

## Blessed Are The Wasteful

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Are you enjoying the fall foliage or at least what's left of it?

Taking in the kaleidoscope of colors that is autumn in New England these last several weeks, I'm reminded of why so many, from first time visitors to lifelong residents, are so enamored with this region of the country. Indeed, New England has a reputation for being one the most beautiful areas of the country, in part, because of the annual autumnal transformation we enjoy.

Speaking of reputations, New England, or rather New Englanders, have long been noted for something else: being frugal. As an old New England proverb goes,

“Use it up,  
wear it out,  
make it do,  
or do without.”

And I recognize at least some of the spirit of those words alive in me when looking at photos from five, six, seven, or more years ago and I realize I still have and wear the shirt I'm wearing in the photo.

Then there's the next level. As John Sedgwick observed in the September 1991 issue of Yankee Magazine, “All Yankees are known for their frugality, I suppose, but well-to-do Yankees most perfectly embody the idea. In no other part of the country are the rich cheap.”

As a sometime art and antiques appraiser and consultant, I've seen plenty of what he's means. Indeed it was more common than one might imagine to arrive at a grand multi-million dollar home in Greenwich or the Litchfield Hills chocked full of fine art and antiques, and encounter area rugs with holes on the floor, sofas worn threadbare, a kitchen that hadn't been remodeled since the 1950's or, in the driveway, a car, usually a Volvo or Saab, so old and beat up it appeared it had hit everything but the lottery.

Now, were we to spend time exploring the origins of New Englander's reputation for frugality and its more extreme manifestation among some with abundant means, we'd surely uncover some admonishment against waste. Behind which rests the idea that resources necessary for survival exist in finite quantity. And regardless of the source, be

it religious, secular, personal experience or the anecdotal evidence of others, it was imparted with such force and authority that it became part of the mythos of New England.

Yet, while New England and New Englanders have a reputation for frugality, the ideas undergirding it or its practice are hardly exclusive to New England or its inhabitants. Nor is its manifestation always as harmless as keeping and wearing old clothes or as comic as sitting on an old sofa with the stuffing sticking out while also sitting on millions in the bank. There is in fact a grossly absurd and ultimately devastating way in which humans are frugal which is hinted at in Richard Blanco's poem, "Complaint Of El Rio Grande", our first reading this morning:

"I was meant for all things to meet: to make the clouds pause in the mirror of my waters, to be home to fallen rain that finds its way to me, to turn loveless rocks into lovesick pebbles and carry them as humble gifts back to the sea which bring life back to me."

But, says the river, "Then countries- your invention- maps jig sawing the world into colored shapes caged in bold lines to say: you're here, not there, you're this, not that, to say: yellow isn't red, red isn't black, black is not white, to say, mine, not ours, to say war, and believe life's worth is relative."

This issue, or complaint the river raises is not simply that it's been turned into "a line, a border, a murderer" in the politically fraught drama of contemporary migration and immigration policy, but that it is being denied what it was meant for... "all things to meet, to give and receive, to be one in one another." Thus, it invites not a debate on immigration policy per se, but begs us to think about what we are meant for.

A few weeks ago, I offered a prayer shared with me by Rabbi Danny Moss from Temple Beth Tikvah here in Madison in the wake of the violence in Israel and Palestine. The prayer by Rabbi Tamar Elad Appelbaum and Sheikha Ibtisam Maḥameed, a Palestinian citizen of Israel, observes,

"You did not create us to kill each other  
Nor to live in fear, anger or hatred in your world  
But rather you have created us so we can grant permission to one another to sanctify  
Your name of Life, your name of Peace in this world".

Translating this overtly theistic language into UU terms, I hear an affirmation that what we human beings are meant for is to "love the hell out of this world."

As my colleague the Rev. Joanna Fontaine Crawford, who coined that phrase writes, "hell is all around... misery, ill health, disease, viciousness of greed in the face of want, voices that shout hate or whisper meanness, soul-eating addiction, humiliation, despair, injustice that curls up nastily." To which she adds, "We are the only form love will take."

And yet we often hesitate, hedge, or hold back our love.

Why?

What stops us from “loving the hell out of this world?”

“If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to us as it is, infinite.”

William Blake’s words remind us that like the river meant for all things to meet but that we mistake for a border, that then divides and even kills, we don’t see love as it is, but as we fear it is, a finite resource. And what do we tend to do with love when we fear it to be a finite resource? We manage it. We dole it out cautiously. We become frugal arbiters of who or what is worthy or unworthy of love when what is called for is to waste it with abandon.

“Love wastefully”, my late friend and teacher John Shelby Spong used to say. Spong, a former archbishop of New Jersey, author, champion of LGBTQ rights, and theological revolutionary in the Episcopal Church, believed and preached with his lips and life that, “Even in the widest variety of our humanity, in our deepest set of beliefs, there is no outcast... There can be no one regarded as unclean, no prejudice allowed....”

