

More Than Enough
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Sermon, presented July 6, 2008
Williamsburg Unitarian Universalists

I grew up as a Baptist PK, preacher's kid, and was raised in the era when being a minister inadvertently meant taking a vow of poverty. Consequently, my dad's profession along with the fact that he had 7 daughters to feed and clothe meant that money was not plentiful in our home. I think I was 12 before I got a coat that had not belonged to my older sister. And, even though my childhood preceded the onset of the skillful marketing of name-brand clothes, my sisters and I knew that materially we had considerably less than most of our friends.

Understandably there were times when it really got to one of us that because of lack of finances we were not able to have or do something that "*everyone else*" was getting or doing. Invariably my mother's response would be the statement, "*Well, you may not be rich in money, but you are rich in sisters.*" As you might imagine, none of us seemed to find that response particularly satisfying or consoling. In fact, there were occasions when each of dreamed that somehow the majority of our siblings could be eliminated from the face of the earth.

As adults, however, each of us has a totally transformed perspective. Although we are spread around the country we gather as frequently as we are able because we enjoy each other so much. We collegially shared the responsibility of my dad during his prolonged terminal illness and death; we have been there for each other in the tragedies various families have endured, and we've grown to recognize the value of the intangible kind of **richness** my mother, who never had a sister, had been describing.

Mark Buchanan says that we live in a *consumist* culture, a lifestyle where we are "*trapped in the cult of the thing.*" He believes mostly we continually live for

“the next thing”—the next purchase, the next weekend, the next job, the next adventure. This becomes so obsessive that we lose the capacity to enjoy and to be thankful for *this* thing we have right now or that thing we acquired yesterday. In what seems to be a frightening statistic, 72 percent of the nation’s economy depends upon retail binges.

Nearly all of us, - to some extent - are owned by the stuff we think we own, and it seems the amount we think we need, what we believe we have to have, is increasing. Over the past couple of decades, while the family size has decreased, the average house size in the US has doubled. Many students arriving at college have never shared bathrooms while most of them have never shared bedrooms.

Recently, in the library, on the bookshelf for new books, I noticed a title, *House Lust*. Apparently someone has researched how harmful the ostensibly growing phenomenon of possessing bigger and more beautiful homes is wreaking havoc with relationships, bank accounts and life satisfaction.

It is fascinating to me, and I think partial blame may go to HGTV, that in order for our bedrooms and hotel rooms to really pop and not be outdated we have to have a dozen pillows on the beds. I sure would like to be the salesperson responsible for convincing the Marriott Corporation they would lose market share if they did not invest millions in pillows. At the same time I would not want to be the maids who’ve had added to their workloads the task of putting these pillows back in place in each of the units they clean.

The drive not only for more but also for the *newest* plays a part in our one-sided, materialistic understanding of happiness: America is the richest nation on earth with possibly the highest rate of clinical depression and anxiety.

Earlier this year a former president of Hamilton College, the gentleman who hired me as college chaplain in 1991, jumped out of the window of a high-rise hotel in Atlanta. Hank Payne was someone who it appeared had the ideal life. He was

charming, brilliant, highly-respected, entertaining, had two sons who are professors at Stamford, a loving wife, was a valued and participatory member of his synagogue, had a fulfilling career, a summer home in the Berkshires, everything, according to conventional wisdom, anyone could want. But obviously something was desperately amiss to convince this gifted man that taking his life was the best way to address what was lacking in it.

Someone has observed that consumerism teaches us not to value things too **much**, but to value them too **little**. We forget how to cherish and to savor. The existence of constant wanting dissipates gratitude, and the weight of impatient craving robs us of potential enjoyment. The first story in the Bible about human beings is a story of enticement. Adam and Eve were lured to the tree in part because it promised more than what they had. But it took only an instant for them to determine that the pleasure they discovered was in the envisioning, not the achieving. Thus the story of Adam and Eve is the first story of human beings who wished to bypass “**enough**” for “**more.**”

For a contingency of born-again Christians, there is a new popular dogma being touted labeled **gospel prosperity**. Its gist is that God will generously bestow material goods on those who have the proper belief structure. In other words, believe certain things about Jesus and you will be blessed with prosperity. To me this is a perversion of all biblical teaching. Over 2000 Bible verses address economics and most frequently they either advocate for actions that address the needs of the less fortunate, or they are a warning of the dangers of valuing material goods in unhealthy ways. What I think gospel prosperity really is, is just another way to religiously defend lifestyles of greed and privilege.

