

**The Biggest House in the World**  
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Four friends sit around a table.  
They are gathered for a mid-morning coffee break,  
perhaps,  
or maybe it's an evening drink.  
They know each other reasonably well,  
but they are not life-long buds.  
Two of them - Jack and Trish - were co-workers once  
upon a time.  
Jack's friend Jill joined them -  
yes, Jack and Jill.  
They became friends because someone else said to Jack,  
hey, you should be friends with Jill,  
it'd be funny.  
And since Jack is the sort of person who does things on a  
dare,  
he talked her up, and they became friends.  
Trish and Jill got to know each other a bit through Jack,  
and discovered they both go to the same gym;  
sometimes they take classes together.  
Trish's ex-girlfriend — they were only together a few  
weeks before deciding to be just friends -  
came too; Emma was her name. She had gotten along  
with the whole crew - Jack, Jill, and Trish -  
so the foursome all gathered on occasion.

Emma was, paradoxically, the most religious of the  
bunch.

I say paradoxically not because of her sexual orientation,  
of course,  
but because she'd been raised without any religious  
tradition at all.  
Her parents were committed secularists and found her  
faith to be very odd,  
but Emma loved it. She loved the smells and bells,  
and the music at Grace Episcopal was old and mysterious,  
at least to her ears.  
She felt at home and at peace.

This was her eleventh year, then, of observing Lent.  
"You guys," she said, around the table,  
"you don't get it.  
It's not about giving something up.  
That's what everyone thinks,  
that you give something up.  
I mean, you do - fasting, sacrifice, is part of it.  
but it's not about that.  
It's about taking up as much as about giving up.  
You're supposed to give alms to the poor, or volunteer, or  
just be nicer and more compassionate too -  
the reason to give something up  
is so that you are more aware of your gifts and will be  
more generous with them to others.  
It's not just a divinely sanctioned diet-plan,  
really." She said this with some force.

What are you giving up,  
the others had asked:

Emma was giving up alcohol,  
when she had shared this Trish had laughed out loud -  
no thank you! she'd said,  
no way -  
which got Emma started on why Lent was about more  
than giving something up.

It's about being humble so that we can be sacred.  
Remembering that we are (star)dust and to (star)dust we  
shall return.

If I can insert a little narrator's comment here in the  
middle of the story,

I'll tell you that I personally am observing Lent for the  
second time.

More and more Unitarian Universalists are observing Lent,  
as a time of spiritual renewal, yes, and of simplicity and  
generosity.

Folks are doing it in different ways - pledging for the forty  
days to be more courageous, more compassionate,  
to go without something and to give that money, time,  
and energy to the work of justice.

Last year, I gave up caffeine, but I didn't do as much of  
the rest of the spiritual work as I could;

this year, I, like Emma, am forgoing alcohol,

and hoping to use that discipline and practice as a way to  
remind myself

of important spiritual truths:

I don't need what I sometimes think I need;

I have much to be grateful for;

and - because I'm doing this with others, known and unknown, I am part of a community in practice together.

But, enough of the narrator butting into the story.  
Let's go back to the coffee shop or bar or wherever it is our friends are sitting -  
Emma is explaining why Lent has come to be important to her.

"You see," she says, "for me, who always thinks I need more,  
it's so powerful to remember that I'm fine.  
I have enough.  
I am enough.  
I am loved as I am, and I can love others as they are.  
And Lent is, for me, a reminder of that."

Trish apologizes for laughing out loud,  
though she reiterates her position that she, Trish, would strongly prefer not to give anything up.  
For her, Lent is full of hypocrisy and self-righteousness - she recognizes that that's not true for Emma, but that's her truth, that's her experience.  
She tells the table that when she was growing up, Lent was only about giving up, and giving up something more impressive than everyone else.  
It was show.  
And she does not remember her parents or her family talking about giving things away.

She remembers the verses about “if you want eternal life,  
give away everything you own to the poor and follow me”  
but her family didn’t give away everything,  
they gave away one small thing,  
and kept all the rest of their privilege.

Trish remembers vividly, in her American Literature class  
her sophomore year of college,  
reading a poem by Oliver Wendell Holmes – Sr. - not the  
supreme court justice, but his dad -  
about this, and thinking it fit her family so well  
that she memorized it,  
and has it memorized still.  
It expresses her opinion about lent, and so much of what  
goes for living simply.

Emma, Jack, and Jill prod her - say it, say it!  
We want to hear it!  
Trish finally agrees.  
But she warns them, first,  
they must listen closely, for it is a subtle joke, and not a  
straightforward poem.  
They put down their cups,  
and Trish begins with the title.

### **Contentment BY OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES SR.**

Little I ask; my wants are few;  
I only wish a hut of stone,

(A *very plain* brown stone will do,)
That I may call my own;—
And close at hand is such a one,
In yonder street that fronts the sun.

