

EASY DOES IT

Sermon by Rev. Kathleen Hepler
First Parish in Framingham Unitarian Universalist
December 11th, 2011

READING

By Naomi Shihab Nye (American Palestinian Poet)

Wandering around the Albuquerque Airport Terminal, after learning my flight had been detained four hours, I heard an announcement: "If anyone in the vicinity of Gate 4-A understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately." Well-one pauses these days. Gate 4-A was my own gate. I went there. An older woman in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress, just like my grandma wore, was crumpled on the floor, wailing loudly. "Help," said the Flight Service Person. "Talk to her." "What is her problem?" "We told her the flight was going to be late and she did this." I stooped to put my arm around the woman and spoke to haltingly. "Shu dow-a, Shu-bid-uck Habibti? Stani schway Min fadlick, Shu-bit-se-wee?"

The minute she heard any words she knew, however poorly used, she stopped crying. She thought the flight had been cancelled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso for major medical treatment the next day. I said, "You're fine, you'll get there, who is picking you up? Let's call him." We called her son and I spoke with him in English. I told him I would stay with his mother till we got on the plane and would ride next to her-Southwest. She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for fun. Then we called my dad and he spoke for a while in Arabic and found out of course they had ten shared friends. Then I thought just for the heck of it, why not call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her? This all took up about two hours. She was laughing a lot by then; telling about her life, patting my knee, answering questions.

She pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies-little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts-out of her bag-and was offering them to all the women at the gate. To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo-we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There is no better cookie. And then the airline broke out the free beverages from huge coolers and two little girls from

our flight ran around serving us all apple juice and they were covered with powdered sugar too.

And I noticed my new best friend-by now we were holding hands-had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing, with green furry leaves. Such an old country traveling tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere. And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, this is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person at the gate-once the crying of confusion stopped-seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women too. This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.

“On Possessions” from
Simple Truths: Clear & Gentle Guidance on the Big Issues of Life
By Ken Nerburn

Most of our possessions arrive
in our lives almost by accident.
gradually, like falling snow, they
accumulate around us until they form
the basis for our identity.

We do not intend this to happen.
most things we acquire are meant to
increase our happiness and sense of
fulfillment. But their uniqueness is
quickly subsumed into the ordinariness
of daily affairs.

We (may) wake up one day and
find ourselves surrounded by
possessions that mean nothing to us.
our freedom is gone; our lightness of
being is gone. In their place is a sense
of responsibility and ownership. We

have become curators of our own
cluttered reality...

We must remember that most
possessions are really butterflies that
turn into caterpillars. They start with the
wings of fantasy. We see them as
freedom, as happiness. We believe they
have the power to change our
lives...they (may) give us a moment of
elation (but eventually) the thrill of
ownership begins to grow cold in our
hands...

(We must) keep in mind that
possessions are as likely to make (us)
unhappy as they are to make us happy.
...They are chameleons that change
from fantasies into responsibilities once
(we) hold them in our hands...

When the objects accumulate,
(we should) do what (we) must to free
(ourselves) from their false importance.
give away what (we) don't use. Go on
a long trip and travel lightly. Find a
possession (we) values highly and give it
to someone who would value it more...

Listen to the quieter wisdom
that says you will value your
possessions more if you have fewer of
them, and that you will find deeper
meaning in human sharing than in the
accumulation of goods.

If (we) build up possessions just
as the logical outcome of pursuing (our)
desires, (we) will lose (our) wings
to fly.

SERMON

Easy Does It

Rev. Kathleen Hepler

12/11/11

I decided in preparation for this sermon to plop myself down in the middle of a major discount store and observe the faces, the moods, the interactions between the people shopping for their holiday presents. Rarely did I see smiling faces. Often I saw tired-looking, rushed faces. And, often, the conversations between people shopping together were difficult to hear:

“Eric, the stuffed animals are over here- the ones that are on sale”. (Eric comes around the corner.) “Let’s see we need to buy 8, no 9; one for everyone except Jill. She’s 13 and I don’t think she needs a present this year”. “What are you talking about? Her brother is only one year younger. How can you buy a present for him and not for her? I don’t think she would like that very much. Besides she is very immature. She would love a stuffed animal.” Eric replies, “I don’t think she is immature.” “Well she always plays with the little kids at every family function.” “That doesn’t make her immature. That makes her nice.” “Well, it’s your family. Do what you want.” “Oh, alright, throw another one of those in the basket. They are cheap anyway. Thank God, this is done.”

