

Idolatry: Materialism
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When you came in today I hope you got a pencil or pen to write with.

Take that out.

And your order of service, or a scratch piece of paper.

If you'd like, you can use your smart phone or other device for this -

just the note application is fine.

This is just for you.

You'll want to write this down, though.

Ready?

I want you to imagine that someone is going to come and replace everything you own.

They'll come into your house, your apartment, your room, and replace your bookshelves with other ones, replace your books with ones you haven't read yet, replace your kitchen utensils and your clothes and electronics,

all your furniture, your tools, your this and that, replace the art on your walls and the knick-knacks and the souvenir's.

All the replacements will be functional - it'll work fine (better, maybe, than your things do now).

The clothes will fit and the art will be your taste.

But everything will go away.

Just things, we're not taking people or pets; I'll even exempt plants from this thought experiment.
You will not lose your digital collections - your emails, your photos, and so on.
If it's in the cloud, it stays in the cloud.
But everything else.
Got it?

Now: you may choose those items which you do not want to have replaced.
Make a list - on the top of your paper, your note.
What things will you not give up?
Your list can be as long as you want it to be.
This isn't a forced choice.
This isn't a "you have 10 seconds to grab one thing."
As much as you like.
Go ahead, write it down. What do you not want replaced?

OK, now stop.
You might have more, it's OK.
But stop.

And notice how you feel.

Do you feel anxious about this thought?
Is it worrying to you to imagine this?
Why is that?

Are you intrigued by this?
Did some of the things you thought of surprise you?

Did some of the things you said, ah, I don't need that, surprise you?

Did you feel relieved by this?

Did you think, god, that'd be great.

I'd love new stuff!

What a wonderful adventure?

People are different.

Just notice your reaction.

Now, draw a line on your paper, or make a break in your notes.

Go back to this thought experiment.

The folks come to replace everything you own with new items.

And you say, "you know what, don't bother with a new —
- fill in the blank.

I don't need it.

Take the old and don't bring back the new."

Make a list.

The first things that come to mind.

What could you do without?

What would you like to do without?

I'll give you a moment to write.

Got it?

Maybe you want to keep working on either list later,
that's fine.

This second list, by the way,
that's the beginning of your "donate to next year's church
rummage sale" list.

Don't forget.

How did you feel as you thought about things to get rid
of and not replace?

Anxious?

Like you were supposed to come up with something but
couldn't?

Ever since the children's story, if not ever since you read
the newsletter,

you knew this was coming and you've been dreading it?

It's OK, you are not alone.

Or did you feel liberated?

Like, oh that would be wonderful?!

And what is stopping you from doing that now?

Oh, the church rummage sale is a great chance to
donate,

but you could have done that this year.

You could take the stuff to Goodwill - or the dump -
now.

What's stopping you?

What's stopping us, I should say. Us. Me included.

I have longings to purge.

I feel like I've got too much stuff.

I want to go through it and get rid of things.
Replace some things with new things -
clothes designed for a me 50 pounds ago, for example -
but mostly just purge.

Simplify.

You can't take it with you,
paint peels in the suitcase,
and the chair is too awkward to carry.

What gets in the way is inertia and business.
Is that really the way I want to spend my few free hours,
I ask.
But sometime soon - this summer - I'm going to get to it.
Take a full day - or three - and just reduce.
And not replace.

And I know, based on experience, that it'll feel great.
Liberated.
For me.

But people are different.
And our emotional and spiritual relationship to stuff is
different.
Some of us would like to have less,
but we can't seem to make it happen.
Others do it - they really live very lightly.
Others of us are perfectly happy with the things we have
-
we feel no urge to collect more or to get rid of things.
Some prize quality over quantity -

they don't have a ton of junk,
but they do have some nice well-made, beautiful things.
Some of us would love to buy some new things,
if only we could afford it.
And for those who feel this way,
the conversation about getting rid of things
feels more than a little insulting.
Right?

People are different.

Of course, there are extremes.
For some, owning things - including even owning a place
to live,
feels like a trap.
If you can't carry it with you, you don't want it.
And we might romanticize this as the free-spirit hermit,
or like the hero at the end of the movie,
squinting into the sunlight,
with nothing, not even a clothespin.
A Zen monk, living off the land.
But for every romantic spiritual aesthetic
there are ten thousand homeless persons,
living on the margins, unsafe and vulnerable,
trapped not by things, but by their reactions to them.

On the other end of the spectrum,
there are those who find in things,
collections, items, stuff,
a kind of protection from the vulnerability of the world.

Sometimes we call these folks “hoarders”
and we even make reality shows about it,
and some might laugh, or joke,
but it’s deadly serious.

In preparing for today, folks shared stories with me about
the harms of too much materialism,
including the story of a woman who,
when her things caught on fire,
kept going back inside the house to get more stuff,
over and over again,
and died in the fire.

It took weeks to clear out the things,
including, I’m sorry to say, former pets,
long dead, whose bodies were buried under the
collections of stuff.

We think, how awful, and it is awful,
and there are hundreds of thousands of folks who live in
such danger,
so consumed by their desire to collect and hold stuff
that they forget to live.
Including some of us, and some we love.

The Dierdot effect -
the desire to own more and nicer things,
is alive and well in many of us.

And it takes work to resist.

Spiritual practice.

Discipline.

A set of priorities.

The right kinds of friends and family.

