

**The Secret Lives of Things -- The Rev. Suzelle Lynch – 12-03-06, Unitarian
Universalist Church West, Brookfield, WI**

Words for Chalice Lighting

Each morning we must hold out the chalice of our being
to receive
to carry
and to give back."

Dag Hammarskjold

Readings

The first reading is from the book "Unplug the Christmas Machine, in which authors Jo Robinson and Jean Coppock Staeheli write about the American habit of acquiring more and more stuff (most of which we don't really need or want) each Christmas*:

They write: The Christmas Machine has this power over us because it knows how to woo us; it speaks to the deepest, profoundest, and most sacred desires of the human heart. If it appeared as a monster, we would rise up and stop it. But the commercial messages of Christmas appear as promises that bring tears to our eyes. Look at the bounty we are promised by the December magazines and the glowing Christmas commercials: Our families will be together and happy... Our children will be well-behaved and grateful... Our wives will be beautiful and nurturing... Our husbands will be kind, generous, and appreciative... We will have enough money... We will have enough time... We will have fun... We will be warm... We will be safe... We will be truly loved. No wonder we stop, we listen, and we want to believe. The problem comes when we buy into the notion that what we long for can be procured by the buying and selling of goods...[when we believe] that if we buy and receive more Christmas presents our inner lives will be fuller, and we will finally be safe [and satisfied] in the world... The key to unplugging the machine is knowing what you REALLY want.

*(*Thanks to the Rev. Scott Alexander for this edited passage from the book.)*

The second reading is from an essay titled, "How Much is Enough?" by Alan Durning in the book, *Simpler Living, Compassionate Life* (pp. 90-92).

Early in the post-World War II age of affluence, a U.S. retailing analyst named Victor Lebow proclaimed, 'Our enormously productive economy .demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction, in consumption. We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever increasing rate.' Americans have risen to Mr. Lebow's call, and much of the world has followed.

Since 1950, American consumption has soared. Per capita, energy use climbed 60 percent, car travel more than doubled, plastics use multiplied 20-fold, and air travel jumped 25-fold.

We are wealthy beyond the wildest dreams of our ancestors;... Ironically, abundance has not even made people terribly happy. In the United States, repeated opinion polls of people's sense of well-being show that no more Americans are satisfied with their lot now than they were in 1957. Despite phenomenal growth in consumption, the list of wants has grown faster still.

The compulsion to have more has never been so actively promoted, nor so easily acted upon as it is today. We are encouraged to consume at every turn by the advertising industry, which annually spends nearly \$500 per U.S. citizen, by the commercialization of everything from sporting events to public spaces, and, insidiously, by the spread of the mass market into realms once dominated by family members and local enterprises. Cooking from scratch is replaced by heating prepared foods in the microwave; the neighborhood baker and greengrocer are driven out by the 24-hour supermarket at the mall. As our day-to-day interactions with the economy lose the face-to-face character that prevails in surviving communities, buying things becomes a substitute source of self-worth.

And our final reading is by Sue Bender, from her book, *Everyday Sacred* (p. 26).

"One afternoon I bumped into my friend Mel, a Zen priest, dressed in blue jeans and a plaid shirt, looking very much like everyone else shopping for vegetables at our neighborhood market.

"He asked how I was, and I told him about the ... story I had written that morning. ... Before he had a chance to answer, I added, "And the image of my new project is a begging bowl. Can you tell me anything about begging bowls?"

(insert from p. 5) All I knew about a begging bowl was that each day a monk goes out with his empty bowl in his hands. Whatever is placed in the bowl will be his nourishment for the day.

"Oryoki," (Mel) said (the Japanese name for a begging bowl) "means 'just enough.'"

JUST ENOUGH.

Two words.

Somewhere between the image of an empty bowl that made me feel peaceful and the too much that was driving me crazy, was a moderate, balanced space of JUST ENOUGH.

What is the path from Too much to Just enough? I began to wonder.

Sermon

It was early December more than a few years ago, and there I was, trotting through a store near my former church in Washington State. I was there to pick up a few groceries we'd forgotten on our last shopping trip. The plastic shopping basket on my arm was already heavy with items as I raced by the store's magazine racks on my way to the check stand. But as I zipped by, a woman caught my eye. A woman, smiling serenely as she hung a gold velvet dove-shaped ornament on the branch of an old-fashioned Christmas tree. It was Martha Stewart, domestic goddess, purveyor and promoter of "good things" gazing enticingly at me from the cover of a paperbound book that shouted genteelly, "Classic Crafts and Recipes for the Holidays."