OR....

“Gees, this video game looks so violent. I don’t feel good about buying this. ”

“Well it is at the top of his list, and you did ask for a list of what he wanted. Anyway, I read that violence in video games don’t make violent kids .”

“He would be so disappointed if he did not get this. Good grief, its \$69.00! Oh well, this is what the world is like now,” she says throwing the game into her stuffed shopping basket.

OR....

“Sit down in the cart and stop crying! I have a lot to do. If you are not good, Santa will not come to our house!”

And, simplicity is the theme today, along with the concept that sustainable living will be the salvation of human life. It’s just that simple.

“A simple life has a different meaning and a different value for every person. For me, it means eliminating all but the essential, eschewing chaos for peace, and spending your time doing what’s important to you. It means getting rid of many things you do so you can spend time with people you love and do the things you love. It means getting rid of the clutter so you are left with only that which gives you deepest value. However, getting simplicity isn’t always a simple process. It’s a journey, not a destination, and it can often be a journey of two steps forward and one backward.” (

In my own life, I made a commitment a decade ago to buy used clothing as much as I could. Through those years I have become proud of this, self righteous even. Not only that, I became a used-clothing addict. Hey, it’s cheaper! So buy more! Right? Ha! That’s not the point....one step forward and then oops....still, I must change!!!!

There are really only two steps to simplifying:

- Identify what’s important to you.
- Get rid of everything else.

Simple to state, but not easy to implement in a culture that loves consumption.

It turns out that a typical American sees 3,000 ads a week. It turns out that the two ways we spend most of our leisure time ...that is time when we are not working...is watching TV, and shopping. And, I could see in the faces and the conversations of the people at Target that this is not making us happy. It’s a ruse. It’s a grand hood-wink. It’s addiction. It is distracting us from the living we would rather be doing. It has become

endemic to our culture, but it is not reflective of the best of our humanity. It is not the filling up, the fulfillment, for which we yearn.

Personal freedom of body, mind, heart and soul is the goal....AND, in this less-encumbered life, we begin to understand the joy of caring for the entire web of life. We begin joyfully adhering to Gandhi's axiom of "living more simply so that others may simply live".

Most Americans buy more than they want to at this time of year and beyond. In fact, we are 5% of the world's population and we use up 30% of the world's resources. We are 5% of the world's population and we create 30% of the world's garbage.

"Too many people spend money they don't have on things they don't want to impress people they don't like." (Will Rogers)

OR

I read somewhere ... "I have a new microwave fire place. I can get an evening in front of the fire in 8 minutes." (unknown)

I invite you to watch the video created by thestoryofstuff.com . It is an explanation of the production cycle we currently use:

EXTRACTION/PRODUCTION/DISTRIBUTION/CONSUMPTION/ DISPOSAL. In the end, it teaches a simple truth.....what you would think would be obvious to us..... you cannot have a linear production cycle in a limited resource system. It simply says that sustainable living is not some nice, hippy-dippy thing that some off-the-wall granola crunchers (that would be me!) think is a good idea. It's common survival sense and spiritual truth all wrapped into one. Jesus said, "where your treasure is, there is your heart." The Buddha taught non-attachment as a way to live a fuller life....a life, a mind, less filled with the unnecessary. Sustainable living is the salvation for life on this planet, and a personal path toward increased freedom. I mean I want to spend my time in activities that fill my heart, not my debt total. I want to say when I look back on my life something different than, "I sure did a lot of shopping! I sure found a lot of bargains!" And I want the same for you, FOR EVERYONE.

"O come O come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel. Who mourns in lonely exile here. Until the Son of God appear." These original words to the song speak hauntingly to the human desire to be free. Referring to the time of the Israeli captivity in Egypt, the words were a plea for God to send a messiah, a savior. In our time the words can relate to

our captivity to a life of consumerism and maintaining what we consume; life exiled from the love we are, from our acting on the knowledge that how we live affects the entire planet.

