphany feels somehow optional, the end of Christmas rather than the beginning of something—one last intensification of the miracle of God-with-us before Ash Wednesday arrives to remind us that we are dust.

I probably have more experience with epiphany as a literary concept than as a religious observance. James Joyce borrowed the term from the Christian feast to describe a sudden, unexpected moment of illumination, a revelation of the radiance of the ordinary world. But there are all kinds of epiphanies in literature. Some characters seem almost effortlessly alive to the mystery that reveals itself in the midst of ordinary life; others struggle toward their revelations. Virginia Woolf doesn't use the word *epiphany*, but she does write about what she calls the "moments of being" that shaped her life and her art—encounters with the real so powerful that they often left her shattered. She wrote in her autobiography that these moments of being made her a writer. Writing was a way to respond, a way to collect the fragments of the revelation and create something new from them. Finding language for such experiences is part of what makes Woolf's art so revelatory.

Epiphanies open the possibility that we might change and the world might change, for they offer an opportunity to create new ways of living from our fragments of revelation. In the moment of illumination, our experience is enlarged, the boundaries of our lives made more permeable. Existence itself seems to hold more possibilities than we had imagined. But epiphanies are evanescent—they shine out, and then they recede. How can we hold onto the possibilities of change we glimpsed, in ourselves, in the world?

We need practices that keep us grounded in our epiphanies, even when the Magi have returned to their country and we to our daily lives. We need ways to extend our vision even when we are too busy to remember we've had one.

One way to do this is to make living in the afterglow of that vision a habit, a commitment. Benedictines do this when they choose to welcome every guest as Christ among them—a choice grounded, surely, in an epiphany, but a choice that can be made even when the light of illumination has dimmed. The story of La Befana illustrates this way of making an epiphany last. If she cannot go with the Magi to see the Christ Child, she will choose to find Christ in every child.

How will we choose to respond to the illumination of Epiphany, which passes so swiftly into memory? What commitments can we make to keep the Magi's epiphany in view? Will we choose to see the Christ Child lying on the floor of a detention center, covered in a foil blanket? Will we choose to see the Holy Family separated and caged? And if we choose to see, what will we choose to do?

The journey from Advent to Christmas to Epiphany and beyond is a journey from the enveloping darkness of the womb into the world's harsh light. Christ is born, and so are we—reborn into a greater awareness of God's presence in the world and called to keep it in view. Epiphanies flare up and then fade. They can be easy to miss, coming, as they so often do, in the middle of our work week, revelations we are lucky to catch from the corner of our eye. Some Christians call these weeks between Epiphany and Lent the season of Epiphany; others call these weeks Ordinary Time. Maybe the truth is that there's no difference. For it is in ordinary time that the light of Epiphany shines, signaling to us from desolate places that Christ has been born.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Making epiphanies last."