

The Dangers of Stuff
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Luke 12:13-21
1 Timothy 6:7-10, 17-19

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There is a wonderful short film available on you tube called “The Story of Stuff”. “The Story of Stuff” takes us on an eye-opening tour of the real costs of our consumer driven culture—from the extraction of resources to the incineration of I-Pods and computers. David Andes tells me that the Green Committee here at Elon showed this film a year or so ago, so many of you have probably seen it.

Annie Leonard, an activist who has spent the past 10 years traveling the globe fighting environmental threats, narrates “The Story of Stuff”, examining the real costs of extraction, production, distribution, consumption and disposal. The film points out that a “buy it then throw it away” mentality affects everyone on the consumer food chain, some disproportionately more than others. And of course, the environment itself becomes the final victim as our trash piles higher, and our forests, fresh water, and mineral resources are depleted in order to manufacture more goods for higher consumer demand. What drives our materialistic tendencies? Somehow, we equate security and happiness with possessions. Sarah van Gelder writes that “pursuing happiness is something we are entitled to; it says so, right in the Declaration of Independence. But are we happy? Could it be that what we are pursuing is not in fact happiness, but the *stuff* that is supposed to lead to happiness?”

Van Gelder points out that American citizens rank low in global happiness scores, although we are the wealthiest country in the world and have way more stuff than almost anyone else. She says we must face the reality that our wealth hasn’t made us very merry, and that our pursuit of the pseudo-happiness promised by Madison Avenue is destroying a very real planet.

The real ingredients of happiness, it turns out, are far less costly to the planet than we might have thought. Happiness comes from having enough--but not too much--and from living in a society in which others have enough. And it comes from such simple habits as expressing gratitude, seeking to live spiritually and emotionally balanced lives, and finding ways to give back to the world.
(<http://www.yesmagazine.org/svgblog/>)

We realize this truth when we expose ourselves to those who don’t have enough. My own happiness is short-lived when I consider how disproportionately large my share of the pie is compared to the sliver belonging to someone else. Our daughter, Jessica, was confronted by this comparison a couple of years ago while in Peru. She and her boyfriend Andrew spent time in remote villages in the Amazon, hosted by families who had no electricity, running water, or furniture. Jessica and Andrew slept on the floor or in hammocks on the open porches of houses built of sticks. Here’s what Jess wrote in her blog after living for awhile in one village:

Speaking of material things, once again I was reminded on this trip that I have an uncomfortable amount of stuff. Sometimes when we go visit the communities, Andrew and I feel like we’re roughing it, but if you ever want a real kick in the behind to simplify your life, unpack your backpack in front of a barefoot 7-year old from an Amazon village.

You will take out your bug repellent, your hand sanitizer, your sunscreen, your zippered bag of toiletries, your 3 pairs of different kinds of shoes, your hammock, your cameras, your bag of clothes, your sleeping sheet and therma-rest, your mosquito net, your books and pencils, etc. etc. and the child will marvel at each thing and it will start to dawn on you that this kid has basically none of that stuff, and he lives here, while you are planning to stay for nine days and somehow need it all. And this is just a small fraction of the things that you have in Iquitos. And

those are also hardly anything compared to the things that you left behind at home in the states.

Since, when I spend time with them in their homes and on their boats and in their meeting halls, I don't really perceive these people as "poor", though I know they do not have a lot, the unavoidable conclusion is that I have WAY TOO MUCH. Since it is now so clear, one of our new favorite things to do is look for ways to give stuff away. I know that I've always heard that giving is better than receiving, and I've always felt ambiguous about that because I really like receiving, but I have been pretty surprised at how good it feels to go around lightening our load. It's more than just a pat on the back for being a good citizen. When we can get in this frame of mind, we feel more incorporated, more confident and proud of ourselves, and less clingy and dependent on things that distract from what's important.

(www.lifeontheamazon.blogspot.com, March 22, 2008)

Distraction from what is important. This is the danger of too much stuff, along with the twin problem of imbalance between the few who have much and the many who have little. When our focus is on accumulation as a means to achieve happiness, then we forget about what truly matters during our short time on this earth.

The parable of the Rich Farmer drives home this point. Jesus tells this parable in response to a question from a man in the crowd asking him to settle a dispute with his brother over his inheritance. Jesus is seen as a teacher of the law, and it was assumed he would weigh in on such matters. However, he sidesteps this question and instead focuses on the motivation behind it: the desire for possessions. "Watch out and guard yourselves from every kind of greed," warns Jesus, "because your true life is not made up of the things you own, no matter how rich you may be." Those listening to Jesus might have wondered about his words. After all, they were probably laborers, and the man's question about his inheritance would have seemed appropriate. He was only trying to get his fair share of the pie. But Jesus reminds them that greed is an issue for all of us, a spiritual question of focus, as well as an ethical one of fair distribution.

Jesus then goes on to tell a story about a rich farmer who has a bumper crop and must decide what to do with the surplus. The man's response to his good fortune speaks volumes about his spiritual life. He doesn't express gratitude for this good luck which probably had very little to do with his own efforts. He had little control over the rain, weather, or yield of the seed. This bumper crop was a gift from God, yet the man's immediate reaction is one of insecurity. He wants to hoard what he has received, build bigger barns, make better investments, create a financial plan that has him living easy for years to come. His dialogue with himself is classic: "And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, and be merry.'"