Jesus clearly saw wealth as a slave master that prevented a centering in what he perceived God to be, the mystery that transcends and gives ultimate meaning to life. It was not that Jesus was opposed to material possessions, but, like time-honored

spiritual leaders of all faiths, he wanted people to understand that relentless gratification of our appetites in the material world would not bring ultimate meaning and purpose.

It seems, then, it is not the wanting that corrupts us. Rather what corrupts us is the wanting that's misplaced, that is set on the wrong thing. The cure for our yearning and our restlessness **is not** to keep getting more. That bloats us; it does not fill us. Nor is the cure Buddhist detachment, where we try to winnow out from ourselves all desires. That depletes us.

According to the unassuming Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, *“The amount of violence and craving in us and in our children comes from our practice of unmindful consumption—watching television, reading magazines, having poisonous conversation. He says, we bring a lot of poisons and toxins into our bodies and into our consciousness. If we don't stop producing these toxic items and if we don't know how to protect ourselves by mindful consumption of these items, there's no way out. His solution: We need not less but right consumption.”*

The Catholic priest, Thomas a Kempis, writing almost a thousand years ago, cautions us about overestimating what the world seems to offer. Living a very simple life himself, he wrote that it was vanity not only to seek material wealth that cannot last, but also to put your trust in it.

It is relatively easy to agree to these as words of wisdom but the reality is that we live in a culture that ceaselessly attempts to convince us that we have to have this and that, or life won't be worth living. Thus we are faced with a constant challenge to want the right things in the right amount at the same time as we are bombarded with not only too many possibilities and choices, but also repetitive chants like,

- *“Super-size,*
- *If little is good, more must be better, or*

- *Even though what you have now works, your life would be enhanced with a newer or better model!” ///*

So, how are we supposed to achieve what Adam and Eve were unsuccessful at achieving **in a paradise**, and that is, to balance getting what we want in life with contentment for what we already have. How much **is** truly enough?

A first step might be to convince ourselves that constant striving for more will not bring us the best and most meaningful life. In classical spiritual literature there is a stage that St. John of the Cross called “*The Dark Night of the Senses.*” a stage in life where things of the senses—food, drink, gold, toys of all sorts—no longer satisfy the way they once did, and the question arises: “*Is this all there is!*”

Asking this question with sincerity, brings a shift in us where we desire to live more according to spiritual values, the values that give our lives a sense of belonging, meaning, hope, beauty, simplicity and acceptance. When we are earnest about demonstrating a commitment to spiritual values we begin approaching our decision-making regarding our purchases, the utilization of our discretionary time, and the places we choose to put our energy by asking ourselves, will what we are choosing bring us a greater sense of belonging and fulfillment? Will it nourish our spirits?

Additionally we need to accept, **that** part of our humanity is that we are hardwired with a desire for more. That is one of the truths conveyed in the Adam and Eve myth. Thus, we need to cultivate a level of comfort with the part of our being that desires, and learn to nourish it appropriately and in moderation because honoring boundaries leads to wellness.

As we develop, a major learning includes acknowledging what does *not* make for life. A major key to our quest for a life of enoughness may be to ask ourselves, what it is that we really do not want to do so that everything else we do, can be done with more energy, with more quality, with more inner peace.

In her autobiographical book, *Leaving Church*, Barbara Brown Taylor, who is considered to be one of the top mainline preachers in our country today, wrote that most of us know what it that is killing us and she gave some examples:

- the chaos and rush of our lives,
- the inability to move from where we are;
- the prison of our possessions,
- the crushing poverty that dooms our children to more of the same,
- deadlines pressing on us,
- technology, and
- pain from our families

After identifying those things that are killing us, we can try to answer the other question Barbara Brown Taylor asked, “*What is it that is saving your life now? What are the things in your hands that can be expanded because they bring you life?*”

Her personal answers to that question, which invariably would differ from yours and mine, were:

- Teaching, being a part of a transformative endeavor
- Living in relationship with creation
- Caring for animals, and
- Observing times of quiet and Sabbath

Answering those questions led Rev. Taylor to determine what things she needed to winnow from her life to create a more fulfilling one. Ultimately for her, much to her amazement, that meant leaving parish ministry, something that had for over two decades nourished her and provided her a basis of identity.

