

**20 July, 2008 * Appetites, Part 2: How Much Stuff Is Enough?
Rev. Erika Hewitt * Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Congregation**

Reading

an excerpt from “Wanting, Getting and Giving” by Rev. Bonnie McClish Dlott in *The Abundance of Our Faith*, eds. Terry Sweetser and Susan Milnor (pp. 19-26)

Last spring, I got a message from the universe. Now I don't get too many messages from the universe; sometimes I do not even get my phone messages. But this message was very loud, and it came at four in the morning in the form of a tremendous thud from my closet... This particular message was,... “You have too many clothes.” The stupendous weight of my clothes pulled the bracket holding the closet rod right off the shelf it was attached to, and my beautiful wardrobe hit the floor. I was stunned. Hadn't I just gone through this closet and taken out a few dozen things to give away? How could this happen?

I thought about this as my husband fretted about the closet repair. Why do I have so many outfits? Hey, I know the answer to this question: because I want them! I see something on the rack... I try it on... I look so... whatever – professional, sexy, smart, cool, tough hip! It's like magic; I'm transformed into a new person...and I like what I see! If I just had this outfit, I would feel good about myself. Each piece of clothing is a transformational opportunity.

And yet, [as my husband returned from Home Depot the next day with some brackets that looked like they could hold up an entire circus tent], I had to ask myself: Had that happy [transformational feeling I got from my clothes] persisted past one or two washings? Even more importantly, what was it about myself that needed transforming, and how is real transformation accomplished? Can it be accomplished by getting things?

Sermon: “How Much Stuff Is Enough?”

One hundred seventy years ago, Ralph Waldo Emerson proclaimed that the “true preacher” can be known by this: “that he [or she] deals out to the people... life passed through the fire of thought.” Notice, however, that Emerson didn't specify *whose* thought. I believe that I can claim my status as a “true preacher” and still confess to you that, if you feel blessed by insight or wisdom this morning, it's courtesy of my colleague, Bonnie Dlott, and the members of the Summer Sermon Seminar, whose conversation on Monday sparked some good questions. I thank them for their ideas, which became the building blocks of this sermon.

During the Message for All Ages, we looked at a whole heap of stuff from a systems point of view: the toxins that go into resource extraction and production; the degree to

which our economy is designed around consumerism and “planned obsolescence;” the wounds we inflict on the earth when we grow bored with, and dispose of, last year’s purchases. That’s one lens for viewing our appetite for stuff: the environmental cost of producing – and then getting rid of – storage boxes, calculators, computer monitors, electric staplers, telephones,...you name it.

For the rest of this sermon, however, I’m asking you to look at “stuff” through an additional lens: the inner forces that compel and seduce us to accumulate stuff, and what responses are available to us as we wrestle with those forces.

I begin, as Unitarian Universalist ministers are wise to do, with a disclaimer: We all need stuff. There’s nothing inherently wrong with it. I, for one, believe that computers and cell phones make life easier and more enjoyable – as do toasters, coffee makers, furniture, DVDs, and the many books that I acquired on vacation.

You know what I’m referring to, though, when I use the word, “stuff.” For many of us, it’s the years-long accumulation of things that we once found necessary – or found under the Christmas tree – that have slowly lost their utility, attractiveness, and even their sentimental value. “Stuff” is what makes both self-storage facilities and thrift stores a booming business. It’s what owns *us*, rather us owning *it*. “Stuff” is what got left behind, almost two weeks ago, when the Gap Fire forced a good number of you to evacuate, and you had to decide what to save, and what you were willing to say good-bye to. So you know what “stuff” is, just as certainly as you know that a woman who bought three bags of new clothes on her vacation is neither going to judge you & your stuff, nor urge you to live a life of asceticism.

With that behind us, let’s talk about how that stuff made it into our homes: whence our appetite for it stems. The “getting” of things is a way to assuage boredom or loneliness; it’s a means of numbing discomfort, or filling time. Then there are societal forces at work, which continually up the ante by redefining luxuries as “basic necessities.” When our culture normalizes the monthly expenses of daily lattes, cable TV, Netflix subscriptions, gym memberships, and cell phones, it insidiously shifts our resources away from conscious, mindful spending.