My steps faltered. I nearly stumbled. Did I have time to stop and look? No. Yes. No. I stopped anyway, opened the book.... The easy-to-make velvet dove ornaments bowled me over with their charm and I swept Martha -- all twenty-two-dollars'-worth of her -- into my over-laden basket, and went off to trade my hard-earned cash for the chance to peruse her pages in depth.

Every year about this time when I pull out my holiday magazines and books, Martha's serene smile meets my eye again and I look longingly at those velvet dove ornaments. They are lovely. I don't have time to make them. They would transform my Christmas tree into a thing of beauty. I don't have time to make them. Not this year, not last year, not the year before... I suppose it would be possible for me to feel bad about this, but mostly I just laugh, and know that I have certainly gotten far more than twenty-two-dollars'-worth of enjoyment out of Martha over the years.

Many people despise Martha Stewart, and I can understand that. She committed securities fraud and went to jail for it, yet she still runs a multi-million dollar media and retail empire. And her empire is based on the unhealthy value of perfectionism and the consumerist maxim that "to have more is to be more." And yet there's something about her that I still think is quite lovely, quite tender, quite consonant with some of the deepest yearnings of our hearts.

In many ways, Martha is an icon of the longings many of us feel each year during the holidays. Wanting to believe that the world is a good place full of good things. Hoping for beauty. Longing for our heart's desires to be fulfilled. Wishing to be taken care of, to be made much of by someone else. I feel it as a powerful nostalgia for the Christmas of my middle-class childhood -- a time I remember as one of being pampered, encouraged, and indulged ... But even as Martha helps me feel that delicious longing, I sense that as an adult, it's really about something else -- some deeper desire to understand the meaning of my life.

For isn't that what's really underneath all the tinsel and tangles after all? Beneath all the rush and bustle, the buying and giving, the lights and

decorations, the traditions and obligations is our very human wondering about how to connect with that which gives our lives meaning.

Unfortunately, we tend to paper over that deep longing, that powerful wondering, with stuff. With things. This is a very thing-intensive time of year. We buy things to give as gifts, and most of us have special things we use for holiday decorating or entertaining. And there are those special holiday things we like to eat, too.

When did Christmas become so out of control and materialistic? Immediately after the beginning of the 20th century, the overall American transition to a consumer economy quickly began to express itself in our celebrations of Christmas as well. 19th century gifts had been "holiday notions," small, practical tokens of affection, but within the first ten years of the new century magazines were promoting jewelry, dolls, trains and bicycles. Retailers' tradebooks began to include instructions on how to create "a perfected holiday advertising machinery running full blast." ... By 1919, the New York Times was advertising its opinion on the appropriate gift: "Don't give your family and friends frivolous gifts that are sure to disappoint, buy them worthy gifts that will let them know how much you care." (*From my colleague the Rev. Scott Prinster's sermon, Unplugging the Christmas Machine, December 5, 1999*)

Some years ago, before our daughter Grace was born, and long before the Martha Stewart holiday craft and recipe book leapt off the shelf and into my shopping basket, Young and I decided that we would de-commercialize Christmas by giving only handmade gifts. Actually, I think I decided we should do this, and persuaded him that it was a good idea. I had always loved making Christmas gifts as a child, I said. We could make things together, I said. We'd have fun in the process, I said.

Well, the process took several weeks. First we made candles, which turned out rather strong-smelling and luridly colored, and then we made soap, which shrunk in the molds and wouldn't produce lather. We had a good laugh as we wrapped these items with little hand-written warning labels about their oddities. I created some handmade cards (no warning labels needed). But the centerpiece of each gift basket was to be a set of handmade placemats with matching napkins.

Not too many days before Christmas, and dangerously close to when we had to put our gifts in the mail, I pulled out the fabric, the ironing board, and my sewing machine one evening along with the placemat pattern I'd made, and set to work. Near midnight, I stalked into the living room where Young was reading a book and wailed, "These placemats are horrible. I can't do it."