Plain food is quite enough for me;
Three courses are as good as ten;—
If Nature can subsist on three,
Thank Heaven for three. Amen!
I always thought cold victual nice;—
My *choice* would be vanilla-ice.

I care not much for gold or land;—
Give me a mortgage here and there,—
Some good bank-stock, some note of hand,
Or trifling railroad share,—
I only ask that Fortune send
A *little* more than I shall spend.

Honors are silly toys, I know,
And titles are but empty names;
I would, *perhaps*, be Plenipo,—
But only near St. James;
I'm very sure I should not care
To fill our Gubernator's chair.

Jewels are baubles; tis a sin
To care for such unfruitful things;—
One good-sized diamond in a pin,—
Some, *not so large*, in rings,—

A ruby, and a pearl, or so,  
Will do for me;—I laugh at show.

Of books but few,—some fifty score  
For daily use, and bound for wear;  
The rest upon an upper floor;—  
Some *little* luxury *there*  
Of red morocco's gilded gleam  
And vellum rich as country cream.

Busts, cameos, gems,—such things as these,  
Which others often show for pride,  
*I* value for their power to please,  
And selfish churls deride;—  
*One* Stradivarius, I confess,  
*Two* Meerschaums, I would fain possess.

Wealth's wasteful tricks I will not learn,  
Nor ape the glittering upstart fool;—  
Shall not carved tables serve my turn,  
But *all* must be of Buhl?  
Give grasping pomp its double share,—  
I ask but *one* recumbent chair.

Thus humble let me live and die,  
Nor long for Midas' golden touch;  
If Heaven more generous gifts deny,  
I shall not miss them *much*,—  
Too grateful for the blessing lent

Of simple tastes and mind content!

When she finishes, the friends applaud.  
It's rare for someone to recite poetry these days,  
and they appreciate the humor of it -  
who knew 19th century poets could be so funny?  
One Stradivarius, I confess.

And they recognize the truth of the poem,  
too,  
some of those who speak most about giving something  
up  
have so much in the first place  
they'd hardly notice.

Trish does fine, economically, and her parents did fine.  
But she knows people who really struggle to make ends  
meet.  
A neighbor of hers moved out last month,  
the foreclosure was finalized and the bank took back the  
house;  
the neighbor is staying at a cheap apartment,  
she got laid off years ago, and she got a new job,  
after burning through a lot of savings,  
but the new job doesn't pay as well as the old one.  
You want to go to her and say "give something up?"  
What would that be?  
She does splurge sometimes on, you know, vegetables.  
Last week, the neighbor had an iced coffee - it'd been a  
long sleepless night,

and a long day ahead of her, so she spent \$3.50 to stay awake.

Some might judge her, I suppose, but Trish doesn't. Trish thinks it's pretty outrageous for those who are rich, and always have been, to critique the life choices of the down-and-out. Something about the speck and the log in your own eye, all that.

She says so at the table, and Emma, in particular, is in agreement: Lent, she admits, can be a form of spiritual abuse; anti-consumerism, in general, can be a kind of class-prejudice. It's important for us to remember that real lives, real people, are at the core of this, not some ideology. Look at yourself, says Lent, says every spiritual practice and teacher worth anything, look at yourself, and look to your own spirit, your own sense of peace and gratitude for life, and judge not others. Judge not others. Live your life, give up, or take up, what you need to give up, or take up - it's not our place to do that for someone else.

Trish is glad to hear this from Emma - religion was one of the reasons they didn't stay dating, but in this case, they seem to have come to a common ground.

Jill, too, seems fine with this approach,  
but Jack scowls.

“That’s all well and good,” he says, “except for the fact  
that the planet is at stake.”

Jack isn’t always the most welcome guest at the party,  
and Trish, Jill, and Emma are not surprised to hear him  
raise this issue,

for they’ve heard him talk about it before.

And they agree with him, in principle, though the  
implications of it are a little bigger than they know what  
to do with.

“It’s fine,” Jack says, “to say that we should each look out  
after our own spiritual welfare.

Couldn’t agree more.

But we all need to start giving things up,  
and not just for Lent.

40 days isn’t going to cut it.

We need a different spirituality,

an eco-centered spirituality,

a spirituality for the reality of climate change, and the  
possibility of the sixth mass extinction.

We go around, strutting our stuff,

so happy to be living in the biggest house in the world,  
but it’s going to collapse,

and we’ll be left with the ruins.

I’m not exaggerating,” says Jack.

“Years ago, scientists agreed - we needed to hold the  
amount of carbon in the air to 350 parts per million

if we didn't want to have cataclysmic climate change.

That's why the group is called [350.org](http://350.org)

Last year, carbon dioxide hit 400 parts per million.

It's a runaway train.

You can talk about all the material and spiritual benefits of simplicity:

being happier with less,

knowing what's important,

giving away the extra to the poor,

even some environmental benefits:

less landfills, less mining for materials, etc, etc.

