

Less is More: Reappraising our Values for the Sake of our Planet and Spiritual Health

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Unitarian Universalist Church of Silver Spring

Call to Worship

How important is constant intercourse with nature and the contemplation of natural phenomena to the preservation of moral and intellectual health.

- Henry David Thoreau

*I think that I shall never see
A billboard lovely as a tree.
Perhaps, unless the billboards fall,
I'll never see a tree at all.*

- Ogden Nash

Meditation

A certain degree of physical comfort is necessary but above a certain level it becomes a hindrance instead of a help; therefore the ideal of creating an unlimited number of wants and satisfying them, seems to be a delusion and a trap. The satisfaction of one's physical needs must come at a certain point to a dead stop before it degenerates into physical decadence. Europeans will have to remodel their outlook if they are not to perish under the weight of the comforts to which they are becoming slaves.

- Mahatma Gandhi

Reading

To be able to find [wisdom], one has first to liberate oneself from such masters as greed and envy. The stillness following liberation – even if only momentary – produces the insights of wisdom which are obtainable in no other way.

They enable us to see the hollowness and fundamental unsatisfactoriness of a life devoted primarily to the pursuit of material ends, to the neglect of the spiritual. Such a life necessarily sets man against man and nation against nation, because man's needs are infinite and infinitude can be achieved only in the spiritual realm, never in the material...

How could we even begin to disarm greed and envy? Perhaps by being much less greedy and envious ourselves; perhaps by resisting the temptation of letting our luxuries become needs; and perhaps by even scrutinizing our needs to see if they cannot be simplified and reduced.

- E. F. Schumacher

Introduction

I remember the moment vividly – in the remote Papua New Guinean village where my wife, Anita, and I were working as Peace Corps Volunteers, the village leader, Geoffrey, held my hand and stared deep into my eyes as if to penetrate my very soul: “Taim yu go bek long America,” he said, “yu mas scalim kaikai o kina olgeta dai long wanwan manmeri husat igat hevi.” (When you go back to the US, you must give food or money to someone in need every day.)

In Papua New Guinea, a leader gains status by giving away his accumulated wealth. The culture broadly accepts the notion of sufficiency. While the vast majority of the population has little opportunity for Western-style wealth, there are some individuals who do have that opportunity but are “kept in check” by a culture of reciprocity that pretty much demands redistribution.

Despite the village’s extreme isolation, Geoffrey was a worldly guy, having traveled to a number of countries as a government official. He had seen societies with great disparities of wealth. In a very gentle, non-judgmental way, he was telling me that the US would do well to learn from Papua New Guinea: in effect to be less materialistic, less focused on individual gain, and to recognize the distinction between needs and ever-increasing wants. I do not want to glorify Papua New Guinea nor am I making a political statement – I’m simply providing a point of reference that I think is useful in appraising our own culture and values.

Shortly after returning to the US after two years in Papua New Guinea, I was driving to New York’s LaGuardia Airport in a downpour and got a flat tire. I started to change the tire, but couldn’t budge the nuts. A man pulled over and took out his heavy duty wrench and quickly put on the spare. “How kind and gracious this man is,” I thought. “I really appreciate your help,” I said. “Thanks so much!” The guy looked at me as if to say: “Hey Mack – we’re in Queens, not Papua New Guinea!” Then he replied, “That’ll be \$30 bucks.”

Thus began my reintroduction to American culture. In a way, I started to look at my own country through the lens of a foreigner. Since then, I’ve been thinking about the linkage between our seemingly insatiable and limitless desire for more material things and:

1. a deteriorating environment;
2. as well as a deteriorating quality of life --
 - a. not only for future generations and those most vulnerable,
 - b. but for folks like us here in Montgomery County who actually benefit from material wealth.

Buying the Privilege to be the Last to Starve

Let’s first look at our natural environment...

In his recent book, *Collapse*, Jared Diamond analyzes ancient civilizations that have self-destructed because of their inability or refusal to live within their means – the Mayan, Easter Islanders, and the Norse of Greenland (Vikings). He suggests that the unsustainable lifestyle of

the Norse chiefs, characterized by a competitive race to consolidate power through the acquisition and exploitation of land and an excessive attachment to luxury imports, was simply an effort to obtain what he graphically describes as “the privilege of being the last to starve”.¹

Indeed, according to the United Nations Agenda 21 report, “the major cause of the continued deterioration of the global environment is the unsustainable patterns of production and consumption, particularly in industrialized countries.”²

Signs indicate that we might be on a course similar to that of the Norse, Mayan, and Easter Islanders:

- With just under 5 percent of the world’s population we contribute 25 percent of its greenhouse gases; 40% of our lakes and streams are too polluted for swimming or fishing.³
- The average size of new homes is now more than double what it was in the 1950s; it’s now about 2,300 square feet⁴ -- this, coupled with the fact that household size has gone down.
- Were the rest of the world to consume natural resources at the same rate as Americans, three earths would be required to sustain us.⁵
- It’s been said that since 1950, Americans have used up more resources than everyone who ever lived on earth before then.⁶

Why the Excessive Materialism?

