

LIVING SIMPLY AND WELL— IN TIMES LIKE THIS



Morning Celebration

Unitarian Church of Staten Island
Sunday, November 16, 2008

“Reflection: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”~Walden by Henry David Thoreau

Call To Community

Within Unitarian Universalism, we have one particular shining star of what it means to live simply and well. Our Transcendentalist ancestor, Henry David Thoreau is known for living simply and well for a time near Walden Pond as well as for his civil disobedience in response to justice issues prevalent in his day.

His words are our call to community this morning: “Time is the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thick current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars...I have always been regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born.” By Henry David Thoreau quoted in *Thoreau as Spiritual Guide* by Barry M. Andrews

Guided Meditation on Simplicity

Our meditation is inspired by a wonderful book by Joe Dominquez and Vicki Robin called “Your Money or Your Life” (p. 230-231)

Take a deep breath and breathe in joy, vitality and peace. Exhale fear, negativity and worry. Breathe in and out—clearing the mind, preparing the heart to go deeper, to cultivate peace in this quiet time that we share together in this sacred space. Continue breathing in and out in this safe haven for the renewal of your spirit.

Consider a new definition of money as what we trade our life energy for. What we trade our life energy for. Our income and our jobs help us to have money for food, shelter, clothing and the basic necessities of life for ourselves and our family. They do not define us as people nor do they limit the real “work” that is ours to do. For our “real ‘work’ may be far bigger...”

In this period of silence, ask yourself “what am I willing to trade my life energy for?” What is central to my life, my values, my beliefs, and my integrity as a person and a member of the human and earth-wide community? Really breathe in and find that centered place within you to ask yourself these questions—what am I willing to trade my life energy for? And what is most central to my life and my intrinsic core values? Rest in these questions and in the silence of this moment.

Reading

In times like this, we need to take stock of how we spend our money and our time. Cecile Andrews’s book, *The Circle of Simplicity: Return to the Good Life* has a number of suggestions. Voluntary simplicity circles are springing up everywhere. People realize the value of living simply and well. Andrews’ book has some Simplicity Circle Members’ experiences with voluntary simplicity. The reading included many of their experiences from her book.

“When you begin to live consciously, you not only begin to enjoy life more, you begin to save money.” Here are some ways to reduce our consumption:

“Try not to expose yourself to the pressure of advertising.

Don’t shop as entertainment.

Research every purchase.

Develop your own slow-down mechanisms”

Become a caring consumer by asking yourself:

“Do I really need this?

How will this item affect the quality of my life?...”

How were the people who made it treated?

“Was their health put at risk with pesticides?”

Finally, “...Some worry that if we reduce consumption, we’re not being loyal Americans. But don’t confuse being loyal to a corporation with being loyal to this country. We are forsaking our values of life, liberty and justice for all *by consuming*, not by reducing our consuming.”

“...Now that we have cleared a space in our lives—now that we have a vision of clarity for the kind of life we are seeking, now that we have begun to remove the clutter both within and without, we can seek out a new path, one that will help us discover how to live more fully and be more alive.”

Living Simply and Well—In Times Like This

The Rev. Susan Karlson

November 16, 2008

What's so complicated about living simply? With our human roots as hunter/gatherers, we tend to hoard naturally. We're hot-wired collectors whose first instinct is to gather because we don't know when something might come in useful. So went one of my discussions with my beloved this week as we talked about how we could live more simply and well. We are not sinners for being hunter/gatherer types. We simply do what comes naturally. Along our journeys, we sometimes learn the adverse effects of our hoarding instincts. It is possible to work towards balance by living simply and well in times like this—in spite of our proclivity for hoarding and gathering.

We shared some funny stories this week about our hoarding tendencies. Mine mainly have to do with food and sentimental collections of “stuff.” When I was a young adult, my mother and I went to the local Greek bake sale. Oh, how I love those Greek pastries. That particular year, we bought several of each variety and I ate all of mine before we arrived home. Towards the end of the drive home, I had a rash that went up and down my arms. Even then, I was a little surprised I didn't go into some kind of insulin reaction. I had this inner drive that pushed me to consume all the pastries right then and there.

My daughter and I talked the other day about all those free coupons that appear in little plastic sleeves. This church gets three different sets each week at each door, all promising discounts on so many varieties of grocery and sundry items. That doesn't work for my anti-hunter/gatherer efforts. I prefer to avoid the stores altogether—waiting till I really need something like a coat or warm clothes. Otherwise, I know I'll see something I have no earthly use for whatsoever. I had a gift card to buy a frame for a poster. After buying the frame, I had \$2.50 credit left. I started looking at the \$1 sale items and could have bought tons of cute little dollar holiday items but I knew if I was going to buy any of those, I should buy them at the Jolly Holly Fair coming up in a couple of weeks. The temptation was great, but I was strong—that time.

