

“MORE THAN THE SUM OF OUR WANTS”

A Sermon by Rev. Barbara W. ten Hove — February 8, 2009
Cedars Unitarian Universalist Church — Bainbridge Island & No. Kitsap County, WA

Reading Intro:

Michael Gerson is a conservative columnist for the Washington Post and a one time George W. Bush speechwriter. I started reading him in the Post a couple of years ago and was surprised, given his background, at how often I was moved by his words. Perhaps this is because he dares to write about morality in a pretty immoral town. And he takes risks, such as supporting the lessons of tolerance learned in the Harry Potter books, alienating many of his co-evangelists. Though I disagree with much of what he believes and writes about, I find him an interesting commentator on culture.

This reading comes from an article he wrote after seeing the Disney/Pixar film Wall-E this summer. I saw the film, too, but Gerson’s column got me thinking about it sermonically. Here are his thoughts on this controversial animated picture.

Reading: *More Than the Sum of Our Wants*, by Michael Gerson (Washington Post, July 11, 2008)

For a children’s movie, “WALL-E” begins with startling bleakness: epic landscapes of the Earth buried under the waste of endless human wants. This is the way the world ends—not with a nuclear bang, but with a closeout sale at “Buy n Large,”...—humanity’s only monument the mega-mall and mountains of discarded rubbish.

...But this grim grandeur serves the cinematic purpose of highlighting a humble flicker of revolt — a lonely robot named WALL-E, pointlessly compressing garbage into neatly stacked cubes. During these excavations, he salvages shiny items...that become...evidence of personality, even humanity. WALL-E spends his free time endlessly watching a videotape of “Hello, Dolly!”—a tinny, grainy remnant of romance and beauty in a world devoid of both.

Humans have long since evacuated Earth to join an endless pleasure cruise in space. A wall featuring pictures of previous ship’s captains chronicles 700 years of evolutionary regression—from bold space explorers to rotund, adult infants, incapable of walking without aid. Humans move about the space liner in floating easy chairs, consume food in oversized shakes and engage in constant, Facebook-like communication while communicating little but complaint and boredom.

Though WALL-E says only a few words in the movie, his compassion, vulnerability and endearing clumsiness awaken the dormant humanity of everyone he meets, robot and human... But there is a deeper purpose to “WALL-E.” ...The spell of self-involved

consumption is eventually broken by a combination of music, natural beauty, holding hands and dancing... Unlike some horror movies, this “alien” spreads a contagion of humanism...

“WALL-E” is partly an environmental parable, but its primary point is moral. The movie argues that human beings, aided by technology, can become imprisoned by their consumption. The pursuit of the latest style leads to conformity. The pursuit of pleasure displaces the deeper enjoyments of affection and friendship. The pursuit of our rhinestone desires manages to obscure our view of the stars.

What is perhaps most surprising about “WALL-E” is its daring. Not the false daring that transgresses lines of brutality or taste. Rather, the daring of savagely lampooning people in padded lounge chairs consuming supersized drinks—who suspiciously resemble audience members (*including me*) in a luxury theater...

And beyond these thoughtful paradoxes, this movie dares to raise a principle central to our humanity. People...require constant reminding they are more than the sum of their wants...

Sermon: More Than the Sum of Our Wants

by Rev. Barbara W. ten Hove

Movies are often cultural touchstones, reflecting the world around us in significant ways. For example, in 1969, a year of enormous turmoil in our nation, two of the Academy award nominees were practically polar opposites, mirroring the conflicted state of our nation that year. One, the winner of the Oscar for best picture, was the powerful but dark and difficult film *Midnight Cowboy*. It presented the bleak underside of New York City and a strangely loving but ugly relationship between two men.

One of the other nominees was *Hello Dolly*, a widely panned, but bright and beautiful musical directed by one of the most famous movie stars of a fading generation, Gene Kelly.

