

“Abundant Living on a Troubled Planet”

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First Parish in Wayland

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Well, folks, here we are . . . right in the middle of the Holidays. The Christian Advent began last week, the Jewish celebration of Hanukkah begins this evening, and as the very, *very* dark late afternoons remind us...we are approaching the Pagan celebration of Yule on the longest day of the year, December 21.

With the holidays, there often comes an abundance of activities, sights, and sounds. Our own normally simple sanctuary is now bedecked with greenery. And this afternoon, our front steps and lawn will become a festive scene of caroling. So, how are you holding up? Are you enjoying the parties? Cranking the car radio when “It’s Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas” comes on? Or, are you feeling a bit overwhelmed by the demands of shopping for presents? Maybe you’re dreading an upcoming holiday party at work . . . or with your family. I suspect some of us are simply feeling sad to be facing the holidays without a loved one who may have died this year . . . or even years ago. Or, maybe you’re even feeling alone and lonely amidst the bustle.

Wherever you may be in your heart today, there has been an unmistakable shift in U.S. culture towards the celebration of holidays. With these celebrations, there often comes an increase in consumption—food, decorations, new clothes, and presents. But the holidays are not just about more *stuff*. It’s also a season of rituals with family and friends that bring us closer together—bonding us as new memories are laid upon the old. And here at First Parish, we mark the season with our own rituals from the Carol Sing to Music Sunday to a Christmas Eve pageant. Through these gatherings, we enjoy great music, community with each other, and a sense of connection to ancient celebrations that link us across generations.

In such a season, words of plenitude abound. We speak of an abundance of food. A pile of presents. A long list of to-do’s. We speak of generous giving to others or of the bountiful gifts of being together. And, beside the lights of the Menorah or the Christmas tree, our hearts may swell with overflowing gratitude for our loved ones; our safe, warm spaces; or life itself.

This is also a season that speaks of miracles—of the oil in the lamp burning days longer than it should have and of a baby born to save the world. It is a season of hope that celebrates light overcoming the darkness and the transforming power of new life. Such a season is indeed a time of plenitude . . . of a joyful awareness of the many *gifts* of life.

What are the *gifts* in your life that you most cherish? If you turn on the T.V. or pick up a newspaper, I’m sure that you’ll be prompted with all kinds of ideas for what gifts you should crave (. . . *I mean cherish*). We live in a highly material society with enormous desire

for the new and the better, the hip and the chic. But, as parents perennially teach their children—there is, of course, a difference between what you *want* and what you *need*.

In her book, *Plenitude*, economist Juliet Schor, offers an explanation for why we consume more than we need. She suggests that “what we now care about as we consume is not products themselves, but the signs and symbols they connect to.” (40) So, rather than buying for material need, we’re motivated to buy by symbolic value of owning *that* branded athletic shoe or *that* car or cell phone or size of house. According to Schor, such symbolic purchasing leads to a “materiality paradox” where consumption of material resources is actually *highest* when people are in buying for *symbolic* value as opposed to physical need.

Take a wardrobe for example. Perhaps like myself, you’ve found yourself wondering...do I really *need* all these shoes? Or sweaters? Or suits? Why do we buy *more* when we already have enough clothes to keep us warm or cool or dry—enough clothes to meet our physical needs? Well, because clothes carry symbolic status—we want to stay in fashion or we want to wear something new to a special event. We consume more when we’re motivated by symbolic value.

Schor writes:

This point brings to mind Raymond William’s famous quip that our problem isn’t that we’re too materialistic; it’s that we’re not materialistic enough. We devalue the material world by excessive acquisition and discard of products. (41)

We’ll say, “oh, it’s just *stuff*.” Sometimes we *do* need to devalue the symbolic value of items to be able to let them go. But, sometimes, maybe the problem is that we need to see that all this stuff *is* stuff. Stuff that has used *material* resources in their production and transportation. We leave a *material* footprint through our consumption.

The problem with this high level of consumption, Schor cautions, is that we are living beyond our planetary means. The material resources of our shared world simply cannot continue to sustain current or expanded levels of consumption and energy use. To continue to do so is to participate in planetary ecocide. Or, as activist Naomi Klein has declared, “[our economic model is at war with life on earth.](#)”

And this is why global leaders are meeting in Paris this week. Because we are living on a troubled planet whose ecosystem is in upheaval. We are already seeing the impacts of climate change in our world. Here in the Northeast, we may not be feeling the worst effects of climate change, but as part of the massive U.S. culture of consumption, we are certainly a part of the problem.