In a way, it should be no surprise that Americans by and large embrace a culture of consumerism. Our great indicator of success is measured by the Gross National Product (GNP). Accordingly, the bigger the GNP, the better off we are, despite the fact that it doesn’t distinguish between good and bad. For example, the GNP grows when we spend more on crime prevention, pollution clean up, or pay legal fees to settle divorces.⁷

We’ve largely embraced the economic model that suggests continuous economic growth is the way to go regardless of the fact that such limitless growth is dependent upon a “non-growing and finite”⁸ environment.

¹ Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, Viking Press: New York, 2005, page 276.

² Agenda 21, as cited in the Center for a New American Dream’s website.

³ *Affluenza: The All-consuming Epidemic*, Second Edition, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco, 2005, page 4

⁴ *Affluenza* page 24.

⁵ Worldwatch Institute, *State of the World*, 2003

⁶ *Affluenza*, page 4

⁷ *Affluenza*, page 240.

⁸ Herman Daly, Professor of Ecological Economics, University of Maryland.

And our economic system absolves us of any moral obligation associated with our consumption. Anonymous exchanges, determined by supply and demand, dilute any sense of responsibility for the source of our goods. We're told that acting in our own self interest is best for everyone. In the words of E. F. Schumacher, in his work *Small is Beautiful*:

The buyer is essentially a bargain hunter; he is not concerned with the origin of the goods or the conditions under which they have been produced. His sole concern is to obtain the best value for his money.

...In a sense, the market is the institutionalization of individualism and non-responsibility. Neither buyer nor seller is responsible for anything but himself.⁹

There is a set of social justice issues here -- we don't see the folks toiling for less than a dollar a day sewing our jeans; we're not the ones experiencing the soil erosion resulting from our purchase of teak chairs, nor are we paying for the cost of environmental remediation. The Earth simply does not have the regenerative capacity to replace limitless natural resources nor can it effectively absorb the waste and pollution resulting from such consumption.¹⁰

Some experts have indicated that we need to change our consumption patterns within the next decade in order to prevent catastrophic repercussions, particularly for the most vulnerable.¹¹ And what about our moral obligation to our children and future generations? If we agree that the environment has limitations and that as Americans we are disproportionately pushing these limits, are we not morally obligated to adjust our consumption patterns?

It's hard to see these linkages when we are bombarded with messages of how buying things will make us happy. Our children are conditioned at a very early age to accept this trap. Advertising at children is estimated at over \$15 billion annually – about 2 ½ times more than what it was in 1992.¹² The average child sees nearly 40,000 commercials a year, about 110 a day.¹³

Taking the Sacredness out of Life

Our blind faith in traditional economic models and our general acceptance of Madison Avenue's message that "more is better" is throwing our environment and culture into a tailspin. What's important in life has been distorted so that what we say are our values, are becoming decreasingly aligned with our actions. The norms of ethical behavior have become blurred, our sense of balance has become skewed, and the limits of decency are bridged. Nothing seems sacred anymore.

⁹ E. F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*, 1999, Hartley & Marks (originally published by Blond and Briggs, London), page 29.

¹⁰ Center for a New American Dream website.

¹¹ James Hansen, Director of the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Science, as reported in the *Washington Post*, August 6, 2006, page M5.

¹² Susan Linn, *Consuming Kids: The Hostile Takeover of Childhood*, (New York: The New Press, 2004), 1. From *Tips for Parenting in a Commercial Culture*, Center for a New American Dream, 2006.

¹³ Affluenza, page 57

The other month I was struck by a news report touting an approach to overcome the high cost of gasoline. The individual interviewed was the owner of a 9-mile per gallon Humvee who had established a marketing relationship with a company that would provide him free gas if he pasted the company's advertising on the side of his car. If I recall correctly, the agreement required that he drive a certain number of miles a week to get the benefit. "Great" idea...