It was one of those moments in our relationship I will never forget. My dear husband took that ugly, raggedy-looking placemat out of my hands, examined it, and said, "Hey, this isn't that bad. Let me help. Just tell me what to do."

I put him to work ironing fabric and cutting out placemat shapes. I sat at the sewing machine and whirred away. Before dawn, we had placemats and

napkins for everybody in our families. And they looked pretty good - or at least we thought so.

But in truth, we were exhausted – much more so than if we'd gone out shopping for the gifts. And I'm not sure they were any less commercial – after all, we'd had to buy the supplies to make them. Trying to have a less-commercial Christmas was a noble goal, and making gifts was a lovely idea, but what we did not only left the gift-giving scenario in place, it upped the ante because we'd invested not only money, but time in the gifts. We ended up feeling more self-righteous than generous.

What happened to us was that we were still living in the world of "too much." We hadn't altered our understanding of Christmas, we'd simply slapped a "home-made" label on top of it.

We hadn't stopped long enough to examine our values or discern our deeper longings.

We hadn't paid attention to the secret lives of things.

Paying attention to the secret lives of things has become, for me, a kind of spiritual discipline based in the seventh of our Unitarian Universalist principles – the principle which calls us to affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are part. It's a spiritual discipline because I find that it helps me touch a deeper source of meaning in my life.

There are a couple of ways to engage in this practice of paying attention to the secret lives of things. The first way is to imagine that each and every thing contains within it a secret spark or seed of the Divine. Jungian analyst James Hillman writes, "Theology calls this distribution of the divine within all things the theory of immanence, and, sometimes, pantheism... A theology of immanence means treating each thing, animate and inanimate., natural and (hu)man-made, as if it were alive, requiring what each living thing requires above all else: careful attention..." (James Hillman in *Kinds of Power*)

This quality of soul or divinity in objects can also be grasped in terms of the meaning we've invested in them. Writer and editor Frederic Brussat says that one of his most cherished possessions is a painting he inherited from his grandfather. He writes, "After (my grandfather) died..., my parents were quite taken aback when I installed in my bedroom the ... dark and ominous painting of a shipwreck that had hung in (his) living room. But I felt that a part of me was smashed and dashed on the shore when my greatest male advocate died. ... The painting also was precious to me because the image of the beached vessel mirrored the plight of my grandfather, who was marooned by illness for the last ... years of his life in a chair in his living room. Recently I noticed within the dark of ... the scene a rather amazing array of subtle but bright colors. Now, when I look at it, I think of my shipwrecked grandfather and the brightness his love brought into my life." (*In Spiritual Literacy*) One of my own prized possessions is

a simple pottery coffee mug painted with two cat faces – one blue and one green. I bought it for myself the summer I lived with my dear friend Maxine while I was working as a hospital chaplain intern. Each time I use it, all the blessings and challenges of those months rise up to greet me, and I think of my dear friend, who died eight years ago, and the comfort and shelter she offered me in her home live on in my heart.

I like choosing holiday gifts by remembering or imagining that they have something like a soul. If the earrings I select for my sister are more than earrings, if they carry a spark of the divine, I'm likely to feel different about giving them. They become something alive, something enlivening, something symbolic of the love we have for one another. They move away from being "something she'll like that's the right price." When she wears them, she'll be wearing our love.

There's a second and very different way to think of the secret lives of things as well – and that is by considering all that occurred to bring them into being. Let me explain this as it applies to something small but ubiquitous, which happens to be one of my favorite things to eat -- French fries. (This information, also, comes from the book *Simple Living, Compassionate Life*.)

"The potato (for my [French] fries) was grown in in one-half square foot of sandy soil in the upper Snake River valley of Idaho. [it] was watered repeatedly .. from the Snake River. Eighty percent of the Snake's original streamside habitat is gone, most of it replaced by reservoirs and irrigation canals...

"My potato was treated with fertilizers to ensure that its shape and quality were just like those of other potatoes. These chemicals accounted for 38 percent of the farmer's expenses. Much of the fertilizer's nitrogen leached into ground water; that, plus concentrated salts, made the water unfit even for irrigation.

"Freezing the potato slices required electrical energy which came from a hydroelectric dam on the Snake River... [Dams have stopped 99 percent of salmon from running up the Snake River to spawn...] Frozen foods require 10 times more energy to produce than their fresh counterparts...

