

fire

Melissa Addey continues her series on the elements of our world

Legends around the world say that of all the living beings on our planet, only people have and use fire – and that we stole it from the gods. This divine aspect of fire-related legends tells us in what awe we hold this element:

that whilst it provides us with warmth, light and cooked food, we also fear and revere it. Fire is used in festivals, rituals and religions, from candles for prayers to bonfires for celebrations and to ward off evil. We use fire to signify continuity when we hold up the Olympic torch, we have nightlights to assuage our children's fear of the dark. We blow out candles to celebrate the years passing on our birthday cakes and we set off fireworks to bid farewell to an old year while welcoming in a new season. Fire is cosy and domestic, but also magical and fearsome.

Find the fire in your own home – from candles for special occasions to matches to light them, from fireplaces to stoves. From light bulbs to the sun, where do the heat, light and cooked food come from in your house?

Playing with fire might sound like a terrible idea for family fun, but use this opportunity to teach those you love important fire safety skills. Think about what fire needs and try an experiment where you take away all the air from a burning candle – a candle in a jar will show this when you put the lid on. See how quickly the flame flickers and dies. Could you make a fire in a survival situation? It's a feel-good skill to lay a proper fire in the house or garden when you have all the right tools – but see what you can do with only a magnifying glass and some dry wood in the garden!

Fire can engage all your senses. Both people and domestic animals find watching live flames quite entrancing and even meditative. The sound of a roaring fire can bring instant 'cosiness' to a room, and the warmth it brings can

be comforting, although if you have ever burnt yourself even a little you will be all too aware of the pain that can result. Try burning different substances to enjoy the smells: pine cones, herbs, or fragrant woods such as apple-tree prunings. Think of smelling wood smoke versus a gas flame. We use fire or heat in various forms to prepare food, but something cooked on a barbecue, where the flames have had direct contact with it, tastes quite different from the same food cooked in an oven. Explore the power of fire – from lightning strikes to wildfires – to see how tame our own cosy fires at home are.

Go out and enjoy the bonfires and firework displays that autumn festivals bring. Make a guy for Guy Fawkes Night, dress up as fire-breathing dragons for Halloween (heavily derived from the original Celtic festival of Samhain) and fly sky lanterns, perhaps with wishes or your names painted on them, but do make sure they are biodegradable. Have a little campfire of your own to roast marshmallows on sticks, and potatoes or chestnuts in the embers, tell scary stories and sing songs. Make your own pizza in a wood-fired oven or find a restaurant that does where they might let you take a peep while your food cooks. See if there's a local fire station having an open day that you can visit: this is a huge hit with little children for the thrill of sitting in a real fire engine. Celebrate Diwali, the Festival of Lights. Use solar fairy lights to turn your garden into a magical place and harvest the power of the sun, a truly mighty flame!

If you're stuck indoors, use the time to carve pumpkins for Halloween, to make little lanterns from paper or old tin cans, to draw pictures with charcoal, or make candles – in moulds and by dipping. Are you brave enough to pass your finger through a candle flame? It is an oddly exhilarating thing to do, yet safe (if you take care and are quick and have an adult close by, of course!). Use your stove to make popcorn so that you can see how heat can utterly change the nature of a foodstuff, and then munch on the results round an open fire if you have a fireplace – or around your newly made candles and lanterns.

Older children may feel that they are too grown-up to be impressed by sitting in fire engines or carving pumpkins.>