Fast forward 40 years and you have a bleak yet hopeful film that uses that peculiar yet colorful lesser movie, *Hello Dolly*, to remind little Wall-E, the solitary robot on a rubbish-filled earth, that love and beauty are still possible. He listens to a young Michael Crawford (yes, Broadway buffs, *that* Michael Crawford of Phantom fame) sing:

Out there, there's a world outside of Yonkers
Out there, Full of shine and full of sparkle
Close your eyes and see it glisten

Crawford leaps into a dance and tells everyone to put on their Sunday clothes and go out into this beautiful world to live fully in the moment.

Wall-E is transfixed by this vision of a world of hope and possibility, and we the viewers, get swept up by it as well. Wall-E, as Michael Gerson so clearly states in his excellent article, “is partly an environmental parable, but its primary point is moral. The movie argues that human beings, aided by technology, can become imprisoned by their consumption. The pursuit of the latest style leads to conformity. The pursuit of pleasure displaces the deeper enjoyments of affection and friendship. The pursuit of our rhinestone desires manages to obscure our view of the stars.”

That such a movie came out during this past year of crises is not surprising. Like other films that seem to emerge at just the right time (think of *Coming Home*, for example, or *2001- A Space Odyssey*), Wall-E captures, in its simple yet brilliant way, one of the greatest challenges we humans face today. Not global warming, or the economy or even war (though it impacts all of these huge issues). Rather, it’s our human tendency to want, want, want. It’s our desire for stuff. It’s consumerism, materialism; yes, we can even call it greed—which this little film so aptly displays in all its ugliness. And any American watching the film can’t help but squirm a little at the obvious truth it portrays.

Like any apocalyptic fiction, Wall-E isn’t really about the future so much as it is about our current situation. On this chilly February in 2009, when our economy is falling apart, our environment is showing signs of an extraordinary breakdown, and wars are all around, we can’t help but feel some of the bleakness of Wall-E’s world. Even the magnificent beauty of our region can’t hide the fact that, as the poet Yeats once wrote: *Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold* [from *The Second Coming*].

So here we are. On a Sunday morning surrounded by people who want to build a better world. Here we are and it seems that all Jaco and I can talk about is the change that is coming—the challenges we face as individuals, as a nation, as a congregation. I seem to have only one sermon in me right now. And the sermon is all about change, challenge, and perhaps even a little hope.

While reflecting on what I wanted to preach about today, I read a book that has been on my shelf for a little while. It’s called *Love and Death, My Journey Through the Valley of the Shadow*. I’ve resisted reading it because it may well be the last book ever written by my beloved colleague Forrest Church. Forrest is one of the ministers at All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City and in my view one of the greatest living American religious leaders. And while he still lives, his days on earth are likely to be very short. Though he has cheated death for a while, the cancer he has is persistent and it is likely his life will end soon. It’s why he wrote *Love and Death*. It’s his final legacy, his words of hope for those of us left behind.

As I read his bittersweet but powerful book, I couldn’t help but think that a man facing his own death has something to teach all of us. Not just about how to die with dignity, though his book is

full of good reminders of why that matters. His words resonated with me because in a sense we Americans at the beginning of the 21st century may be facing the end of a way of life that we have grown so accustomed to that to lose it would be a bit like dying. Though it is hard to predict exactly what will happen in the next few years, I can't help but believe that we will have to give up habits that are deeply ingrained in most of us, from long drives to the mountains, to strawberries in December. Paper cups and plastic bags may not be sorely missed, but I imagine that it will be hard to let go of other things. But learning to let go may be the first step in what will likely be a long process. And I find Forrest's words to be helpful as I imagine walking through our own valley of the shadow.

Forrest writes, "It is tempting to seek meaning not in what we have, but in what we desire. When we do this we practice wishful thinking. Of the enemies that frustrate our search for meaning, this is perhaps the most traitorous. It places fulfillment forever beyond our reach, in what we do not have, in what we cannot do, in who we shall never be" [*Love & Death*, p. 39].