This last line is an echo of Isaiah 22:13 which depicts God's people refusing to turn from sin, saying to themselves, "Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we'll die." In the Rich Farmer's case, this is exactly what happens. His trust in material goods offers no real security. Death can come before we achieve our long term goals.

Jesus concludes the parable with the words, "And so it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich in God's sight." Eugene Peterson's translation of this verse is "This is what happens when you fill your barn with Self and not with God." (The Message)

This is a case of misplaced trust, and the gospel of Luke shows Jesus offering several teachings about trust. The verses immediately following this parable show Jesus reassuring his disciples that they need not be excessively anxious about food, clothes, and saving for the future, because life is much larger than the sum of these things. Worry will not lengthen one's life.

“Consider the birds of the air; they don’t plant seeds or gather a harvest, they don’t have storage rooms or barns.... Consider the lilies of the field, they don’t work or make clothes for themselves,” Jesus tells his followers (Luke 12: 22-28). I don’t think Jesus used these examples from the natural world lightly. Humankind seems to be the singular species that is both blessed and cursed by the ability to consider future catastrophe. I think Jesus is pointing to the solace of wild things as an antidote and corrective to our materialistic tendencies and ingrained anxiety. As Wendell Berry says in his poem, *The Peace of Wild Things*:

*When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.*

Our stuff cannot offer spiritual solace or answers to our anxious ruminations about the future. God’s presence shines reassuringly through the beauty and immediacy of wild things which travel through life lightly, accumulating nothing but grace.

A few verses later in Luke, Jesus speaks about the moral implication of the unequal distribution of wealth. It is an issue of justice that also profoundly affects our own spiritual health: “Sell all your belongings and give the money to the poor. Provide for yourselves purses that don’t wear out, and save your riches in heaven, where they will never decrease, because no thief can get to them, and no moth can destroy them. For your heart will always be where your riches are.” (Luke 12:33-34).

“Your heart will always be where your riches are.” Mystics refer to the negative image of this truth: the danger of attachment. Attachment to things allows little room in the heart for the sacred. The Christian mystic, Meister Eckhart, invented the words for a spiritual attitude that is opposite to the clinginess of attachment: *letting go* and *letting be*. Letting go means detaching from what is superfluous, what doesn’t really matter. It does not mean that the world is bad. Rather, *letting go* is a way of seeing “the divinity behind the divinity of things”, and *letting be* is a state of being open, receptive and compassionate. *Letting go* and *letting be* are two themes in the recent animated movie, “Up”. “Up” is the story of a grouchy old man named Carl who tries to fulfill the dream of his beloved wife, Ellie, who had always wanted to go to Paradise Falls in Venezuela. After Ellie dies, Carl is left with only his memories and their lovely little house, a home which is in the way of some new construction. Unable to keep his house from being leveled, Carl decides to fulfill Ellie’s dream and also hold on to the home he shared with her by tying thousands of helium-filled balloons to the house and floating away to South America. However, while up in the air, he realizes that Russell, an over-eager Wilderness Scout, has stowed away on the porch and is now with him for the remainder of his great adventure.

They finally get to a ravine across from Paradise Falls, and tie themselves to the house, as it now barely floats above the ground. They are attached to the one possession that is most precious to Carl, the home and possessions he shared with Ellie. Carl will do anything to keep the house safe. But his house has also become a burden. It literally ties him down.

The old man and boy keep plodding along on their house-pulling journey, and along the way they meet Kevin, an exotic endangered bird, and Dug, a lovable golden retriever who wants a family. The movie

goes on to show Carl's slow transformation from a grouchy old man annoyed by the boy and animals who have intruded on his solitary existence to a wiser soul who literally lets his house go, allowing it to float away, when faced with the choice between keeping it or protecting the companions he has come to love. In the end, we see him back in his home town, no longer in his home, but lighter in spirit. He is happily engaged in new adventures and relationships and becomes a foster father to young Russell, finding joy again in simple things.

Voluntary simplicity is a spiritual practice. As Lao Tzu said, "She who knows she has enough is rich". There is a wonderful word from the Jewish Seder service which might help us remember this. *Dayenu*. It would have been enough. If God had only brought us out of Egypt, *dayenu*. If God had only led us to Mt. Sinai, *dayenu*. If God had only given us the Torah, *dayenu*. My friend, Jeanette Stokes, describes a December trip to the beach, and the way a series of wonderful and lucky happenings left her saying, *Dayenu*, it would have been enough:

*If I had only had a weekend of silence, it would have been enough, but I also saw the sunset. If I had only seen the sunset reflecting the peach and fuchsia in the tide pools at the beach, it would have been enough, but it also snowed... God provides all of this and more. Every now and then, I remember to stop and say thank you. (Stokes, **Twenty-Five Years in the Garden**, RCWM, Durham, 2002, p. 131.)*

May we also remember to look at our lives, see the riches that are there, and say *dayenu*. We have been given enough, and so much more. May we rest in the grace of the world and be free.
Amen.