

ENOUGH, ALREADY!
A presentation by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene and
Kelly Greene McConnell
Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
January 2, 2005

Contemplation—from “The Oversoul,” by Ralph Waldo Emerson

Let us learn the revelation of all nature and thought; that the Highest dwells within us,
that the sources of nature are in our own minds.

Within us is the soul of the whole; the wise silence, the universal beauty, to which every
part and particle is equally related; the eternal One.

When it breaks through our intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through our will it is
virtue; when it flows through our affections, it is love.

Reading—“Barter,” by Sara Teasdale (1884 - 1933)

Life has loveliness to sell,
All beautiful and splendid things,
Soaring fire that sways and sings,
And children's faces looking up,
Holding wonder like a cup.
Life has loveliness to sell,
Music like a curve of gold,
Scent of pine trees in the rain,
Eyes that love you, arms that hold,
And for your spirit's still delight,
Holy thoughts that star the night.

Spend all you have for loveliness,
Buy it and never count the cost;
For one white singing hour of peace
Count many a year of strife well lost,
And for a breath of ecstasy
Give all you have been, or could be.

PRESENTATION

Elizabeth Greene—A Spiritual Story

The Benedictine sisters at St. Gertrude's Monastery in Cottonwood ID are not
exactly obsessive spenders. They wear sensible, well-used clothes. They drive old cars,

when they drive. They cultivate a huge garden in the summertime, canning and freezing vast quantities of fruit and vegetables, which then appear on winter dinner tables. They recycle everything that can be recycled. Many of them work outside the monastery, and they bring their paychecks back to the institution. Part of their stated commitment is to “live simply, reverently and attentively,” and to “share all things in common.”

The mental picture is clear, right? Little shabby women with no possessions—scurrying about, praying earnestly, pinching pennies, looking out to see that others are not wasteful, living hand to mouth. Looking inward to preserve their 1500-year-old tradition.

Well—not exactly They do, indeed, receive continuous nourishment from looking inward (and outward) in communal and individual prayer. At the same time, their perspective on money and the what-is-enough question bears no resemblance to the scarcity-oriented stereotype I painted. They choose to live simply and communally and frugally—and joyfully. They are committed to a serene, safe, simple living place for the community.

They also have a blazing mission in the world: “to expand our capacity for Benedictine hospitality in all areas, but especially in our Spirituality Ministry and The Historical Museum at St. Gertrude.” They honor the past and keep it, hence the museum. They know that people who spend time with them go forth spiritually refreshed, which is to say, more likely to embody the respect, compassion, peace and love that comes from connection with the Holy. Hence the Spirituality Ministry.

They are building a 22,000 square foot Spirit Center, to welcome retreats and meetings into an environment of peace, nourishment and challenge. Mindful that life’s loveliness is an integral part of the “spirit’s still delight,” they have chosen the more expensive alternative in some places—like gray slate in the Spirit Center entryway, echoing the old monasteries colors. They are making much-needed renovations on the old stone building, constructed in 1920—renovations for better efficiency and for safety and environmental considerations. (Do you know how much it costs to double glaze one arched, 15-20 foot chapel window? \$10,000.)

An immensely capable, generous-spirited and funny woman has taken on the job of Development Director, and is traveling all over the west, raising money for the glory of god—expressed, practically, in this world. Another sister staffs the development office at home, and another one has the nearly full-time job of working closely with architect and builders, from planning through building through final decorating. The entire community is consulted, again and again.

In a bit, Kelly McConnell will talk more about the difference between “money” and “stuff,” and why the difference is so very important in our lives. The sisters embody an informed understanding of the concept. For them, “enough” is very simple, very little in the way of possessions—and at the same time they are in no way daunted by money, when it comes to fulfilling their dreams of a better world.

Is there anything in this story that speaks to us UUs? To us: mostly affluent by the world’s standards, most of us at least partly guilty of colluding with the American value of over-consumption. Kelly will bring it a little closer to home.

Kelly McConnell: Material Over-consumption

Really, the question is: How much is too much? For some who already know that they have too much, the question may more accurately be – how to stop the obsessive wanting and the obsessive spending that goes with it. Is “more” better? For the people in this room, the answer is “probably not.”

Living in the consumer culture that is America, we have a constant pressure to achieve more, to buy more, to keep up with Joneses (who just bought another new SUV) competitive consumption. It’s too easy though, to blame the enormous commercial corporate machine that seems to run the world. You cannot control that machine, but what you can control is yourself. So the path starts with you.

Anyway, as laudable the goal of changing the world, it’s a hell of a task to undertake. It’s better to avoid discouragement and set a reasonable goal that you can actually accomplish.

Reaching a place of “enough” is more a function of perspective than a function of true affluence. Attitudes of selfishness and greed propel people down the path of obscene conspicuous consumption. These bad attitudes often come from people with a Scarcity Mentality. Dr. Stephen Covey describes these people like this:

“They see life as having only so much, as though there were only one pie out there. And if someone were to get a big piece of the pie, it would mean less for everyone else.”

So the first step is faith: Faith in the abundance of the Universe to provide for you, and Faith in Yourself to take care of yourself and those that you love.

