

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE PEOPLE OF SIMPLICITY?

The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
June 5, 2016

OPENING WORDS *When I am Among the Trees* ~ Mary Oliver

When I am among the trees,
especially the willows and the honey locust,
equally the beech, the oaks and the pines,
they give off such hints of gladness.
I would almost say that they save me, and daily.
I am so distant from the hope of myself,
in which I have goodness, and discernment,
and never hurry through the world
 but walk slowly, and bow often.
Around me the trees stir in their leaves
and call out, "Stay awhile."
The light flows from their branches.
And they call again, "It's simple," they say,
"and you too have come
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled
with light, and to shine."

We have together to be filled with light, that we may shine.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *The Little House* ~ Virginia Lee Burton

(A sturdy little house, built on a hill surrounded by trees and daisies, is slowly surrounded by the city until she can no longer see the sun or the stars. Then one day...)

READING FOR MEDITATION *The Quiet and the Calm* ~ Jay E Abernathy, Jr

Let us seek the quiet and the calm
Let us lay aside our loud calling
Let us lay aside our struggle
Speak softly: let us listen to the melodies that recall other proportions
Our moments tarry not with us
Let us then seek the dimension that endures
beyond all nowness and hereness
beyond all requirement and all particularity
Let us speak softly that we may hear
Let us enter into the quiet.

MESSAGE *People of Simplicity*

Simplicity can mean a lot of things. It can mean easy...as in uncomplicated, or it can mean uncomplicated, as in simple-minded. Simplicity can infer a lack of complexity, as in something that is easy to grasp or to understand. And it can refer to a kind of sparseness, something that is plain and uncluttered.

So when I think of a life of simplicity, I imagine a life in which there is little clutter...of both stuff and busy-ness. I see a life of ease, a life that is uncomplicated, one with a clarity of values

and meaning. A life of simplicity, for me, would mean being able to make choices without feeling torn in a multitude of directions. I would spend my days in a simple cottage by a lake, and would sit in the sun for hours watching the leaves flutter in the wind or the sunlight dance on the water. I would grow my own food, and throw out my TV, eat a lot of peaches...oh, wait...maybe that's just John Prine singing in my ear.

How about you? Can you imagine a simple life?

Okay, maybe obtaining an idyllically simple life seems too complicated. What if we just tried to become people of simplicity? Maybe all we need is to 'simply' be a person of simplicity, here and now, in the lives we already have. Yet even this is not such a simple thing to do.

Think of that little house in today's story. Born in a place of quiet and simplicity, her world gradually filled with clutter and noise, crowding out the little house's view of the trees and the stars. It was a huge task...a house-moving task...for that little cottage to again find a place of spaciousness...where she could breathe and commune with the daisies and feel her place on the earth. It is as difficult as moving a house achieve simplicity.

I'm not going to give you practical lessons in simplicity. Take one look at my desk and you'll realize I am not to be trusted in this regard. Besides, there are tons of books, articles, podcasts and webinars that tell you how to simplify your life. There are people you can hire to come into your home to help you to de-clutter, and psychics who can de-clutter your mind. We even have a 'simplicity' theme packet in the foyer, and in your email inbox, chock full of resources. So, advice on simplifying is not what we're about this morning.

Rather, I want to explore the 'whys' with you. Why simplify? Why is simplicity good for the soul? Or for your mental and spiritual health?

Spaciousness. In-breath. Quiet.

Walden was first printed in 1854, one hundred years before I was born. Thoreau was repulsed by the busy-ness of life in the small city of Concord, Massachusetts, and chose to go looking for the 'solid bottom' he believed existed everywhere. Can you imagine what he would think of our world today? Can you even imagine??

I've just begun reading his book, the June pick for our non-fiction book club. The introduction in this edition was written by Bill McKibben. He calls Thoreau's book scripture, saying it is a practical environmentalist's volume for the 21st century. "We need to understand," he writes, "that when Thoreau sat in the dooryard of his cabin 'from sunrise till noon, rapt in a reverie, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house,' he was offering counsel and example exactly suited for our perilous moment in time."

Spaciousness. In-breath. Birdsong.

There is a 'solid bottom' everywhere...a place where you can rest and know what is real and find your place in all that is.

