Damaged Good

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Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, my husband and I exhibited regularly at several large multi-day antiques fairs that drew international crowds. The pandemic proved the demise of some of these fairs and severely impacted the size and draw of others, not to mention increasing the expense of exhibiting. One of the things I miss most in the wake of this disruption of business as we'd known it, is the in-person connection and interaction with collectors, customers, and fellow dealers, from around the world, some of whom we had know for over twenty years but only saw once or twice a year at the fairs.

Not that it was a universally pleasant experience. We're talking about people after all, lots of people, and some were decidedly unpleasant. There were the pushy dealers who were notorious for regularly crossing the line between friendly, even spirited haggling, to being downright rude and insulting, prompting my husband once to physically remove an item from an offending dealer's hand and place back in our showcase while saying the dealer, "Obviously, this isn't for you."

Equally unpleasant were the people who felt they were too important, rich, or both to pay sales tax and were quick to tell you so. Nonetheless, my standard response, "If you don't pay the tax, you don't get the item", rarely resulted in a lost sale, often thanks to a partner or spouse who really wanted the item.

And then there were the perfectionists.

A curious group indeed, considering almost everything for sale had at least some age, was handmade, and previously owned. Which means items they will almost always exhibit some evidence that they've been around awhile and were made and handled by human hands over the course of their life.

Such evidence ranges from patinas acquired over time to scratches and wear spots where an object has been handled repeatedly for years to variations in height, weight, or color intensity between objects made as pairs or sets, especially glassware. Sometimes things happen in the making too, like on certain early ceramics, where glaze loss occurs on the rim or handles of a piece and glass that is occasionally found with potstones, which are inclusions consisting of unmelted particles from the glass batch. And then there's replacements to trim or hardware, and of course repairs sometimes as well.

What degree of visible use, wear, manufacturing flaws, or even repair is considered normal varies depending on what category and age of antique we're talking about. But to expect such objects to exhibit the same degree of uniformity of form, weight, and finish as something made by yesterday with modern manufacturing techniques is unrealistic.

At an antiques fair, the perfectionist fails to appreciate what I call the soulfulness or fabulous flaws of an object, by insisting it bear as little testimony of its history as possible save for its physical presence.

Now, in truth, while to insist such testimony of an antique is unrealistic, is not the end of the world. But what if we make the same demand of ourselves?

Well then, we've got a genuine tragedy on our hands.

Indeed, to insist our lives bear as little testimony of our existence as possible save for our physical presence, is not merely unrealistic, it, like the prayers of Emerson's formalist preacher, "smites and offends." For such insistence makes a mockery of life whose meaning is shaped by change, and deepened by the wear and tear of living. To insist upon and pursue perfection of one's self is to live in vain.

This is precisely what Emerson rails against in his Divinity School Address, calling out the fraud directly, he writes, "This man had ploughed, and planted, and talked, and bought, and sold; he had read books; he had eaten and drunken; his head aches; his heart throbs; he smiles and suffers; yet was there not a surmise, a hint, in all the discourse, that he had ever lived at all. Not a line did he draw out of real history."

Emerson's preacher having given no sense he had ever lived and acted failed to grasp "the capital secret of his profession", was not to instruct his listeners in spiritual perfection, but rather, "to convert life into truth."

"To convert life into truth."

Now, that's a rather tall order. And I would argue this task belongs not just to professional clergy but to anyone seeking a life worth living.

For in our own time a life worth living is still presented, as it was in Emerson's, as the attainment of perfection, although no longer or necessarily spiritual perfection.

Indeed today, the issue generally isn't, as with Emerson's preacher, a complete lack of evidence of a life but rather all too strident testimony in favor of an airbrushed life. Testimony replete with enhanced images and videos of exotic locations featuring people with flawless skin, bright white teeth, thick, stylish heads of hair, pouty lips, and tight bodies wearing exquisitely tailored clothing, living their "best lives."

But what is really being sold is not a travel destination, make-up, hair care or any other product for that matter. What is being sold is salvation through perfection. And if perfection is the key to salvation, then heaven is surely a lonely place. I'm definitely not getting in. What about you?

So why are we here?

The late Unitarian minister, James Luther Adams called church, "The place where you get to practice what it means to be human." I had never hear of James Luther Adams before my first visit to a Unitarian Universalist Church, but his words pretty much sum up why I showed up one Sunday. I was filled with inconsolable anger over anti-gay rhetoric and a rash of legislative initiatives occurring nationwide at the time. But I didn't really know what to do with that very human experience of feeling anger. At church I found a place where I could acknowledge and care for it without indulging it.

Now when I lead adult religious exploration classes, I include a check in where people are invited to share what they're bringing to the session that day. Naturally I like it when people say they bring something like openness to the material or readiness to participate, but sometimes people say they bring anxiety or worry or anger about something completely unrelated to the session. When that happens I don't ask them to ignore it aside or suggest a way to alleviate the feeling, I simply thank them for acknowledging it. My intent is to welcome people as they are.

Over the years several people have told me they come to church because it is the only place in their life where they feel they can truly be themselves. Which, when I've asked what means to them, they've offered that they feel welcomed to bring and process the fullness of their experience with them. Something our story for all ages beautifully illustrates.

Recall, of the two pots, "the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments, perfect in its mind to the end for which it was made. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection, and miserable that it was able to accomplish only half of what it had been made to do."

It is not difficult to hear in this the pride of those who delight in sharing with everyone how busy they are and the shame of those who experience struggling with multitasking as akin to a moral failing.

And indeed, the cracked pot is the voice of anyone feeling inadequate in a world where salvation through perfection is relentlessly promised and pursued.

“Because of my flaws”, the cracked pot laments to the water bearer, “you have to do all this work, and you don't get full value from our efforts.”

Now, we can imagine the water bearer might say, “Yeah, you’re right. We need to be fix you.” And that’s how a lot of the world usually responds. Entire industries are built around the idea that people need to be fixed.

The water bearer, however, responds differently, saying,"Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of the path, but not on the other pot's side? That's because I have always known about your flaw, and I took advantage of it. I planted flower seeds on our side of the path, and every day while we walk back from the stream, you've watered them. For two years I have been able to pick beautiful flowers to decorate my master's table. Without you being just the way you are, he would not have this beauty to grace his house.”

I don’t think it’s a stretch to liken the water bearer to a place where one can truly be themselves, perhaps even a church where we come not to be fixed, but by practicing what it means to be human, one learns to convert life into truth.

The problem with salvation through perfection isn’t simply that its unattainable, it’s not true. “We are all cracked pots” the story remind us. Flaws are the rule, not the exception and further damage is all but guaranteed with each candle added to our birthday cake each year. But contrary to the false popular theology of perfection, damaged doesn’t mean worthless.

Collectors and connoisseurs look to evidence of a life well lived in the form of imperfections, citing “good wear” as both aesthetically appealing and mark of authenticity. We would do well to likewise seek, as evidence of a life worth living, the embrace of the damaged good that is each and everyone of us. A life whose meaning is shaped by change, and deepened by the wear and tear of living.

May it be so.

Amen and Blessed Be