That's all fine. It's bonus.

But let's be clear."

Jack is getting a bit worked up.

"Let's be clear.

Changing our consumer culture isn't a matter of spiritual wholeness.

It's a matter of survival."

Jack's soliloquy hangs there, in the air, like the smoke from an extinguished candle.

They don't want him to be right,

but they know that he is.

He speaks more calmly now.

"We can't give up meat just on Friday.

We've got to cut our consumption of beef in half, at least.

Everyone.

We can't buy one less thing -

we need to create a local economy of sustainability.

We have to reinvent how we live, where we live, and how we power our lives.

Maybe Lent should be about that.

Be about the real world,  
and what we're going to do about it."

And the promise, I will tell you, goes unspoken but still made.

Between these four friends.

That they will do more.

Emma decides, in her head, that it won't just be alcohol but also beef that she gives up - and maybe, not as a strict rule, but as a general practice, doesn't add it back in on Easter Sunday.

Trish decides to call her Senator and send [350.org](https://www.350.org) a little money.

Jill mentally resets her thermostats, and pledges to do it when she gets home. She can get an extra blanket.

They don't discuss it, and they each decide something different,

but each, on their own, make the commitment:

whatever it is that they give up, or take up,

for this or any other season,

for this or any other spiritual practice,

will not be for its own sake,

not for the sake of the ego or habit,

but for the sake of this planet we share together,

for the sake of sustainable justice.

The table is silent for a moment.

Not awkward, but reflective.

They take sips of their drinks - coffees, teas, waters, beers, wine, whatever it is.

Jill hasn't really spoken much,  
and they sort of turn to her, as if waiting for some insight from her.

She waves them off,

"I don't know" she says.

"I don't think I have much to add, really.

I don't practice Lent, like Emma. Sounds like it works for you, though. That's good.

We did it when I was a kid, but, unlike Trish, I never had strong feelings about it, positive or negative.

It was just another thing we did that I didn't really understand.

And Jack, yes, you're right.

We need to be serious about this, really serious.

But I don't have some way to synthesize everyone's perspective together, or anything like that."

She stops.

Feeling there's something more to be said, they wait.

She speaks.

"I mean, you know?

When you step back from everything,

it's just, life is pretty amazing.  
'Leaves flutter lightly in the breeze, and  
where the earth splits, crystals glitter in the early sun.'  
To be gathered here, with friends,  
talking about things that matter,  
this is such a gift.  
I'm grateful for the conversation.  
I'm grateful for your spirit, Emma,  
and for your passion for justice and for your humor,  
Trish,  
and the earth is so precious, so marvelous,  
and I'm grateful for it, and committed to living with  
simplicity for the sake of us all,  
and those to come - thank you, Jack, for keeping us  
honest.  
I'm just feeling grateful, you know?"

Emma nods: "that's what Lent is for me:  
a time to return to gratitude.  
To be simple for the sake of thanksgiving."

Trish has no objection:  
"Gratitude," she says, "is what hypocrites and egoists  
lack,  
when they pretend to be holier than thou, more  
important, but aren't.  
If thanksgiving makes us humble, and a nicer person,  
then I'm for it."

Jack, of course, cannot agree more:

that's what's under my anger," he explains:  
"The earth is our own only home.  
This life is our only life.  
It's so precious.  
It's so amazing.  
It's worthy of our love and our care.  
That's what I'm trying to say."

Eventually, their time together comes to an end.  
They go their separate ways, off to face their nights and  
their days.  
Each, for their own reason,  
decides to try to live with a little more contentment:  
to embrace their modest-sized shell, their life as it is, full  
of gifts,  
and not long for the biggest house in the world.  
Their reasons are spiritual, religious, humanistic,  
ecological, scientific,  
and also just a nebulous longing for something more  
essential  
in a world of distraction.  
They need not have the same reasons, or course,  
nor chose exactly the same ways to respond,  
but each of them feels the calling:  
out of their gratitude for life, the earth, for community,  
out of their humility and longing for justice,  
out of their desire for a life worth living,  
they find ways to live with less instead of more,  
to enjoy the simple gifts, and call that blessing.

This day, I invite you to do the same.

Your reasons can be whatever they might be:

spiritual, ritual, ecological, humanistic, unclear.

Your practice can be whatever matters to you, what makes a difference in your life and the world.

We'll each do it in our own way.

But I assure you that the four friends are on to something:

the life of simplicity is the life of thanksgiving and it is the life of beauty and meaning.

In a world of distraction and disposability, finding ways to hear and follow that still small voice within,

to say, hush, somebody's calling your name,

to live a life of essentials and not superfluity,

I assure you this is the life worth your effort, your attention, your love.

I invite you to that life.

You need not be perfect - I'm not! - but I'm trying. I

invite you to try with me.

Accept the invitation — in your own way.

And 40 days from now, let's see what we've learned together.

For now, let us sing.