

TIS A GIFT TO BE SIMPLE

by Rev. Kit Ketcham, Dec. 2005

“Somewhere over the rainbow, way up high,
there’s a land that I heard of once in a lullaby;
somewhere over the rainbow, skies are blue
and the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true.
Someday I’ll wish upon a star and wake up where the clouds are far
behind me;
where troubles melt like lemon drops away above the chimney tops,
that’s where you’ll find me.
Somewhere over the rainbow bluebirds fly;
birds fly over the rainbow, why then, oh why can’t I?
If happy little bluebirds fly beyond the rainbow, why oh why can’t I?”

For most of us humans there was a point in our lives when we became aware that others had stuff, that we didn’t have the stuff they had, and that their stuff looked better than our stuff. The rainbow had a pot of gold at the end of it, for the taking. Whoever got there first had dibs and we began to chase it, down that long yellow brick road.

What’s wrong with yearning for life to be better than it is? For us to be happier, more fulfilled, more comfortable. Not to be hungry; nor homeless; nor sick nor dying; not to be “out of it”, behind the times, uncool. Not to be shabby, underdressed, under-equipped. Nothing is technically wrong with any of these yearnings. But, there are two different ways to look at them.

If we understand our yearnings in a concrete way, we may see that we are longing for human life in which we are as good as or better than others. We compare our happiness to the happiness we think others have; we compare our clothes, our kids, our cars, our computers, our homes to others’ possessions.

We are using the good or bad fortune of others to determine what we consider to be adequate.

If we understand our yearnings more metaphorically, using our own internal plumbline to determine what they mean to us in a deeper way, we may find that we are longing for a life in which we are more aware, more strongly connected, to the Divine center within each of us.

Our hunger for particular things may symbolize a hunger for relationship that is deeper, understanding that is clearer, lives that are in sync with the great mystery of the Universe. It seems to be the age old conflict between our desire for competition and our need for connection.

What is at the heart of desire? Desire, as opposed to need, seems to be a pretty normal trait of human nature. It seems to be the next step beyond need. We need oxygen; we need food and shelter or we will die. We need relationship; we think we need sex in our relationships--and in a biological way, we do. But sex is one obvious place where need melds into desire. And, as we know, when sex comes into the picture, it's hard to maintain our understanding of what we need and what we want.

Manipulating this thin line between need and desire in a thousand ways, advertising strategists have marketed Christmas, for example, from a time when we considered an orange and some hard candies in our stockings to be plenty--into a time when Neimann Marcus lets us know that if we can't or won't spring for their latest extravaganza, we are to be pitied.

Our needs as humans are actually very simple; our desires, on the

other hand, run the gamut and affect every area of our existence. And our desires, innocent as they begin, very soon can overshadow our real needs and open us to envy, greed, covetousness, anger and depression.

Now, Stuff is a lot of fun. And it keeps the economy rolling full speed ahead. It makes it possible for entrepreneurs to make a living; artists depend on our desire for beautiful objects in our homes; poets and novelists hope we will have plenty of disposable income or at least a credit card when we visit our local bookstore. But we are drowning in Stuff. And we rarely have the satisfaction we hope for when we acquire it.

During the incredible velocity of technological advance from the Industrial Revolution to the present time, human beings have learned to make lots of stuff in order to control or at least adjust to most of what nature throws at us. This has been a wonderful thing; who would not want a car? Who would not want air conditioning in that car? Who would not want heat in their house? Who would not want a food market to visit weekly? We need to be able to protect ourselves from the weather; we need to be able to eat, despite growing conditions; we need to be able to move about freely.

There's no arguing with this---but it's interesting to observe how need has turned into desire, as we escalate the ways we meet those basic human needs.

Human beings have an incredible ability to control our response to the Universe, also known as Mother Nature. Because of this, many

human beings have come to think of themselves as omnipotent. In the novel Ishmael, by Daniel Quinn, humans are divided into two groups: the Leavers and the Takers.

In the novel, the Leavers are indigenous peoples who believe that the Gods control their lives, that they must appease those gods in whatever ways they can, including sacrifices of goods and occasionally life. They have little technology; they live off the land and are baffled by the technology that does creep into their awareness when missionaries or doctors or any of the host of Western do-gooders arrive to help them make progress.

The Takers do not believe in Gods. They may pledge allegiance to a so-called omnipotent being, but they do not really believe that God or Gods control their lives. They believe that they control their lives. They have been led to believe this because they are so good at thwarting the forces of Nature.

The fact that storms and natural events such as hurricanes and earthquakes defy their efforts does not deter them a bit. They simply assume that if they just design the perfect building or dam or bridge, Nature will bow to their superiority. They are living on borrowed time, for it is only a matter of time before Nature proves herself more powerful than they.