The next step to take is to understand the difference between money and stuff. Money is not a coin or a piece of paper, and it’s more than a medium of exchange. Money is not evil and not good, yet can be used for either purpose. At its most base level, money is intangible energy that is essential to the functioning of our lives. You can’t eat it, but you can’t eat without it. Money allows you to take care of your people. Money is essential to help alleviate the horrible suffering left in the wake of the Christmas Tsunami.

Most of us trade our own time and energy in exchange for money. And then we go spend our money on stuff. We all hear about people fantasizing about winning the lottery, and probably indulge in that daydream now and then ourselves. Many people start by listing all of the stuff that they would buy. But if you think about it, why would you trade your money for stuff if you value and respect money itself? You wouldn’t, you would set up investments that generate enough income to allow you to live how you like. You would live off the income generated, not the principal. It’s sad to say that lottery winners often end up in financial trouble.

After you leave here today, contemplate every purchase you make: Before you put a dime on the counter – ask yourself these questions:

Am I living within my means – not spending more than I make?
How will this purchase help me reach my goals in life?
Is this purchase really worth the time and energy I expended by making money?
Is this going to end up as nothing more than unused clutter?

You can find thousands of ways to save money. One of my favorite tips is this: Don't Go Shopping. Shopping is not recreation; take a walk on the greenbelt, that's free. In one survey, only 25 percent of mall shoppers said that the primary purpose of their visit was the pursuit of a specific item. In any event, It's easier to save, when you respect money as a part of yourself, that part of your life that you traded for it.

There is a growing movement in North America to reduce consumption, and thus spending. This movement goes by many names, anti-globalization, downshifting and voluntary simplicity. Juliet Schor describes "simple-livers" in *The Overspent American*:

In contrast to those of us caught up in the competitive spending process, simple-livers struggle against the dominant cultural assumptions about consumption, continually chipping away at the symbolic meanings of consumer objects. They reject the idea that their worth as a person is determined by the size of their house, or that they are incomplete without good china and a silver service. They symbolically connect their cars with pollution rather than power and sexuality.

It is clear that less consumption will physically benefit our planet. It is not as clear, however, that a popular movement to reduce spending won't have a negative impact on our economy. After all, less consumption, less production, fewer jobs, etc. In fact, this is the argument often used against voluntary simplicity. In my view, however, each of us is primarily responsible for our own personal and family economics. Families that are overextended in debt should not worry that the US economy will fall apart if they downsize their spending.

A good decade or two into a growing simple living movement, the US economy doesn't seem to suffer any negative effects. My personal assessment of the economy is that Americans have too much debt and don't save enough money, danger signs that could lead to more problems than diminished consumption. Some economists share that view. At any rate, I am willing to risk an economic slowdown in order to make my life simpler and my planet cleaner.

Elizabeth

I am grateful to Kelly for lifting up the all-important distinction between money—a symbol of our substance, our dearest values—and “stuff,” the cars and sound systems and huge homes and SUVs and expensive toys for adults and children. I am also grateful to her for underscoring that the values derived from our faith systems play a foundational role in how we deal with possessions and money.

For a lot of us, the idea of “de-cluttering,” simplifying, is daunting. A few of you have seen my computer room at home, where I do a great deal of work. There are things at the bottom of piles that have not seen the light of day in—I’m sure I would be entirely too embarrassed to tell you, if I checked. There’s that beatup old occasional table that was Granny’s. But it’s not an heirloom, or even an antique. It has a terminally-broken leg and a top so severely scratched and stained that God herself could hardly restore it, and it is a repository for junk.

A harder question: do I actually, honest to goodness, need **all** the books, even the ones that have been in boxes for lo, these many years? All hundreds of them?

Well, maybe I do need the books—a lot of them, anyway—for so many of them reflect my highest and most cherished values (poetry, Shakespeare, the “better” class of fiction; material I need for my beloved vocation). If that is so, why don’t I practice the other important spiritual principle Kelly spoke of? Why don’t I spend some money and time on those values—get rid of some stuff and erect more bookcases? And why haven’t I spent more time in reflection and discernment, discovering exactly what values are at the core of my best self, the self that wants to embody the love taught by all major faiths?

I can’t answer my own “why” questions. I only know that today’s topic has deep significance for most of us. Human life is so very, very short, and—from everything we have observed over the centuries—we don’t get another chance on this beautiful planet. It is actually a religious imperative for most Americans: we need to seriously simplify in terms of stuff, in terms of what we toss into the environment. The sisters at St. Gertrude’s live vibrant, interesting, joyful lives, with an absolute minimum of stuff. If we only sort of emulated them, we could, too.

On a deeper level, we need to emulate them and their attitude toward money—we need to put our money into those things that are of deepest significance to us and to our vision of the future. We need to reflect deeply on what is worth “all you have been, or could be.” We need to have faith that we can manifest love and loveliness, “all beautiful and splendid things.”

The St. Gertrude’s community consists of about 60 nuns. The Benedictine order has no financial ties with the diocese or with the Vatican in Rome. None. How much do you think they are raising for their project, the Spirit Center of which is scheduled for completion in a few months? \$6,900,000. How much of that do you think the 60 nuns have committed, from their own resources? \$1.9 million.

Let us listen once again to the words of poet Sara Teasdale, remembering that “loveliness” equals all that is highest and best in the soul of each of us:

Spend all you have for loveliness,
Buy it and never count the cost;
For one white singing hour of peace
Count many a year of strife well lost,
And for a breath of ecstasy
Give all you have been, or could be.