

Simple Gifts

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Rev. Craig M. Nowak

Rising up from the back of the chair positioned opposite my own came a young man's voice, who judging by the volume and lack of an audible second voice, was speaking to someone on his cell phone. I tried to ignore him and might have been successful even in the close quarters of the cafe where we were both seated had he not soon after said to person on the phone, "Chloe, my cab driver and new best friend said I should drink hibiscus tea to lower my blood pressure."

"Huh.", I thought to myself before quickly grabbing my phone and typing what I just heard into the Notes app. And in case you're wondering, I didn't do so because I wanted to remember to try hibiscus tea to treat high blood pressure. I made a note of it because it struck me as something worthy of reflection and perhaps something I might use someday in a sermon.

Indeed, for anyone who has ever wondered where I get my ideas for sermons the answer is anywhere and everywhere I can, lending credence to the notion that ministers are never really off, even on vacation, because life - with its ups and downs, tragedies and triumphs, extraordinary or quite mundane moments- is the raw material from which ministry, include sermons, is wrought.

And so here we are with a short statement I overheard while on vacation, made by a young man in a cafe aboard a cruise ship. But why this statement about taking health advice from a cab driver one just met?

Well, initially it got me thinking about in what or whom people place their trust or faith. Why would this young man trust or take health advice, for example, from someone he just met and who is presumably not trained in medicine? Sure, maybe Chloe's on to something that does work. Then again, maybe she's got a side gig selling hibiscus tea.

But then I started thinking about how a lot of people today are looking for alternatives to a life that feels on many levels overwhelming. Now, perhaps the young man is currently taking a pill to treat his blood pressure. For most, taking a pill to lower blood pressure isn't itself overwhelming. But in many ways that pill is more than just a pill.

It is a symbol of so much that exhausts us: a broken healthcare system, big pharma, corporate and political influence and overreach into our lives, and so much more.

And what is tea associated with? Plants, the earth, water, warmth, soothing, calm. And tea isn't that complicated. It's readily accessible. You don't need a prescription from a doctor or approval from an insurance bureaucrat to obtain or drink it. And most are unlikely to suffer some unwanted or irreversible side-effect from it. In a word, tea seems simple.

In the Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows, described as "a compendium of new words for emotions", is listed the word, "Maru Mori" which is defined as, "the heartbreaking simplicity of ordinary things."

Something Billy Collins points to in his poem, "I Ask You." in which sitting at his kitchen table, he pays homage to what many deem unremarkable,

*the clear ovals of a glass of water,
a small crate of oranges, a book on Stalin,
not to mention the odd snarling fish
in a frame on the wall,
and the way these three candles--
each a different height--
are singing in perfect harmony.*

To be clear, I'm not advocating one give up their prescription medications in favor of a cup of tea. I just wonder if the young man seemingly ready to take his cabbie's advice to drink hibiscus tea to treat his blood pressure wasn't, in part, sensing a bit of "maru mori"? Perhaps awakening to the experience or longing he hasn't previously paid much attention to.

As the world in which we live becomes more complicated and our attention increasingly fragmented by varied interests vying to capture and monetize it, the appeal of a simpler life, in effect, a demand for a refund from the attention economy, is also likely to continue to grow.

Case in point, a recent article on religion in the Associated Press began, "At the Arch Street Meeting House in Philadelphia's Old City, more and more young people are seeking respite from a clamorous technological age in the silent worship of a centuries-old faith." Said one new attendee (Valerie Goodman) in response to the silence and quietude that feature prominently in worship, "This

feels different in that it's so simple. It's set up in a way that makes you feel like your internal world ... is equally as important as the space that you're in."