Leavers don't own a lot; they are often nomadic, possessing only what they can easily carry from place to place. But Takers are the Stuff Champions. There is no apparent limit to the amount of stuff they can

produce, can figure out how to move from place to place, and can afford to own and maintain.

And they tend to look down their noses at those who can't produce, or move, or afford to own. These folks are considered poor, lazy, shiftless, unmotivated. Human worth is measured in possessions because they think they are in control of their ability to have/own/produce stuff.

An issue of Utne Reader awhile back had a spread on consumerism and its effect on American life. Here's a quote: "Stemming the tide of consumerism requires thwarting human nature and sacrificing individual gain for the public good." Sounds like basic common sense, doesn't it? Human nature is bad, we've got to whip it into shape, so that the planet will survive.

But you know what? I'm not sure of this. To me, it sounds like a diet. It sounds like a budget, like trying to quit smoking, like any number of other prescriptions for reining in our appetites and desires. Thwarting human nature, sacrificing individual gain, elevating the public good. All thoroughly admirable efforts, right? And certainly, it's impossible to argue with the benefits of changing our eating habits to lose weight, tracking our spending so that we can live within our means, cutting out cigarettes to become healthier.

But any of us who have undertaken a diet, a budget, a cold turkey routine, know that it often just increases our desire to overeat, to overspend, to have just one more smoke. There's something about a restrictive discipline that often (not always, but often) produces exactly the

opposite response.

We lose weight and feel so deprived in the process that when we've lost 20 pounds, we again turn to the high calorie foods and pack the weight right back on. We save our money, then blow it all when we're feeling down. We can't seem to quit smoking permanently, even though we know it'll kill us.

Somehow we're not tackling the problem from the right angle.

I've come to believe that thwarting human nature is not the answer. I don't advocate rampant human voracity; I don't think we ought to spend all our money on junk or eat piggishly or trash our health in foolish ways. But I trust human nature. Let me say that again: I trust human nature.

Oh, I know, human nature is a tricky thing. We see ourselves and other humans behaving quite badly sometimes and blaming it on human nature. Well, that's probably true--human nature does allow us to get into deep trouble, because of our ability to choose good or bad behavior.

But I think our human nature is essentially good. And I think that when we get sidetracked into desiring possessions or greedily comparing our stacks of stuff with others' stacks of stuff, we have lost touch with our true human nature.

I believe that human nature is essentially spiritual. We have our human bodies, which need oxygen, food, water, shelter, sex. We have our minds, which need stimulation and learning and creative outlets. And we have our spirits, which need connection with each other, with our own selves, and with the Universe.

I believe that when our spirits are not connected with one another, our selves, and the Universe in positive ways, we develop a spiritual hunger that we try to satisfy with possessions and other harmful behaviors, because the facets of our lives are out of balance.

Let's talk about spirituality briefly. Perhaps the most concise definition I've heard is that spirituality is a human being's private and personal search for meaning and for answers to life's biggest questions.

When people ask for more spiritual experience in church services, they seem to be asking for moments in which they feel a connection to others, an insight into their own selfhood, an understanding of their place in the Universe and a greater sense of connection to that Universe.

For me, and perhaps for many of you, the search for spiritual nurture is relational. I find my spirituality in my relationships, with myself, with others, and with the Mystery of the Universe. I am spiritually nurtured by solitude, by deep conversations with others, and by the many opportunities I have to experience my connection to the Universe, whether that's during my prayer time or a walk on the beach.

Others are nurtured spiritually in different ways. An artist or a scientist or a writer or musician might find the greatest spiritual meaning in those times when body and mind are working creatively. An athlete or a craftsperson such as a carpenter or plumber or gardener might find spiritual meaning in using physical strength and skill to meet a challenge.

A child might find spiritual meaning in a relationship with a pet. We

each have our own approach to spirituality, determined by who we are and what we find expressive of our true selves.

But let's go back to the Leavers and the Takers for a moment. The Leavers believe that the Gods control the Universe and their lives. The Takers believe that they themselves control the Universe and their own lives, at least as much as technology has allowed them to do.

Inherent in this approach is the hidden belief of the Takers that there is no need to have a relationship with any power beyond human power because there isn't any. I'm not talking about atheists, for some of the most committed atheists I know have a profound spiritual connection to powers beyond human powers. They may not believe in a God, but they very much believe in the natural world, in natural law, and in humans' obligation to live in accordance with natural law.

If we deny any power greater than human power, we become Takers. And Takers do not know how to satisfy the spiritual hunger created when they refuse to see any power but human power, so they may attempt to fill that spiritual void with stuff, with substances like food and booze, or with shallow, unsatisfying relationships.