Through the years, First Parish has done a lot toward the awareness of sustainable living. For instance you started recycling in the town. I am speaking today for a re-invigoration of this effort in our lives. I am imagining First Parish as the go-to place for how sustainable and simpler lives transform people's personal and spiritual lives, and, oh-by-the-way, it just so happens that this is the need in the heart of the entire world. O come O come Emmanuel (god within, love within) and inspire us to move away from our exile in the consumer culture of America, where more and more of the profit from that which we consume is filling the coffers of less and less of our people. Listen, my dear ones.....of the top 100 largest economies in the world, 50 of them are corporations!!!!

Years ago a mentor of mine, suggested that the day after Thanksgiving I start to watch eagerly for the coming of Christmas, to expect it to arrive sometime before the actual date and, when it does, to fully understand that anything else that happens would be gravy, icing, gift- beyond -measure. This has been a cherished practice. That first year I did this, in the first week of December, I entered the dark Sanctuary in the church I served and heard the hearty singing of our sexton who was developmentally disabled and sang with a lisp. "Oh come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant", he sang with so much gusto and feeling that I knew I had just "Christmassed", or "Hanukkahed", or "Solsticed". My heart was full; the angels had sung; everything else would be gift beyond measure!

Each December we host a three year experience called 'Advent Saturday'. It is a time to focus on how to be gift-givers without spending money; how to remember what is more meaningful than consumption in this season. For me, it is always wonderful to take this time. It is time well spent. Yesterday, at Advent Saturday, I sat at a table with Beth Walton and her three year old grandson Dougie. He had watched with what can only be described as trepidation as the 'UU Spirit of the Winter Holidays' (in the person of Russ Greve!) traveled to each table to talk about the season from a Unitarian Universalist perspective. Russ was dressed in green with shiny gold around his neck. Seriously.....curiously.....fearfully....Dougie watched. Russ spoke to him with kindness. He said something about being the last one to meet him and how waiting for that can be fun. For some reason (we knew Dougie hardly could have understood the philosophy) the fear lifted from his visage. His face lighted up with a huge grin! My heart was full; the angels had

sung...everything else would be gift beyond measure. I knew that I had “Christmassed”...that the spirit of love had come to me in the person of Dougie. Incarnation. All else will be added abundance.

Could we, here in our spiritual home, start an intentional process of education, support and exploration for anyone who is interested in choosing sustainable living and voluntary simplicity...because we want to have fuller lives, not lives full of more stuff? I heard about a UU Church that has hired a financial consultant to work with people around managing their finances in ways that causes less anxiety and moves them toward a simpler, more conscious life; learning to live below their means so that there is increased freedom to live and to serve. How can we engage each other in moving toward voluntary simplicity and spending habits that will set us all free to be in the world in the ways we were born to be? Let me know your ideas.

Listen! It is a fact that beyond basic needs, the more stuff we have, the less happy we are. Listen! We know that the more choices we have, the busier we are, the more enslaved to a list of activities we are.....the more we feel like we are in slavery to a life not of our choosing.

Listen! We can teach one another how to move toward a more simple life. In this season of advent toward the returning of the earth's light, let's consider entering into a grand experiment together. Let's do what we need to do to gradually move from those who mourn in the stressful exile of financial worry and fear ...toward more simple, sustainable lives. Let's make ourselves a goal that everyone who chooses can enter a deliberate process that will bring us closer to living that is more congruent with our UU values. Let's discover this together. Let's hold one another accountable and inch by inch become the economic people we yearn to be; people with huge hearts and lots of time to heal the world. People who are conscious about how we spend and celebrate spending more time with the people we love. People who eat healthier food, secure less debt, sing more, laugh more and find great joy in serving others.

“Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere. And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, this is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in this gate-once the crying of confusion stopped-seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women too. This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.”

We exist together in our church life to help one another find ourselves, to deepen our relationship with the sacred, and to live more simply so that others may simply live.

May the angels gathered all around sing to you this day and fill your heart!