I know that the reason some of you are happy to be
Unitarian Universalists
is for exactly this:
a way to be with folks who value a simpler life,
who don't value worth based on possessions.
Especially those of us with children,
it is important to us to expose them to peers
who don't have every newest gadget and are ok with it.

I think we think that if we stay away from the extremes -
the homeless vagabond, the hoarder -
the wanderer, the collector,
then we're OK.

Everything in moderation.

And we're OK. That's what we think.

But it's not so simple.

The truth is that both those who are trapped by their fear
of things

and those who are trapped by their fear of being without
things,

both these extremes are warnings of a system that's off,

both are canaries in the coal mine,

an alarm about the dysfunction of our society,

a signal and sign of an illness that affects us all,

and affects our planet even more.

The vagabond and hoarder,

or to use more humane terms,

for these are our kin, our neighbors, ourselves, after all,

the untethered and the weighed down,

the lover of leaving and the seer of unseen treasures,
these are signs of a culture of stuff that is,
to use an old word,
idolatrous.

It is not about these individuals, it is about the wider
culture
to which they are responding.

It, the culture, makes a false god,
it makes an object of devotion out of something that isn't
worthy of devotion.

Things.

Stuff.

Money and possessions.

It is not the extremes - the wanderer and the collector -
who have this idolatry.

It is our whole society.

Watch the massive container ships,
filled with stuff,
crossing the oceans,
burning oil,

and ask, what is it that we worship?

Look at where all the cars are, all the people are,
on Saturday and Sunday.

Parking lots full of folks buying stuff.

Not a few things they need, but stuff and stuff and stuff.

Look at the storage units dotting the landscape.

The gaping holes in the earth, where we mine for
whatever rock it is we need now,

the half a trillion dollars spent worldwide on advertising last year to convince us to buy something we didn't even know existed.

We just celebrated the 45th earth day;
it snowed for a minute, remember?

And there were speeches about climate change,
and corporate-sponsored advertisements about the earth,
little events here and there.

But the fundamental structure of our society,
a society built on the Deirdot effect,
is rarely challenged.

The idea that economic growth is good for its own sake -
not because it might make all lives better, but for itself,
the idea that we need stuff for the sake of the stuff itself -
not because it might help us live more beautifully
but because we want it -
the idea that we should get stuff for cheap,
regardless of what it really costs -
this structure is deeply troubled.

In our hearts, we know it.

In our souls, we know that this society
worships that which is not worthy of worship.

We value the means, and not the ends.

What is supposed to make us productive sucks our time.

What is supposed to make us happy makes us sad.

What is supposed to connect us leaves us isolated.

What is supposed to fill the empty spaces leaves us
feeling emptier than before.

The good news is that when we can correctly diagnose
the problem -
when we see those who have nothing and those who
have too much
not as other, but as ourselves;
when we see the structure of society as the issue,
not the vulnerability of some to that structure;
when we see it as idolatry,
as worship of what is not worthy -
then the cure, the shift, is evident.
Is clear.

It isn't about what we own. It isn't.
It's about what we desire.

The fact that the advertising industry spends a half trillion
dollars a year to convince us to buy things
gives me hope.
Because absent the push to do so,
we might realize we don't need what we don't need.
So turn off the TV and get outside.
Go gently into the morning with the golden light of day.
Pause to feel and be a part of all you see.
Feel the gift of living simply,
of being alive.
Take the greatest gifts as the sky and the grass,
friendship and thought,
wonder and love.
Step off the escalator of acquisition.
Things are just things.

They're not that important.
Remember what is important.
Breathe.

What I love about ecology, about celebrating the earth,
is that we don't have to have the debate about
whether it should be about
"go outside and enjoy the world"
or "go outside and save the world."
If you take time to be in the world,
you'll feel less need for stuff,
and that will help save the world.
Especially if you share your commitment with other
people,
spread the good news,
be the trendsetter for a deeper purpose to life.

If the purpose of your life is things:
not having them, having them, getting better things,
then I summon you to a higher purpose.
A life of beauty, meaning, service to others, joy, and love.
To live in harmony with the divine, however you
understand it.
It's not about giving up things -
it's about giving up the illusion that more things,
or less things,
are worth the essence of your life.

If the purpose of our society is things:
making them, selling them, owning them,

then I summon our society to a higher purpose:
justice, discovery, compassion, art, neighborliness.
To live in harmony with one another and with the Earth,
our only home.

Today I invite you to try to make this shift -
personally and socially -
to nudge those you love, and the world as a whole,
toward this deeper and more worthy way of living.
It will not always be easy,
and we will be tempted to revert,
but we know that it is worth our effort,
our purpose, our love and our living.
It is how we will be, each ourselves,
and all together as a human race, a part of this planet
and all its life,
more happy, more whole, and more alive.
I invite you to move in this direction,
and to do it together,
remembering the power of community and positive peer
pressure.
I invite you to love life, not stuff, or its absence,
and to treat others, and yourself, with compassion and
care,
never derision or heartlessness, no matter their or your
relationship to things.
I invite you to preach by your deeds more than your
words.
I invite you to give away what you don't need,
and feel liberated.

I invite you to cherish those few things that really matter
to you,

because they connect you to your highest values.

I invite you to praise the earth and make peace for all
people.

I invite you to live the life you seek, for you yourself,
and not be distracted by all which is not worthy.

And I invite you to begin, again, today.

Let us sing.