Spong taught me worship not by being right, but by loving, which he described as, “sharing life, giving life away, not being afraid, wandering out of the certain into the uncertain, out of known into the unknown.” In one of his famous lectures, he said, “The image in my mind is an old sink in the basement, that you plug up the drains and you turn on all the [taps] and the water overflows the boundaries and goes all over the floor and fills up every crack and cranny... and never stops to ask whether that crack deserves this living water... You love because love is what you have to do, not because somebody deserves the love. You love wastefully.”

“But how?”, you might be thinking, seeking to understand.

And that’s part of the problem.

We condition love on understanding.

A problem David Whyte suggests in our second reading we might address via the practice of withdrawal, observing,

“We stick to the wrong thing quite often, not because it will come to fruition by further effort,... but because we cannot remove our sticky hands or our feet or our minds from the way we have decided to tell the story and we become further enmeshed even by trying to make sense of what entraps us, when what is needed is a simple, clean breaking away.”

A couple of weeks ago SUUS hosted a listening session with members of an ad hoc committee charged with advising the town of Madison on the implementation of the town's affordable housing plan. One of the issues discussed was the story people tell themselves about what affordable housing is, who needs it, and why.

And we all have narratives we're committed to...stories we tell ourselves about affordable housing and who lives there, stories about the man holding a sign by the off ramp that says, "Homeless. Please help". Stories about the woman at the grocery store wearing a hijab or the person in the car ahead of us with an NRA bumper sticker. Stories about a neighbor whose children are estranged from her or the adult child who moved out to live on their own. And even the millionaire in Greenwich, sitting on a threadbare sofa and driving an old Volvo.

Now, those stories may be mostly accurate or way off. But either way, it has nothing to do with love. To love, Spengler reminds us means, "wandering out of the certain into the uncertain, out of known into the unknown." To love wastefully is not about arriving at an understanding or figuring someone out, but loving them because they are. We can't love wastefully if we busy ourselves trying to understand. Just as one need not understand Italian to enjoy a Puccini opera, we need not understand another to love them.

And we need not like another to love them either. Indeed, another obstacle to loving wastefully is the idea that in order to love another we must also like them. Here again David Whyte offers us a way through the impasse via withdrawal through which, he writes, "we start the process of losing our false enemies, and even our false friends, and most especially the false sense of self we have manufactured to live with them: we make ourselves available for the simple purification of seeing ourselves and our world more elementally and therefore more clearly again.

People sometimes ask if or what I pray during the silence we observe in our service each week. More often than not I engage in metta or lovingkindness meditation, a Buddhist form of meditation. Metta means to care and wish well for another being without judging them, to accept them independently of agreeing or disagreeing with them, and without wanting anything from them in return. The words vary from teacher to teacher, but essentially one recites or directs positive phrases towards oneself and others, including those one considers difficult or objectionable, even an enemy.

For me, metta is a practice of withdrawal, helping me step back and see beyond dualisms, those false friends, enemies, and sense of self that obscure the larger reality of our shared humanity and ultimately our unity. Of course, the particular practice of withdrawal one engages, be it associated with one of the world's religions, a Greek tragedy, or other art form, is less important than its effect.

Finally, to love wastefully each must realize, as to John Shelby Spong observed, “Nobody else can offer what you have to offer... Whether we are male or female, gay or straight, transgender or bisexual, white or black or yellow or brown, left-handed or right-handed, brilliant or not quite so brilliant. No matter what the human difference is, you have something to offer in your own being.”

And so, loving wastefully means to be all that you are, and not be bound by convention or the fears of the past. Indeed, as our Unitarian forbearer Ralph Waldo Emerson long ago observed, “To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.”

And in this withdrawal again clears our path. As David Whyte notes, “We withdraw not to disappear, but to find another ground from which to see; a solid ground from which to step, and from which to speak again, in a different voice, a clear, rested, embodied tonality we can call our own.”

A similar point was made by the great 20th C. theologian Howard Thurman who said, “Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

A famous story in Judaism tells of Rabbi Zusya whose students discover him in tears on his deathbed. Concerned, they try to comfort him. All your life you kept the commandments as faithfully as Moses. All your life you prayed as steadily as Abraham. Why then should you fear to face God? You don’t understand, replies Zusya, for if God asks me why I didn’t act like Moses, I can say I was not Moses. If God asks me why I didn’t behave like Abraham, I can say I wasn’t Abraham. But when God says, Zusya, why were you were not Zusya- what can I say?

So often we fret and wring our hands over the state of the world, lamenting our seeming helplessness. If only something could be done. If only there was someone to do it. If only we had something to give.

Few if anyone here this morning believes an old man in the clouds is gonna step in. That leaves us. We’re the ones with something that could be done, the ones to do it, and with something to give.

That something is love.

And when it comes to love, blessed are the wasteful, for they have wandered out of the certain into the uncertain, out of the known into the unknown, left falsehood aside, and come alive.

Let us then commit ourselves to loving wastefully and together love the hell out of this world.

Amen and Blessed Be