Forrest is a recovering alcoholic and during the early days of his sobriety, long before he was diagnosed with terminal cancer, he created a small but significant mantra for himself that I want to unpack for us today. His mantra is simple. "Want what you have. Do what you can. Be who you are." I'm going to say that again. "Want what you have. Do what you can. Be who you are."

Wanting more, more, more may lie at the root of our current situation. In some Eastern religions, desire is considered the greatest evil, and the apocalyptic vision of Wall-E shows clearly the ugly side of such craving. It is not surprising that humans want so much. Wanting is not in and of itself wrong. But when wanting becomes grasping, becomes greed, becomes "I must have it now or my life will be over," we know we have slipped beyond simple want. And if we are to become, as Michael Gerson says, "more than the sum of our wants," we are going to have to change.

Forrest's mantra to *want what you have* is a great place to start. It's a call to live in the moment, to let go of grasping, and to be grateful for all that is already present in our lives. It is also extremely counter-culture. Our whole economy is built on the accumulation of things. We are bombarded daily with ads for this gewgaw, and that tchachkey, which, we are told, will make us thinner, stronger, and of course, much smarter and more beautiful. If people stop buying things they don't need, then what happens to our economy?

I think what happens is what's already starting to happen all over the world. Sands shift, businesses collapse, recession sets in. This can seem like a terrible thing. But can we look at it from a religious perspective? Maybe, for the first time certainly in my life, a real majority of people are starting to get that stuff doesn't matter, or at least doesn't matter as much as relationships, clean air and water, music, art and dancing, caring for each other, and so on. We're starting to see that for our beautiful blue green earth to survive we have to let go of our greed and learn again to live with less stuff and

more love. Wanting what we have is a great first step. Can you imagine waking each morning, looking around at your kitchen or your living room and being truly grateful for the same stuff you used yesterday? Can you imagine being glad for the nubby old sweater your spouse wears to keep warm? To give thanks for the same window through which the watery, wintry sun has shone through each year? And can you imagine wanting to be who you are right now? To be fine with the color of your hair or the way your body is changing as you age. To even accept the challenges you are facing?

Forrest Church writes about his response to someone questioning him on his mantra. Do you really want cancer? Someone asked him. “I want what I have. To selectively eliminate all pain from our lives may work, for a brief time, for a drunkard or a drug addict, but we cannot selectively wish away all that is wrong without including all that is right” [ibid. p. 34].

“We cannot wish away all that is wrong without including what is right.” Wow. That one hits me where I live. As some of you know, I have chronic health issues that cause me considerable daily pain and struggle. There are many days when I wish I could be someone else, live in another body, dump it all for something better! Yet, I know that if I were to stop being me, I would lose so many things powerfully precious to me. Learning to want what I already have is a spiritual practice I work on daily. Learning to accept who I am is another.

And that leads me to the third of Forrest’s little mantras: *be who you are*. (And yes, I know I’ve skipped number two – I promise to return to it in a moment!)

I believe that the greatest purpose of the religious life is to help us become who we are truly meant to be. This sounds simple, doesn’t it, but we know it’s not. Recently I watched the Mark Twain Award ceremony. This year’s award was given posthumously to the great comedian George Carlin—a great example of someone who discovered shortly into a good career as a mainstream comic that he couldn’t be the guy he was trying to be. Oh yes, he was an excellent comedian, doing funny sketches in a suit and tie and starting to make money from records and TV appearances. But it wasn’t who he really was. When he let the real George out of the bag—the biting, angry, hysterical, occasionally touching George—he almost lost his career. “Why aren’t you the guy you used to be?” he heard from so many. “Because I’m not that guy,” he replied. “I’m this guy and as George Carlin the real person I can offer the world my gifts in ways the phony George could not.” Ultimately, his career took off, as people came to see that the real George had more to offer than they thought.

Each of us has the potential to be fully and totally ourselves if we allow that self to emerge without shame. But too often our materialistic culture forces us to fit into some mold that makes us terribly uncomfortable. One of the interesting upsides of job loss, I’m told, is the gift that it sometimes gives us to discover someone inside ourselves we’d hidden away because of the expectations placed upon

us by a role or a corporate culture. When that gets taken away we're often forced to ask ourselves, "Who am I really? What makes me tick? How can I best offer my gifts to the world?" And it doesn't take job loss alone for this to happen. Any big change can push us deeper into ourselves to discover what our true gifts are.

