

Enough Is Enough

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Reading “Excess Baggage” by Barbara Merritt, from *Amethyst Beach*.

On our way to [the cottage] one summer,
my older son and I found ourselves following
one of the most ridiculous looking cars I have ever seen.

It was a sports utility vehicle, laden with all the evidence
of consumerism and conspicuous consumption.

Lashed onto the top were a canoe and a kayak.
Strapped onto the back bumper were four bicycles.
Golf clubs, tennis rackets, and camping equipment
were visible through the Jeep’s back window.

Every car that passed by stared in astonishment
at this visible study in recreational excess.

The thing I found most remarkable about the vehicle in front of us
was that we owned it.

My husband and younger son were driving our Jeep up [north],
and we followed [behind in our other vehicle].

After staring at our car for some [distance],
and noticing the attention it was attracting from drivers-by,
I decided that this was an auspicious moment
to have a discussion with my older child about “non-materialism.”

I explained, trying to keep a straight face,
that his father and I were dedicated to an ethic of simplicity,

diminishing consumption, and intentional reduction in material accumulation.

My son greeted this pronouncement with hysterical laughter.
Even I had to chuckle.

But I was persistent, and after his raucous laughter subsided,
I explained how, throughout our married life we had, both of us,
consistently chosen jobs that paid less,
even when we were offered positions that paid more;
how we had invested our modest resources into education and travel
rather than in real estate and furniture;
and how we tried constantly to decrease our dependence and reliance
on material wealth.

Notwithstanding the visual evidence to the contrary,
we were working to simplify our lifestyle.

Robert listened to everything I said, and then he replied,
“I understand Mom.
You and Dad are non-materialistic.
You just aren’t very good at it.”

Sermon: “Enough Is Enough”

It’s an iconic scene, with that most memorable line.

Whether you saw the movie, read the book, or both,
it’s likely that you remember hearing Oliver Twist’s famous request:
“Please, sir, I want some more.”

If the details are fuzzy, recall that Oliver Twist
was a nine-year old boy living in a London workhouse
where the kids were “issued three meals of thin gruel a day,
with an onion twice a week, and half a roll on Sundays.”¹

Describing the scene, Charles Dickens said:

¹ Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, Chapter 2.

Their “bowls never wanted washing.
The boys polished them with their spoons till they shone again;
and when they had performed this operation
(which never took very long, the spoons being nearly as large as the bowls),
they would sit staring at the copper pot, with such eager eyes,
as if they could have devoured the very bricks of which it was composed...”

The boys were “wild with hunger”—so much so
that one of the bigger kids told the others
that unless he had an extra bowl of gruel each day,
he might just eat whoever was sleeping next to him at night.

The boys believed him, and so they cast lots to determine who would seek out
that bonus bowl of soup for their potentially cannibalistic companion.

The task fell to Oliver, so that evening, after they had devoured
their meager meal, Oliver approached the master, put out his bowl,
and begged to have a bit more.

What he got in return was a chorus of confusing questions.

“What?” all the adults asked.

“Just who do you think you are?”

They were stunned by his being so bold, so unapologetically audacious.
So much so that he was instantly ushered away to solitary confinement.

When morning came, the workhouse staff
had pinned a note on the door to the street
offering the boy, along with a bonus of £5,
to any passer-by who would take the little rebel off their hands.

They had had *enough*.

Though the boys, of course, had not. . .

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“Enough” is an incredibly complicated word.

It can, obviously, indicate when we’re at our limit—

and won't be pushed any farther.

More commonly, of course, it conveys when we've had our fill,
when our hunger has been sated and our thirst slaked.
When we're satisfied, when our needs have been met.
When we're content.

It is an affirmation that what we have is sufficient.
Not too much, and not too little.
Just the right amount.

Just enough.

And, yet, how rare it is that our culture affirms this sense of having enough.

We are bombarded with ads, at every turn, that point out what we're lacking.

Ads that promise a ticket to the fountain of youth,
whether it's through a facelift, a sports car, or some magic pill.

Ads that guarantee fulfillment, happiness, and satisfaction—
or your money back.

Most of us likely think we're not in any way susceptible to such marketing—
that we're immune to the influence of all of these ads.

And, if truth be told, we look down on all of those other people
who are so gullible as to believe the hype and the spin—
who succumb to the emotional manipulation
and can't see the tactics of advertisers for what they are.

But one writer has labeled that smug notion the "Exceptionality Fantasy."²

Mark Kingwell tried this theory out on himself and found that it holds up:
"I drink Starbucks coffee," he says, "because it tastes good;
[and I think, with a fair bit of disdainful judgment, that]
you drink Tim Hortons

² Mark Kingwell, "Branded for Life: We're constantly being sold things—increasingly by having our own desires turned against us," *Globe and Mail*, August 4, 2008.

because you have bought into nostalgia and sham nationalism.”

So pronounced is this fantasy—
that we’re the amazingly exceptional person impervious to marketers’ evil
influence—that the industry today plays (or preys?)
on our being convinced we’re much too smart to be seduced by any of this.

Ironically, it was the anti-globalization work of Naomi Klein and others
who protested against the ill-effects of mass-marketing
that has taught the marketing industry in recent years
just how to take its game to the next level.

The old-school days of Mad Men-style marketing are giving way today
to our being drawn into buying up things not for their glamour, per se,
but for their anti-glamour, if you will.

Cool is being redefined by our embrace of what’s seemingly not cool at all.
Our resistance to marketing is frequently turned back on us—
a bit of reverse psychology at play.