In Paris, world leaders are hashing out political pathways to address climate change. But, this is only part of the response. I believe that we will also need a revised spiritual orientation that helps us reframe our sense of true wealth. I think we will need to revise the symbolic systems of value that motivate our patterns of high consumption . . . patterns that have an undeniably negative impact upon our eco-system.

Last summer, I was at an event that offered free Tarot Card readings. Curious, I signed up. One of the cards that I was dealt was the King of Pentacles. The card is one of abundance or plenitude. Although depictions will vary, the King of Pentacles always is an image of overflowing wealth shown not only by numerous coins, but also by lush garden scenery and a golden sky. This is the person who has achieved a fullness of life, whose ambitions have been fulfilled, whose resources are abundant.

I have to say that as someone who has chosen to be a minister . . . financial wealth has never been at the top of my priority list. So, I wasn't certain how to respond to this card until the woman guiding the reading explained. She cautioned me to *not* presume that wealth and resources only signaled money. Rather, the card symbolizes bounty in all its forms.

While I may not have walked away a full convert to Tarot readings, this image of the King of Pentacles has stayed with me, teasing me to consider what fulfillment would look like for me if not a pile of gold? What would your own image of fullness look like? What resources and treasures would you hold in plenitude? Relationships of loving care? Time to be still or to pursue new endeavors? Abilities to positively impact others? Strength and health in body? If you already had all the money you could ever imagine needing, what would you still long for? These questions invite you to listen to your hearts, to your deepest desires and needs. And, I wonder . . . what do you find there?

Such questions can help engage us in the work of reimagining our sense of abundance as we question which plenitude we seek. We live within a culture that repeatedly sends us the message that the highest—or the *only*—value is economic might. Wealth is understood as an economic capacity to consume more stuff, more rapidly and with more symbolic value. But what if we redefined the meaning of wealth?

Mary Oliver's poem, "Messenger," joins in this work of reframing our images of wealth. For Oliver, her work is to attend to the plenitude of the world's delights—to love the world. Even when she notices that her boots are old or her coat torn, she insists that she keep her mind on what matters:

*which is my work,
which is mostly standing still and learning to be
astonished.
The phoebe, the delphinium.
The sheep in the pasture, and the pasture.
Which is mostly rejoicing, since all the ingredients are here,*

Her wealth is her work of loving the world, of living in gratitude, of rejoicing in the gifts that are already her. So also farmer-poet Wendell Berry writes,

*Geese appear high over us,
pass, and the sky closes.*

*Abandon, as in love or sleep,
holds them to their way,
clear in the ancient faith:
what we need is here.*

*And we pray, not for new earth or heaven,
but to be quiet in heart,
and in eye, clear.
What we need is here.*

What we need is *here*, upon this wondrous, beautiful, abundant planet. And yet, in too many ways we are putting our life-giving planet into peril. Our earth is a closed system of limited material resources. And, our high levels of U.S. consumption cannot continue without further endangering our eco-system.

But, I don't believe that such statements have to leave us in a place of despair. The path forward does not need to be framed in terms of painful sacrifice or the proverbial hairshirts of uncomfortable austerity. For example, Juliet Schor suggests that the path forward could be one full of technological creativity or a robust sharing economy. She wonders if we could share the limited resources we have in smarter, more efficient ways? For Schor and others, these are questions worth exploring.

While I do hope for political, technological, and economic paths forward to a greener, more just world, I also believe the path forward will involve revising our symbolic values of what count as desirable, as good, as wealth. What would be the status symbols of wealth if we were driven by what helped sustain the planet the most? For example, we could laud clever reuses of items that extend their usable life or envy a person who managed to resole a pair of shoes multiple times.

To be clear—such efforts to reimagine and reframe our symbolic purchases to values of planetary preservation are counter-cultural. The media will continue to coax us to discount the materiality of the stuff we “need.” Global corporations will continue to have outsized influence upon the political policies that support—and even subsidize—consumption patterns that endanger our planet. In order to fully address the dynamics of climate change, we will need to seek political and economic change. We'll need to foster alternative streams of messaging that help us to reimagine another world.

In seeking to chart paths forward to a more sustainable planet, I believe we will need to connect this work to values that matter to us. We'll need to ask why we buy what we do, live the way we do, and make the choices we do on how to invest our resources of time, energy, and money. I envision a path forward that joins Mary Oliver in her work of “loving the world”—where the plenitude that matters is a diversity of flowers, birds, and landscape; where abundance is measured by the capacity to revel in this beauty; and where gratitude for the simple gift of enduring life overflows into songs of rejoicing.

So may it be. Amen.