This seems to be a metaphor for what's gone awry, but there are many others:

- Earlier this week I saw a teenager wearing a T-shirt that read, "Money, Power, Respect."
- Think of the soft news stories the day after Thanksgiving with footage showing "desperate" shoppers waiting in line to get the best deal – to get the trendiest new Bratz doll or some such toy.
- Commercials that use Lou Gehrig's "Luckiest Man Alive" speech to sell fast food.
- Blockbuster sales on Memorial Day.
- Nathan's hot dog eating contest to commemorate Independence Day. The winner devoured 53 ¾ this year! "The Nathan's Famous Fourth of July International Hot Dog Eating Contest has become a highlight of America's greatest patriotic holiday," said Wayne Norbitz, President and COO of Nathan's Famous. "It epitomizes the spirit associated with summer each year."¹⁴

The Effect on Family Life

Our selling, buying and consuming culture is also taking its toll on family life. We work harder and longer to buy a bigger house, fancier car, slicker clothing. We're stuck with paying back the loans so that, even if we wanted to cut back we can't. Then we have to maintain all these things. In the words of the authors of *Affluenza: The All Consuming Epidemic*:

As both parents work full time and more to meet their swelling expectations of the good life, then rush to maintain the frenetic lifestyles those expectations demand, nerves are frayed and tempers boil. In an ironic twist, the degeneration of family life leaves some partners spending more time at the office to avoid the friction and turmoil back home...¹⁵

Our children are also suffering emotionally as a direct result of consumerism. According to Julia Schor, an economist and expert on consumerism:

¹⁴ Nathan's Famous website.

¹⁵ *Affluenza*, page 50

*High consumer involvement is a significant cause of depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and psychosomatic complaints. Psychologically healthy children will be made worse off if they become more enmeshed in the culture of getting and spending. Children with emotional problems will be helped if they disengage from the worlds that corporations are constructing for them.*¹⁶

More, More More and Rush, Rush, Rush

The crazy pace of all this crowds out spiritual reflection and diminishes our appreciation of beauty. Our children, who are accustomed to being entertained constantly – by the television, computer, Ipod, Game Boy – almost seem to find free time awkward. “I’m bored”, they often say. Such behavior in children, I suspect, is the result of a pleasure-seeking culture that chooses immediate stimulation over meaningful human relationships. This is tough to swallow since I’ve not been nearly vigilant enough in curbing the influence of commercialism in my home. I simply need to put more time, energy, and thought toward countering the dominant culture.

It’s not just about consumerism per se – it’s about a general competition, an excessive focus on success, if not defined purely by one’s salary, then by one’s professional accomplishments. And we’re transferring this set of values to our children who are now increasingly programmed to achieve. Betsy Taylor, a founding member and former president of the Center for a New American Dream, a Takoma Park-based organization that helps Americans to consume responsibly, captures this point when she says:

*Many of us focus on self-improvement, often with good cause. The desire to achieve, make an impact, and improve ourselves is a wonderful part of human nature, but sometimes we become slaves to our intense schedules and standards. When we spend more time cultivating relationships with others, we can transcend our restless need to do or be more. Try finding a part of your sense of affirmation through relationships rather than achievements.*¹⁷

In our great rush to “succeed,” many of us find that there is precious little space in our lives. In fact, while writing this piece, I’ve basically characterized the very behavior I’m criticizing, as I failed to call both a close friend and nephew on their birthdays. How many of us preface emails to friends we’ve been meaning to write by saying, “Sorry, it’s been insane around here...” In the words of one journalist, “We are a nation that shouts at a microwave oven to hurry up.”¹⁸

The Beauty of Time

About five years ago, I had one of the most profound spiritual experiences of my life because of the incredible grace of a stranger. Suffice it to say that I was highly stressed and looking for a job. We were taking a vacation in New England to coincide with my 20th high school reunion in

¹⁶ Juliet Schor, *Born to Buy*, Scribner, New York, 2004, page 167.

¹⁷ *What Kids Really Want That Money Can’t Buy: Tips for Parenting in a Commercial World*, Warner Books, 2003, page 226.

¹⁸ Joan Ryan, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, from *Affluenza* page 38.

Connecticut. I decided to break up the vacation and take an interview with an organization in Boston while up there. After the interview I was going to race back to Connecticut to kick the reunion off with my high school buddies. After having rescheduled the interview two times to accommodate this particular organization, the folks who were interviewing me arrived more than 45 minutes late. I was irate. The interview was, well a disaster. I left for the train station to return to Connecticut. I did not realize that I was required to reserve my seat prior to boarding. When the conductor informed me that I would have to take the next train, which would leave three hours later and hence I would miss the gathering with my buddies, I LOST IT.