Kingwell says, “Not only are we making marketers smarter,
we’re apparently making ourselves dumber.
A hard sell and a soft sell are both sells that you can decide to take or leave.
[But a] sell disguised as a desire not to be sold to,
which you have created by demonstrating that you’re too smart to be sold to,
is something about which you can offer no decision.

“If,” he says, “discerning that little endgame,
you are brave enough to query your own desires and sift them for validity,
what you will find is the unsettling mixture
of memory, longing, prejudice, imitation,
and delusion known as personal identity.”

Increasingly, our personal identity is summed up, for ourselves and for others,
in the brands that we choose and the brands we don’t choose.

I bring all of this up on this Earth Day Sunday,
because the consequences of how we live out our lives as consumers
is so clearly wreaking havoc with the future of life on this planet.

Our modern society has been built on an unsustainable myth of progress.

Onward and upward forever isn't actually possible.

Yet, that's the economic model that serves as our foundation.
And our critical part to play in that economy is, simply put, to buy stuff.

George W. Bush was famously pilloried after 9-11,
when he encouraged people to go shopping as a response to the attacks.

Now, Bush said many idiotic things as president—and inspired
more than a few Americans to run for the northern border, myself included!—
but this comment wasn't necessarily one of them.

He knew exactly how the fundamentals of the economy worked.
“Retail therapy” was just the thing needed to return to business as usual.

It wasn't a new idea.

In the 1950's, in the wake of WWII, Victor LeBeau, a retail specialist,
made a misguided argument for boosting the economy—
an argument that, by all measures, was widely accepted.

He said: “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 and our ego satisfaction in consumption.
We need things consumed, burned up, worn out,
replaced and discarded at an ever-increasing rate.”

While it could be argued as a solid strategy for a quick return on investment,
over the long-haul, it's been nothing but a recipe for disaster—
as we spend through the earth's bounty
and make the planet uninhabitable in the process.

Which brings us back to the question of enough—of *enoughness*, if you will.

So, I have to ask...

Do you feel that you *have* enough?

And, maybe more importantly, do you feel that you *are* enough?

I believe these two questions are deeply interrelated.
Our sense of being enough
can have a huge impact on our sense of having enough.

Now, I should make it perfectly clear
that there are people the world over who don't have enough.

Their most basic needs for food and water,
for shelter and safety, are far from being met.

To be frank, this isn't a sermon for people in such challenging circumstances.

It's a sermon, instead, for those of us who live in the relative privilege
of having essentially all of our needs satisfied,
to say nothing of our wants and our wishes, our hopes and desires.

It is a sermon for everyone who struggles
with what it means to have enough in a world with such profound inequality.

And for all who may find it hard to feel we have enough,
even though we, by most every measure,
have far more than our **fair** share on this planet.

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There's a Buddhist story that the Tibetan teacher Kalu Rinpoche tells
about a young monk who wakes up one day to find
that he's in possession of a magic jewel—
a magic jewel that grants its holder's every wish—
be it for more priceless jewels, precious minerals or metal,
for love, power, or great wealth.³

So, he's excited about it until he remembers that he's a monk
and that he doesn't actually need any of those things.

So, he looks around and tries to figure out whom to give the jewel to.

³ Aaron White, "A Theology of Enough," sermon preached at First Unitarian Church of Dallas, 22 November 2009. Story attributed to Tibetan Buddhist teacher Kalu Rinpoche.

He initially thought he'd give the stone to a poor person,
but he quickly realizes he's got a problem.
There are just too many poor people.

So, he goes to the Buddha,
figuring that the Buddha would have the answer to his question.

And he asks, "Who should I give this rock to?"

The Buddha thinks on it for a minute and then he says:
"Go over to the castle and give it to the king of the land.
He could use it."

The monk is sort of confused,
but he assumes the Buddha knows what he's talking about.

So, he goes to the castle and tells the king the story,
and then gives him the jewel.

The king is confused, but he takes the stone anyway.

And then the king goes to the Buddha and says, "I have a question for you."

"Why in the world would this monk bring me this stone
which grants a person whatever they want?
I'm the most powerful and wealthy person in the land."

And the Buddha turns to him and says, "Well, you're right about that.
You are the most wealthy and powerful person in the land,
but you are also the person here with the greatest amount of need."

The king was taken aback at even the suggestion he lacked for anything.

And then the Buddha said, "You have the greatest sense of hunger.
You also have the greatest sense that you'll never have enough.
So, it is you who needs the stone more than anyone else.

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If such a stone did exist and you found it next to your bed tomorrow morning,
what is it that you would ask for?

Would you be able, like the monk, to pass it on,
knowing that what you have and who you are is enough?

Or might it cause you, like the king, hopefully, eventually, did,
to ask deeper questions, to wonder what your hungers are really all about,
to ask why what you have or who you are feels somehow insufficient,
for some reason not quite enough?

If that is your question, my hope is that you might come to know
in the deepest parts of your being the core affirmation of our faith:
that each of us comes into this world precious and whole—
that we are worthy of the life that's been given us,
that we are children of the universe,
and that we are, without a doubt, enough.

We need not be perfect, or even try.
We instead need to be gloriously human.

We need to be grateful for the tremendous grace
that has brought us into being.

And we need to hold the gift of our days upon this good, green earth
in deep and enduring reverence, that our lives will go on to serve life itself,
and sustain the great dance of being down through ages still to come.

May it be so. Amen.