"(In the freezing process) Some coolants escaped from the plant. They rose 10 miles up into the stratosphere, where they depleted no ozone, but they did trap heat, contributing to the Greenhouse Effect" (and thus, to global warming). (*Quoted in Simple Living, Compassionate Life from "Stuff: The Secret Lives of Everyday Things, by John Ryan and Alan Durning, Northwest Environment Watch.*)

What did those French fries cost me? Perhaps a dollar and a half. Does that price pay for the loss of stream habitat, the resulting decline in salmon population, the loss of income to salmon fishers? No. Does it cover the cost of illnesses in rural families that result from drinking contaminated water, or the costs to obtain water that is safe? No. Does it cover the costs of global

warming? No. In our market-based economic system, those things are considered "externalities," and are not budgeted for nor remedied in the manufacturing process. The price we pay is determined by the laws of supply and demand. The market does not allocate resources in a way that is consistent with preserving and sustaining the world's resources, including its people. The cost burden of my French fries and other products is often far removed from the point of purchase or use, and is borne by others who in no way benefit from their purchase or use.

How very different this is than the way the natural world functions. In the book, *Simpler Living, Compassionate Life*, Michael Schut, writes about the difference between the cycles of nature, which Wendell Berry has named the "Great Economy," and our economic system, which he has dubbed the "Big Economy." (SLCL pp. 74-77)

Nature, the Great Economy, takes the form of a circle, a cyclical process in which any kind of waste from one creature or life-process is food for another creature or life-process. "Nothing is wasted and there is no 'away' (as in 'throw it away')." Death brings on new life." The Great Economy is a most efficient recycler because it is a closed system: except for solar energy, earth's economy operates solely on what our planet contains.

Now, contrast this with the Big Economy -- the dominant global economy as it has developed in Western culture and is spreading through the world. "Rather than a circle, we might envision a line. At one end, capital, labor, and natural resources are input. Along the way 'things' are produced, advertising creates a desire for those things, which we then consume."

The Big Economy sees itself as an open system, with all of earth as one giant 'resource' that can be used to produce goods for market. Any resource from anywhere may be taken and used. However, in the process of the Big Economy's workings, a lot of waste is produced. The Big Economy does not usually see this waste as food, hoping, instead, that Nature's Great Economy will somehow absorb the waste.

As for human beings, the Big Economy sees us either as labor or as individuals-in-markets. As labor, it seeks to get us as cheaply as possible, moving plants across borders, if necessary, decimating local economies and fueling illegal immigration. The Big Economy always wants to know how it can engender a need for its products -- and thus it seeks to separate us from one another and convince us that if we are to be successful, attractive, and fulfilled, we need to buy and consume more products.

By paying attention to this kind of secret life of the objects we buy or consume, we connect ourselves more consciously and spiritually with all life on our planet -- and perhaps are inspired to change our consumer behavior in the direction of sustainability -- toward that state of "just enough" Sue Bender spoke of in our

reading. A state where we can meet our needs without further reducing the capacity of the environment to provide for future generations.

The holidays are soon upon us with their rush and bustle, their tinsel and tangle of opportunities and obligations. It may already be too late for many of us to make major changes in our holiday expectations and plans, but it is never too late to remember that what we are longing for at Christmastime isn't going to be met by something from any store – it's about the deeper meaning in our lives. And it's never too late to try making small changes like paying attention whenever we can to what we are doing and our reasons for doing it, to what we are buying, and why we believe we need to buy it. It's never too late to remember that even as we participate in the Big Economy, we're still part of nature's interconnected, interdependent Great Economy.

Like the monk who goes out each day with his begging bowl empty in his hands, to trusting that just enough for his needs will be given -- this holiday season may we hold out the "chalice of our being," as Dag Hammarskjöld wrote in our chalice lighting words. May we hold out the chalice of our being to receive, to carry, and to give back. To receive well what is given to us, including our own longings. To carry ourselves gracefully, even when times are stressful. And to give back not only things material, but also from the love that is within us.

And as we do so, may we be guided by the divine spark in ourselves and each other, by the divine seed in all beings, and by our ever-increasing knowledge and appreciation of the secret lives of things.

Amen.