Sometimes that knowledge brings with it recognition that who we are matters to the world in unexpected ways. I used to pride myself on being a person who got things done, who worked really hard and who could make a big splash with my oversize personality. When my physical limitations began to emerge fifteen years ago, I ignored them and pushed hard until I collapsed. Then I moved quickly into guilt. Why can't I be the best minister in the UUA? Why can't I chair every big event and speak at every rally? I began to question who I was.

But gradually, with help and humility, I began to realize that the real me, the Barbara that most blesses the world, isn't just the bossy, go-to girl (though I admit there is a part of the real me in her still), but also a quietly spiritual person who doesn't always have to be in charge. Who I thought I'd be when I was 28 is only one small piece of who I have become at 48. And I admit I like the whole me a lot more.

And that brings me, finally, to Forrest's second mantra (my third!), *do what you can*. If we let go of our desire to have it all and learn to want what we have, and if we accept that who we are is enough, then we may discover that we can do something and if we can do something we should. But what I can do and what you can do will be different, which is why we are challenged to do what we can together.

In 1991, when the first President George Bush told the nation the actual date that the Gulf War would start, I was a part of a team of people who put together the largest march against the war in the country here in Seattle. I worked hard for days on end doing what I did so well in those days—organizing and creating coalitions to pull off this huge event. The night of the march was a high point in my life. I had been a part of something that really mattered. I had used my gifts, worked with others using theirs, and done what I could to say no to war.

Fast-forward ten years. Now living in DC, the warmongering continued. Yet, unlike in earlier days, I could no longer organize marches. Even going to them proved too much for me. I remember the last march I went to in DC, about five years ago, and how in the midst of the crowd I was literally lifted off my feet. Unable to reach solid ground, I clung to Jaco and begged to go home. The shame I felt that night was real. I was (in my own eyes) a failure at standing up to war.

But gradually I began to realize that though my days of marching were over, there were still things I could do. I could host Muslims, Christians and Jews in my home as we struggled to understand what was happening around us. I could write sermons that inspired others to do what they could to

stop the war. I could support Jaco as he marched. I learned that doing what I could do and not fretting over what I couldn't made my actions that much more meaningful.

I also discovered this as I worked with a particular group of folks in the church. Exploring our spirituality on a deep level, through classes and worship, led me to unearth my inner teacher. I found I could be a mentor, had skills that helped others learn, that I could help a person see their inner spirit a bit clearer. If I had spent my forties marching and organizing, I would never have learned this essential element of myself, nor earned my Doctor of Ministry, nor become the minister I am today. I've learned to *want what I have* because I also learned to *be who I am* and to *do what I can*.

Not perfectly, of course. But, I am convinced that my friend Forrest's words are really and truly helpful. They have helped me. Perhaps they might help you.

And perhaps they might help us all as we walk through this valley of hard times that is sure to come. As we celebrate that we can be more than the sum of our wants, we can discover what it is that we truly do need to be human in this changing world. Love and companionship. Meaning and hope. Peace and goodwill.

But these are the fruits. For them to truly come alive we must first plant the seeds. How might we do that? You know my answer. I believe that great things can emerge if we decide together to want what we have, do what we can and be who we are. We are the seeds and together we may reap the harvest if we work together sharing our gifts. It won't be easy. But I have faith that this shadowed valley we are walking will soon see the sun.

And I have faith in the oneness of our world, a oneness that we celebrate in songs such as Hymn #134, *Our World is One World...*

Closing Words

When we learn to want what we have
We discover how blessed our lives already are.
When we learn to be who we are
We discover that our special gifts really do matter.
And when we learn to do what we can
We discover that we really can make a difference
We really can change the world.
So let us go forth this day
And bless the world with our gifts.

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