Such an observation suggests the simplicity that so many hunger for today is about more than the mere act of getting rid of clutter or cultivating a new found appreciation for ordinary objects, as the wider, commercially motivated Simplicity Movement advocates and is prepared to sell countless books, seminars, and consults to show you how. Rather, it seems, "the crucial step toward a simpler life", according the collective of authors writing for *The School of Life*, is "to ask ourselves what our true longings are and what are the ends at which we are aiming." [[A Simpler Life](#)]

And the truth of the matter is we can't know what our true longings are, let alone the ends at which we are aiming if we don't routinely visit our inner world. Our inner world is the last place a society with an economic system devoted to infinite consumer choice will encourage us to visit because there, with some space between us and the millions of possibilities with which we're regularly bombarded, we might start to wonder what any of those possibilities might be for. More, we might actually develop the ability to be more discerning in our selection be it relationships, possessions, experiences and so forth. A process by which we discover, "simplicity isn't so much a life with few things and commitments in it, as a life with the right, necessary things, attuned to our flourishing." [[A Simpler Life](#)].

These right, "necessary things, attuned to our flourishing" are what I call simple gifts that allow us, in the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, "to be oneself in a world that is constantly trying to make us something else." An idea beautifully illustrated in our story for all ages, [Henry Builds A Cabin](#).

You may recall in the story that Henry's friends critique everything from the size to the lighting of his planned cabin, parroting the voice of society at large and its acceptance of unexamined materialist assumptions. To all of this Henry lovingly offers a gentle, yet confident refrain, "It's bigger (and brighter) than it looks" suggestive of one whose life is not dictated by Fad or FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) but fashioned through discovery and discernment of simple gifts.

Whereas a superficial reading of the story would seem to suggest less is more, a common misinterpretation of simplicity. A closer look reveals Henry had discovered and discerned what's "right, necessary, and attuned for his flourishing." Still, for another, Henry's cabin may in fact be too small or too big. The thing is there's no "one size fits all" when it comes to simple gifts. You can't tell a room full of people overwhelmed by modern life to clear their closets of all but ten articles of clothing, dump their difficult relationships, and move into a

tiny house and expect everyone will suddenly be at peace and flourish. Simple gifts are not formulas, they are that which, materially and spiritually, allow you to be uniquely you.

And this is where discernment is crucial and why quiet space and time for contemplation is often experienced as revelatory. Many, perhaps most, don't know if or how all the various the "things" -commitments, possessions, relationships, etc.- in our life relate to who we are. And if per chance we are asked, absent some time exploring our inner world, we may, to our dismay, hear ourselves parrot the maxims of a society or people who, consciously or not, have far more interest in who they want or think we should be rather than who we really are. To submit or adapt ourselves to such ideas without knowing if or how they align with who we are may only make us simple at the expense of gaining the "true simplicity" alluded to in the classic Shaker hymn we sang this morning.

For the point of discerning simple gifts is not to make ourselves "simple" by ironing out or eliminating our inner contradictions, inconsistencies, or longings but to clear away what keeps us from discovering, appreciating and living authentically our inner polytheism, that complexity that makes us a unique human being.

Simple gifts ground us in the fertile soil of life, beyond which, as Billy Collins writes,

*There is nothing that I need,
not even a job that would allow me to row to work,
or a coffee-colored Aston Martin DB4
with cracked green leather seats.*

As the title and trajectory of Collin's poem "I Ask You" hints, and the surety of Henry's response to his friend's critique in our story for all ages illustrates, there is a contentedness that accompanies a life lived aware and appreciative of simple gifts.

In my mind I again hear that young man sitting in the cafe opposite me. And I imagine noticing now his voice has ceased to rise from the back of his chair. His phone call concluded, his mind stilled just enough to ask the question Collin's poses, "What scene would I want to be enveloped in more than this one?"

It's a question with which any one of us might begin (or resume) our own journey within. Where we may reflect, discern, and give thanks for simple gifts, those "right, necessary things, attuned to our flourishing", be they found in the "heartbreaking simplicity of ordinary things", people, places, ideas and

relationships bigger and brighter than they look, or the plain wisdom to know where to look whenever the need arises. Maybe even in a cup of hibiscus tea.

May it be so
Amen and Blessed Be