Surprisingly, the potential for richness in our lives, it appears, may be discovered in proportion to the number of things we can afford to let alone. It may seem paradoxical that our deepest joy lies not necessarily in becoming more, or in

acquiring more but in cultivating a sense of enough ness -- enough space, stuff, achievement, activities, etc. And, like other aspects of growth, a life of sufficiency is not something established once and forever – it is an ongoing quest of experimentation and decision-making.

In closing, because it expresses well what it means to live richly, to live a life of enough ness, I am going to relate a story from Michael Gellert's book, *"The Way of the Small."*

Once upon a time there was a king who died and went to the gate of heaven. Expecting to see large pearly gates and St. Peter sitting on a throne instead he found Peter standing in front of a plain, small doorway.

"May I come in?" the king asked the saint.

"Let's see," Peter said, looking over his notes. *"It is true,"* he began, *"that you were a great king with a great kingdom. Yes, you had many wives and children and much wealth, and made many important changes in the world. But you yourself have become so identified with your crown of greatness that you would not know who you are without it. I am afraid you would not know how to live here. I'm sorry, you can't come in."*

Shocked and dismayed the king said, *"What must I do to get in?"* *I have nowhere to go."*

"You do have some options," Peter replied. *"What I would suggest is that you go back to earth and learn to be less."*

The king, with St. Peter's help went back to earth.

In his next life, he purposely chose a path that was not so big. He returned to the kingdom and became a healer to the poor folk. He studied hard and became very knowledgeable and skilled. And he traveled far and wide healing many sick people. As he was much in demand, he did not have time to have a family, but this suited him fine because some of the kindred souls he met on his journeys became like family.

Finally he reached old age, died and once again found himself facing St. Peter at the modest entrance to heaven.

He said to Peter, *“I have lived a smaller life, helping others and sacrificing my own comfort. Can I now enter heaven?”*

“Mnnn,” St. Peter said, examining his revised notes. *“I see that indeed you chose a somewhat less pretentious life, doing much good serving others. But is it not true that you were also secretly very proud of this, feeling like you were on a heavenly mission and doing this mostly for your own advantage?”*

“Well,” the healer-king said, *“What’s wrong with that?”*

“Nothing,” Peter said, *“but it’s not the right preparation for life up here...”*

Upon hearing this, the healer-king became furious, and started shouting obscenities at the old saint.

“That’s not the right tact, either,” Peter calmly said.

“Well, what must I do?” the healer-king asked in exasperation.

“Try again,” Peter said.

So the healer-king went back to earth, choosing this time a simple life as a shoemaker in a village at the outer edge of the kingdom. He married a village girl, raised a couple of children, and lived in a small cottage with his shoe shop attached. As the years went by he grew into serene happiness, enjoying his family, his work, his neighbors. At the end of each day he loved to come into the living room of his home and spend the evenings with his family sharing stories in front of the fireplace. He grew to be very old in this life, surviving his wife and even his children. And although he was lonely, he still enjoyed his days, making shoes and sitting by the fireplace at night in contemplative reverie.

Finally the old shoemaker died and was once again standing face to face with St. Peter *at the door of heaven. /////*

“You know,” he said before Peter could utter a word, *“that was so good, you could send me back one more time.”*

St. Peter smiled and said, *“Come in,”*

Living a life of enoughness means not just getting through our days, **but also** living attentively and gratefully in them. It means receiving the ordinary things like food, light, warmth and love as wonders with staggering value. And it involves an ongoing willingness to sort out the **substance** of life from its excess, to adopt a lifestyle where incessant actions and distractions do not sidetrack us from a rich attentiveness that brings balance and peace.

Wendell Berry says it so well in the closing words of his poem, “The Wild Geese.”

but to be Quiet in heart, and in eye Clear. What we need is here.