I said some things I cannot repeat up here. Really, if you were a passer-by, you would have thought I was a crazy man. There I was, wondering aimlessly around the station, tears streaking down my face, my tie loosened. The area was packed with evening commuters working to avoid my craziness. I was really pathetic.

Then this stranger approached me – think about the angel Clarence in *It's a Wonderful Life* – and asked if everything was okay. I told him my circumstance. He came closer and actually wiped a tear away – this is a stranger mind you! “You’ve been crying,” he said. He then asked if I had a loving, healthy family. My heart lightened as I spoke about Anita and our two kids. He asked if we’d be out on the streets if I didn’t get a job immediately. I said “No.” He simply and magically put it all in perspective. I asked him what he was doing. He replied that he was a retired policeman and was taking a stroll near the building where his deceased mother used to work. He wanted to reflect on her beautiful life. *He* then became teary-eyed and joked that *I* was now bringing him down! We talked a little longer and then went our separate ways. On the train ride home, I was at peace, soaring actually. I felt so alive, so positive, so rich...

Somehow, in our fast-moving life, we sacrifice this type of authentic human exchange – this deep personal connection. I wonder if I would have stopped for a guy who was in my condition. Maybe not – I was the one rushing after all.

A more simple example relates to our own Jimmy S. He once told me that when he used to work downtown near some of the tourist attractions he would, while on his lunch break, actively seek out opportunities to assist people taking photos of themselves in front of the attractions. He proactively made time for this. I just love that!

Conclusion

So how do we get out of this mess? Even though I’m suggesting something as significant as a reappraisal of our values, I don’t see the way out as that complicated or even that overwhelming. Think of it simply as “More Fun, Less Stuff” – that’s the motto for the Center for a New American Dream. It’s a win-win – I mean, who doesn’t want more laughs and less material and psychological clutter?

Of course, we all choose our own paths and I suspect that most of us are very intentional and successful in living sustainable and spiritually healthy lives, but perhaps the following may be useful:

- I think it really is largely about “smelling the roses” and carving out time like Jimmy and the Boston policeman. A very insightful Fijian once observed to a Peace Corps volunteer that Americans are more like “human doings” than human beings.¹⁹ I really appreciate this insight, as it provides some guidance. So do the lovely words of Desmond Tutu:

We were made to enjoy music, to enjoy beautiful sunsets, to enjoy looking at the billows of the sea and to be thrilled with a rose that is bedecked with dew . . . Human beings are actually created for the transcendent, for the sublime, for the beautiful, for the truthful . . . and all of us are given the task of trying to make this world a little more hospitable to these beautiful things.²⁰

- I also think finding a balance is key – recall Gandhi’s words from the meditation: “The satisfaction of one’s physical needs must come at a certain point to a dead stop before it degenerates into physical decadence.” It’s similar to Geoffrey’s point about recognizing sufficiency and the distinction between needs and wants.
- For many, finding their center and spiritual fulfillment comes through experiencing nature’s wonder. Some of us might find this challenging living in an urban environment and not everyone wants to take a hike or work in the garden. But I guarantee you, if you’ve ever seen a Cedar Waxwing or a Peregrine Falcon, both local bird species, you’ll know what it’s like to soar just like them. The former gets its name from its breathtaking markings – its wings look like they’ve been dipped in wax – and the latter is the fastest creature alive, flying at speeds of up to 200 miles per hour!
- We UUs specifically acknowledge our connection to the natural world – our 7th principle is “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” This covenant is powerful and layered. I’d love to sit down and discuss ways this congregation can truly practice and promote this principle through our collective action.
- And finally, if we are to minimize our ecological footprint, consume responsibly, and take care to nourish our spiritual health, we must simply think before we act – we need to be “able to find wisdom” as Schumacher has advised. In closing, let me again draw on the insight of Gandhi:

Carefully watch your THOUGHTS, for they become your WORDS. Manage and watch your WORDS, for they will become your ACTIONS. Consider and judge your ACTIONS, for they have become your HABITS. Acknowledge and watch your HABITS, for they shall become your VALUES. Understand and embrace your VALUES, for they become YOUR DESTINY.²¹

¹⁹ From a Peace Corps survey related to the Agency’s “Third Goal.” The Third Goal is about learning from host country nationals and sharing that insight with other Americans.

²⁰ Desmond Tutu

²¹ Mahatma Gandhi