It's easy to get sucked into consuming. Though I believe that this hunter/gatherer instinct is buried within us, some of our spending patterns and our habits about money really come from learned behaviors. So how do we change behaviors that may be both in our nature and our nurturing? I appreciate the concepts extolled in *Your Money or Your Life* because I see how easy it is for us to gather at the American feeding trough until we are oversaturated by advertising and stimuli. Black Friday, the shopping bargain day of the whole year, is on its way. With an economy like ours will we still shop till we drop? Is that the best use of our time?

Cecile Andrews writes about Simplicity Circles that help people voluntarily reduce clutter and consumption while building cooperative communities. The religions of the world have their diverse perspectives on acting in harmony to preserve the earth and environment. Earth-centered traditions see life and all its many aspects as gifts from the Creator. People demonstrate gratitude by caring for Mother Earth and all our two-legged, four-legged, flying and swimming sisters and brothers.

The actual meaning of the Hebrew words in the Genesis creation stories highlight a special responsibility given to humans to care for the earth and all its inhabitants. These stories don't indicate human superiority but instead put caring for one another and all life as a sacred human trust.

One of the core principles of Unitarian Universalism is interdependence. In this global economy, our consumption and our hoarding impact the world's rain forests, people

in sweat shops, migrant laborers, marine life and the birds in flight. How do we become better stewards and resist the temptation to horde?

One suggestion I've seen is to take something out every time you bring something in. My life partner, Alan, had a different twist on this idea. His concept is that people horde "stuff" like we horde "calories." People try to go on diets and their diets often fail because it's just too hard to keep up with counting calories and getting enough exercise. His idea was to keep a bathroom scale by the front door and every time we go out, we weigh ourselves and what we carry. When we come back, weigh in and keep a chart so that we can make sure that over time our house doesn't get fat.

One of the simplest and best explanations of how we got to the point where we are trashing our planet is called *The Story of Stuff*. In a twenty minute clip, Annie Leonard explains how we extract natural resources to make the "stuff" we think we need, then we produce chemicals and toxins that create pollution of our natural environment. We distribute these products at "stuff" -in -a -box stores where we really don't pay for the products since the prices are so low to keep the inventory moving and generally avoid paying workers who produced the "stuff" in the first place.

All of this keeps what Annie calls the "golden arrow of consumption" going so that we will continue to buy and spend. Products are intended to wear out so we will go out and buy a replacement and we think it is worn out or obsolete even when it is still useable. Advertising causes us to feel unhappy with what we have and who we are so we go out and buy more so we'll feel better. We work so hard to get a little time off and then our two most common pastimes are watching television where we're told to go out and shop some more, and guess what the second most frequent pastime is—shopping. The circle goes round and round.

The Story of Stuff does more than lay it all out on the line—it tells us how to get involved and concrete things we can do. Briefly, here are a number of simple things you can do to make little or big changes in your own relationship with "stuff" and with money. First, use less power to save money and energy—drive less, wear layers instead of turning up the heat, buy "stuff" that is used and recycle everything you can. Waste less—carry mugs and canvass shopping bags, avoid over-packaged items, repair and mend rather than replacing everything.

Talk to others about what they do to cut down on "stuff", and get involved in the community to make sure that the media covers climate change and resources for living simpler. Research products like cosmetics, toys, and cleaners for toxins. There are many non-toxic products that do the job just as well without the toxins.

Unplug from the television and the internet where we find insidious advertisements promoting buying more "stuff." Spend more time with family and friends and in the community. "Change your awareness, not just your light bulbs." Don't buy into the culture that says more "stuff" is better and we have to have more "stuff" to be competitive and have a thriving economy. Watch *The Story of Stuff* or check out the resources about Simplicity Circles or *Your Money Or Your Life*. "Buy Green, Buy Fair, Buy Local, Buy Used and Buy Less."

The Unitarian Universalist Association wants to know how congregations are addressing these tough economic times. I believe we could start a Simplicity Circle with a small group of interested people. That group could reinforce one another in cutting down on consumption in their personal lives and in Staten Island. They might even

recommend how this congregation might reach towards being a Green Sanctuary in the future.

Collectively we could make a dent in living simply and well on this planet if we simply remember these words by Henry David Thoreau: “I am grateful for what I am and have. My thanksgiving is perpetual!...O how I laugh when I think of my vague indefinite riches. No run on my bank can drain it, for my wealth is not possession but enjoyment. If the day and night are such that you greet them with joy,...that is your success.” May you find joy in simple living, knowing all will be well.

References and Resources

<http://www.storyofstuff.com/>

Andrews, Cecile. *The Circle of Simplicity: Return to the Good Life*. New York:

HarperCollins, 1997.

Dominguez, Joe and Vicki Robin. *Your Money Or Your Life*. New York: Penguin

Books, 1992, 1993.

Benediction

I leave you with these words by T.S. Eliot to take with you into your coming week: “When the stranger says: “What is the meaning of this city? Do you huddle together because you love one another?” What will you answer? “We all dwell together to make money from each other” or, “This is a community”?