I think of clutter as noise. Whether that clutter be stuff, or emails, or deadlines, or the voices of countless expectations...all of that clutter is noise...static...a "constant barrage of chatter." And when it's noisy, it's difficult to hear, or to sense where that 'solid bottom' is. When it is

noisy, we get confused as to “our place in the scheme of things.”¹ When there is chatter all around us, we get distracted from what is important to us, drawn away from what has most meaning for us, and separated from our values.

Maybe this lack of simplicity could be likened to a kind of torment for those of us who would be meaning-makers. Like sleep deprivation, or sound torture, the presence of too much chatter makes it impossible to find our center or to listen to the still small voice within. No wonder we get lost. No wonder we get mesmerized by glitter. No wonder we get confused about what will bring us happiness.

And isn't our world filled to overflowing with noise? There is advertising on every possible available surface. The news cycle runs 24/7/365. We directly and almost continually wire our ears to sounds coming from personal noise-making devices. Even when we put those devices in our pockets or bags, we are compelled to jump in response whenever they beep or even pulse. Input, input, input. (*Whew*)

Spaciousness. In-breath. Quiet.

Yet, simplicity is good for the soul. And to achieve it, we first need to notice the noise, and to ask a few simple questions. What is it that truly makes us happy? How much is enough?

Perhaps you remember the moment in *Oliver Twist* when the boys in the orphanage, starved by receiving only tiny helpings of gruel, cast lots to decide who would dare to ask for more to eat. The task falls to Oliver, and so, one night at dinner, after much nudging, Oliver gets up from the table, meekly approaches Mr. Bumble, holds out his bowl with shaking hands, and begs... “Please sir, I want some more.” “What?” yells the master, and quickly reports Oliver's terrible offense to the Board of the orphanage, and soon, Oliver is sold into a workhouse. Because he asked for more.

Of course, I remind you of this story not to imply that we should judge Oliver as impertinent, nor to suggest that asking for more food when one is hungry is a crime. Rather, I offer it as a jumping off place in an exploration of our hunger for more. Each day we are confronted with our ‘bowl’ of life...our bowl of belongings and tasks and activities. I want to suggest that we might take stock of whether or not we are actually hungry, and what we might need, before we go looking for more. It's countercultural, I know. Radical.

I came across this beautiful quote from English humorist Jerome K Jerome: “Let your boat of life be light, packed with only what you need – a homely home and simple pleasures, one or two friends worth the name, someone to love and someone to love you, a cat, a dog, and a pipe or two, enough to eat, and enough to wear, and a little more than enough to drink; for thirst is a dangerous thing.”

Let your boat, or your bowl, of life be light. Spacious. Roomy. Simple. Enough.

Thirst is a dangerous thing. Hunger is a dangerous thing...a powerful thing. Not a bad thing...because we need hunger, and thirst, in order to live. We depend on these impulses not only to keep our bodies alive, but to identify our passions and our dreams. They are dangerous, I think, when they lead us to cluttering our lives in such a way as to make it

¹ The two parenthetical phrases in this paragraph are from Bill McKibben's introduction to *Walden*.

impossible to distinguish if that for which we hunger is something we need, or something of value, or something else entirely. The clutter chatters at us constantly...more, more, more. Go faster. Do this too. Oh, and that thing. Hurry up. Don't forget that. What? You didn't notice this? What about that? Turn that on. Turn this up. Come on, show up over here. Quickly now. You need more, more. Do more. Be more.

(Whew) Breathe. Make a bit of space around you. Listen for a different voice. Hear the birdsong. Hear God whispering.

“Most of the luxuries,” said Thoreau, “are not only not indispensable, but positive hinderances to the elevation of mankind.”

So what values might guide us in being people of simplicity? I wrote in my blog posting for this month about the new vision statement for Canadian Unitarian Universalism, a statement approved by the gathered delegates at the Canadian Unitarian Council's Annual Meeting a couple of weeks ago. In its simplest form, it reads, “Our interdependence calls us to love and justice.” Of course, interdependence is already named in our seven principles, and even in this congregation's purpose statement. But, the central focus of our new national vision is on interdependence, naming it as the core inspiration and motivation for our work as people of faith.