But cultural forces and emotional whirlpools aren’t at the heart of Bonnie Dlott’s appetite for new clothes. In our reading, she reveals her *spiritual* hunger for stuff; what my friend Cecilia calls the “God-sized hole.” Speaking only for myself, it requires deep honesty and a dash of stillness for me to recognize my own “God-sized hole” and its power over me. When I’m surrounded by Bright Shiny Things in stores, it’s all too easy to justify a purchase as something I “need” or – and this is a red flag – “deserve.” (I was raised by a family for whom “I want” isn’t reason enough to buy something.) Either that, or the justification for buying something contains the word “only,” emphasized in front of the price, as in, “It’s *only* \$25.”

When I manage to step out of range of the siren song of whatever it is that I covet, it's easier to hear the rumblings of the *true* engine driving my longing. It's not low self-esteem, or jealousy, or my inner 12-year old's desire to be "cool." It's a *restlessness*, a wanting not just to *have* more, but to *be* more.

"Each piece of clothing," Bonnie writes, in reference to the wardrobe lying at a puddle on her closet floor, "is a transformational opportunity." Another way to name "transformational opportunity" is the chance to *be* more, to be someone different. As in:

- If I buy this outfit, it will transform me into someone who's younger/hipper/more attractive
- If had this appliance in my home, I would become someone who can cook
- If this knick-knack, which made me smile in the store, were on my shelf at home, it would make me smile every day, and turn me into a happier person in general
- If I buy this blank book, I will be transformed into a person who journals for twenty minutes each day
- (*One of the more destructive ones, in our culture:*) Having this piece of exercise equipment will transform me into a person who weighs twenty pounds less

Who can say *no* to any of those alluring possibilities, to those better and brighter selves waiting for us to claim them on the other end of the purchase? If this seductive stuff – the espresso machine, the cute sweater, the pillows that are a deeper shade of blue than the ones already on our couch... if any or all of these things will morph us into the Someone Else that *we could* be, then *who are we without it?* We're left with ourselves, just as we are. And we are left with each other.

Without all of those Pretty, Shiny Things that could transform me into someone else, I'm just me, filled with the clanging voices of desire. What would it mean if I couldn't, or didn't, have all of those things that I covet? I'd have to find ways to make peace with that Holy Restlessness – the Hunger to Be Changed – that scuttles and skulks inside of me. And I'd have to find other ways – harder, messier ways – to keep becoming the person I want to be.

Bonnie says that when her husband came home from Home Depot with a bigger and stronger bracket for her closet, she wondered: "What was it about myself that needed transforming[?]... *how is real transformation accomplished? Can it be accomplished by getting things?*"

There's nothing shameful or out-of-the-ordinary, after all, about our longing to be changed. Instead of ignoring our hunger for transformation, or "stuff-ing" ourselves out of its range, we can pay attention to it. That rumbling, furtive yearning, in fact, "begs not just for our flickering attention, but for our sustained, directed passion."¹ Theology aside,

the phrase “God-sized hole” is an apt one, because it points so bluntly to that which is at once the source and object of our longing. If that phrase doesn’t resonate with you, try the one used by a Zen Buddhist teacher²: “that which you are seeking is causing you to seek.” I believe that Holy Restlessness is the world beckoning to us; it is an invitation to be more awake; it is life’s call to engage both its light and its shadow more deeply.

*You do not have to be good, writes Mary Oliver.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.*

Ours is a community of welcoming, and ours is a Universe steeped in both mystery and compassion. You do not have to do anything to earn the love in our midst.

You do not have to be braver, smarter, stronger, better than you are in this moment to belong.

You only have to bring the gift of your body, no matter how able;
your seeking mind, no matter how busy;
your animal heart, no matter how hungry.

Be all that you are, and cherish all that you love,
and let us continue listening for the deeper voice.

Endnotes:

1. Victoria Safford, in “Hungry for Transformation.”
2. The title of one of Cheri Huber’s fine books. See www.cherihuber.com.