But wait a minute, I can hear you say it--I'm not a Taker! I am in tune with myself, with those around me, with the Universe. But I'm drowning in stuff. My kids want fancy presents; I find myself frantic about the holidays because they are so complicated. I am overwhelmed by the expectations of society--I am expected to live in the nicest place I can afford, to provide the best for my family, to look good on the job, to entertain properly. I want to live more simply, but I don't know how.

And here you are, Kit, telling me that the answer is not just to overpower my own human nature. You're telling me to trust my human nature. What the heck do you mean?

I believe that if we each consciously nurture our spirituality--in whatever way works best for us--, if we consciously strive to find meaning in our connections with each other, with ourselves, and, most importantly, with the Universe or Nature or God or Mystery or whatever you call that power that is beyond human power, that we will find our desire for stuff lessening, and our needs becoming more clearly defined, more easily met.

I believe that the answer to Stuff lies in our own, much beleaguered human nature, that nature that wants to be connected to all that is beyond us. We see this lived out in recovering addicts who talk about letting a Higher Power control their lives. We see it in the selfless acts of people like Mother Teresa or Gandhi, whose desire for stuff disappeared in their service to others. We see it in the words or designs or sounds of creative people who express their deepest selves through their work.

Simplicity itself is not a fix. Otherwise, the poor would be fixed. Their lives are a matter of working constantly to provide their basic needs. But many of the poor are just as plagued by Stuff as we are, even though they don't own it. Other people's stuff may own the poor, for they may compare themselves to others and crave the stuff they don't own, in the same effort to satisfy that deep spiritual hunger that we all experience.

What is the most precious Stuff we own? For me, it's the old battered rocker my mother left me; she rocked me to sleep in it when I was

a baby. It's the snaggle-toothed photos of my son when he was small. It's my cats. It's not my new car, pretty as it is. It is my piano, where I can recreate the music I love.

What is your most precious Stuff? I'll bet it's the stuff with the history. It's the stuff you received as gifts from precious people. It's the stuff that reminds you of important times in your life. It's the photos, the letters, the recordings, the books, the diaries, the artwork, the things you've created, the memories you treasure. It's the stuff that connects you--with your self, with your family and friends, and with that Mystery, that Spirit which we call Life.

So, in the midst of another holiday season, how can we manage the Stuff problem? What are some possible approaches? Here are some I've thought of.

1. Let's be grateful for all we have. Let's be grateful for the many gifts of Life--the beauty of the earth, the splendor of the skies, the joy of human love, and the opportunity to belong to the human family. Let's say thank you a thousand times a day, to the Universe for its beauty and bounty, to one another for kindness and understanding, to ourselves for the care we manage to give ourselves.

2. Let's be generous. Let's look at what we have that we really need, the possessions that feed our souls, and let's consider giving away what we don't need. The act of giving generously to others feeds us better

than the act of feeding our own desires. Let's be generous to the Universe, offering gifts of careful tending of its resources; let's be generous to one another, forgiving each other for slights or cruelties, let's contribute to the wellbeing of the poor, to the support of loving causes; let's be generous to ourselves, forgiving ourselves and providing greater opportunities for our own spiritual growth.

3. Let's be worshipful. By that, I don't mean bowing down in adoration to a God or saint. I mean it in the original sense of "shaping worth", of finding and celebrating what is most worthy in Life. Let's spend time in honoring what we find to be most worthy. If we pray or meditate, we may increase the amount of time we spend in prayer and meditation. If we write, we may go deeper into our work, trying to express our connection to all life. If we garden, we may think about the sacred aspects of our efforts to grow food or beauty.

If we revel in the outdoors, we may increase our mindfulness of the great glory of our surroundings, whether it is stormy or clear. If we strive for justice, we may look for some more visible way to express our need for greater justice in human affairs. Whatever we find most worthy, let us honor it with greater mindfulness.

Let's teach our children to be grateful, to be generous, and to be worshipful--to shape worth. Let's model this with our neighbors, with our colleagues, with our friends and relations.

And I believe that gradually, little by little, we will begin to find greater satisfaction and pleasure in the stuff we need and less desire for the stuff

we don't need. I believe that as we help our children find their spiritual natures, as we model spiritual self-care to those around us, we will teach ourselves and others what a gift it is to be simple.

Let's pause for a moment of silent reflection and prayer.

Hymn #123 "Spirit of Life"

BENEDICTION: Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that the true gifts of this season are love, hope, joy, and peace. May we offer these simple gifts abundantly, in the knowledge that gratitude, generosity, and reverence are at the heart of a life that is simple. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.