And you see, living a life of interdependence goes hand in hand with simplicity. When we recognize and make choices in terms of our interdependence, that is, our impact on others and on the planet, we just might choose not to have so much, not to do so much, not to expect or demand so much. In other words, a vision of interdependence may well call us to live more simply, in ways that soften our impact on the earth, and on each other.

As is so often true, it comes down to our choices. May I be so bold as to suggest that this is why we gather here each week? We come together in order to get away from the clutter and noise of the world 'out there' that we might find a few moments of spaciousness and quiet...where we can pay attention to what most matters. We come together in order to both create and maintain a certain simplicity or centeredness within ourselves. We come together to shape and express the values that matter to us. We come together in order to examine our lives in the company of a community of support.

So, I really listened when I asked Sheena for her ideas for this service about simplicity. She suggested “few words” and “excess stripped away” and “a single flower.” Her ideas encouraged me to edit out many words...to question what was really necessary. It's like a Ted Talk by Graham Hill² that I listened to the other day. (Graham Hill is a minimalist designer and writer.) He says that life-editing is the skill of this century. We need to build our skills in editing out what is not necessary, what is not life-giving, what does not bring us joy. We need skills in identifying what is excess, what is too much...so that we can enjoy the simplicity of a single flower.

Practicing life-editing, we can guide our energy and our desires toward places of abundance. When we practice life-editing, we can rid ourselves of all that is not really us, everything that feels inauthentic. And yes, it can feel scary, because when we practice life-editing, and clear

² http://www.ted.com/talks/graham_hill_less_stuff_more_happiness

out the noise, we are likely to expose some painful longings and even loneliness...feelings that the clutter was able to mask or bury.

But here, or wherever you can find moments of stillness and simplicity and connection, it is possible to be with those feelings of emptiness until they are filled with the assurance that you are an integral part of all that is...that you have a "place in the family of things"³...that there is a solid bottom upon which you may depend, and rest.

Simplicity is good for the soul. Stillness. Clarity. Spaciousness.

May it be so within each of us.

READING *Gem Mining* ~ Christopher Buice

Rev. Chris Buice wrote these words in reference to our programming for children, but they apply to all of us. Here are his thoughts, entitled "Gem Mining."

A few summers ago my wife Suzanne and I took our son gem mining in the mountains of North Carolina. We mounded a pile of mud and dirt, got a sifter, and began sifting through the soil in search of treasure.

Liberal religious education is like gem mining. In a Unitarian Universalist Sunday School we endeavor to teach our children discernment. The word discernment comes from the Latin word *discernere*, which means "to separate," "to distinguish," "to sort out." In other words, we try to teach our children how to be gem miners.

The process of gem mining is simple. You take some dirt, place it into a strainer, run creek water through it, and sift until you find a gem.

Liberal religious gem mining requires the ability to discern what is worth keeping and what should be sifted out and discarded. This can be difficult. Our children have to sift through lots of information in life. They learn values from television, popular music, the Internet, books, magazines, their friends, and many other sources. We can't even know all the messages they are exposed to on a regular basis.

We cannot shelter our children forever. But we can teach them the process of discernment and the art of gem mining. We can help to awaken the conscience so that they will be able to make responsible choices, to separate things of value from things that have no value. At some point we must open the door and lead our children into the world and speak the words to them that tradition says God spoke to the children of Israel: "I have set before you life and death, a blessing and a curse. Therefore chose life."

CLOSING WORDS *In the Beginning* ~ David Whyte

Sometimes simplicity rises
like a blossom of fire
from the white silk of your own skin.
You were there in the beginning
you heard the story, you heard the merciless
and tender words telling you where you had to go.
Exile is never easy and the journey

³ From Mary Oliver's "Wild Geese"

itself leaves a bitter taste. But then,
when you heard that voice, you had to go.
You couldn't sit by the fire, you couldn't live
so close to the live flame of that compassion
you had to go out in the world and make it your own
so you could come back with
that flame in your voice, saying listen...
this warmth, this unbearable light, this fearful love...
It is all here, it is all here.

Go now, out into the world and make it your own, that you may return here to this fire and
this warmth and this community.

Blessed be.