

CES Monthly Musings

Issue 16, August 2008
(Published September 24, 2008)



**Seeking integral community
in an ecological age**

“Ecozoic” means “house of life.” An “Ecozoic Society” means a society of life.

* * *

The “Ecozoic Era” is a time of mutually enhancing relationships
among humans and the larger community of life.

* * *

The “Great Work” is living the promise of the ecozoic.

In this Issue: "The Dangers of Stuff," by Denise Cumbee Long.

The Dangers of Stuff

I must say that Binkley has been an exciting place to be this past week. All available rooms at the church have overflowed with yard sale contributions. Unwanted items which once occupied space in someone’s home, yard, or garage found their way to the Binkley receiving area to be sorted, cleaned, priced, and displayed for someone else to buy. . . .

It was a conversation that I had with one of you during the yard sale preparations this week which spurred the idea for this sermon. Edith Wiggins was helping the other volunteers in the Kitchen Supply Room sort and price a tremendous array of knick knacks, utensils, dishes, and pots and pans. I was standing in the doorway with a dazed expression on my face, adjusting to the spectacle of shelf upon shelf of objects, some of which you need and some, as Rachel Avery said so succinctly, you definitely did not need! Edith waved her arm at the display and said, “Denise, have you ever seen so much stuff? Why don’t you preach a sermon sometime about STUFF?”

Not too long ago, I chanced across a wonderful clip on the Internet called “The Story of Stuff”. In the words of a reviewer writing for Yes! magazine, “The Story of Stuff” (www.storyofstuff.com) is a 20-minute film that takes viewers on “an eye-opening tour of the real costs of our consumer driven culture—from resource extraction to iPod incineration.”

Annie Leonard, an activist who has spent the past 10 years traveling the globe fighting environmental threats, narrates the Story of Stuff, examining the real costs of extraction, production, distribution, consumption and disposal. She even isolates the moment in history where she says the trend of consumption mania began. The Story of Stuff examines how economic policies of the post-World War II era ushered in ideas of “planned obsolescence” and “perceived obsolescence” —and that these notions are still driving U.S. and global economies today. (<http://www.yesmagazine.org/article.asp?id=2191>)

The film also points out that a “buy it then throw it away” mentality affects everyone on the consumer food chain, some disproportionately more than others. And of course, the environment itself becomes the final victim as our trash piles higher and our forests, fresh water, and mineral resources are depleted in order to manufacture more goods for increasingly higher consumer demand.

What drives our materialistic tendencies? Somehow, we equate security and happiness with possessions. Sarah van Gelder writes that “pursuing happiness is something we are entitled to; it says so, right in the Declaration of Independence. But are we happy? Could it be that what we are pursuing is not in fact happiness, but the stuff that is supposed to lead to happiness?”

She points out that American citizens rank low in global happiness scores, although we are the wealthiest country in the world and have way more stuff than almost anyone else. We are also a country where many resort to drugs--legal and illegal--to make it through the day.

Gelder says we must face the reality that our wealth hasn't made us very merry, and also that our pursuit of the pseudo-happiness promised by Madison Avenue is destroying a very real planet along with the potential for genuine long-term happiness for ourselves and the other people and life forms with whom we share this world. The real ingredients of happiness, it turns out, are far less costly to the planet than we might have thought. Happiness comes from having enough--but not too much--and from living in a society in which others have enough. And it comes from such simple habits as expressing gratitude, seeking to live spiritually and emotionally balanced lives, and finding ways to give back to the world. (<http://www.yesmagazine.org/svgblog/>)

We realize this truth when we expose ourselves to those who don't have enough. My own happiness is short-lived as I consider the unhappiness of one who suffers or if I see in stark relief how disproportionately large my share of the pie is compared to the sliver belonging to someone else. My daughter, Jessica, was confronted by this comparison in Peru where she and her boyfriend Andrew spent time in remote villages in the Amazon. Jessica and Andrew have recently returned from their travels and are here with us today. They are experiencing some culture shock and re-entry pangs as they find themselves back in American society, a world away from life in the Peruvian Amazon. Here's what Jessica wrote in her blog back in March after living for awhile in a village:

Speaking of material things, once again I was reminded on this trip that I have an uncomfortable amount of stuff. Sometimes when we go visit the communities, Andrew and I feel like we're roughing it, but if you ever want a real kick in the behind to simplify your life, unpack your backpack in front of a barefoot 7-year old from an Amazon village. You will take out your bug

repellent, your hand sanitizer, your sunscreen, your zippered bag of toiletries, your 3 pairs of different kinds of shoes, your hammock, your cameras, your bag of clothes, your sleeping sheet and therma-rest, your mosquito net, your books and pencils, etc. etc. and the child will marvel at each thing and it will start to dawn on you that this kid has basically none of that stuff, and he lives here, while you are planning to stay for nine days and somehow need it all. And this is just a small fraction of the things that you have in Iquitos. And those are also hardly anything compared to the things that you left behind at home in the states.

Since, when I spend time with them in their homes and on their boats and in their meeting halls, I don't really perceive these people as "poor," though I know they do not have a lot, the unavoidable conclusion is that I have WAY TOO MUCH. Since it is now so clear, one of our new favorite things to do is look for ways to give stuff away. I know that I've always heard that giving is better than receiving, and I've always felt ambiguous about that because I really like receiving, but I have been pretty surprised at how good it feels to go around lightening our load. It's more than just a pat on the back for being a good citizen. When we can get in this frame of mind, we feel more incorporated, more confident and proud of ourselves, and less clingy and dependent on things that distract from what's important.

(www.lifeontheamazon.blogspot.com, March 22, 2008)

Distraction from what is important, this is the danger of too much stuff, along with the twin problem of the imbalance between the few who have much and the many who have little. When our focus is on accumulation as a means to achieve security and happiness, then we forget about what truly matters during our short time on this earth.

The parable of the Rich Farmer drives home this point. Jesus tells the parable of the Rich Farmer in response to a question from a man in the crowd asking him to settle a dispute with his brother over his inheritance. Jesus was seen as a teacher of the law, and it was assumed he would weigh in on such matters.

However, he sidesteps this question and instead focuses on the motivation behind it: the desire for possessions. "Watch out and guard yourselves from every kind of greed," warns Jesus, "because your true life is not made up of the things you own, no matter how rich you may be." Those listening to Jesus might have wondered about his words. After all, they were probably laborers, and the man's question about his inheritance would have seemed appropriate. He was only trying to get his fair share of the pie. But Jesus reminds them that greed is an issue for all of us, a spiritual question of focus, as well as an ethical one of fair distribution.

Jesus then goes on to tell a story about a rich farmer who has a bumper crop and must decide what to do with the surplus. The man's first response speaks volumes about his spiritual life. He doesn't express gratitude for good fortune which probably had very little to do with his own efforts. He had little control over the rain, weather, or yield of the seed. His good crop was a gift from God, yet his immediate reaction is one of insecurity and focus on self. He wants to hoard what he has received, build bigger barns, make better investments, create a financial plan that has him living easy for years to come. His dialogue with himself is classic: "And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, and be merry.'"

This last line is an echo of Isaiah 22:13 which depicts God's people refusing to turn from their wrongdoing, saying to themselves, "Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we'll die." In the Rich Farmer's case, this is exactly what happens. His trust in material goods offers no real security. Death comes to some of us before we achieve our long term goals. And God asks, "As for the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" Ironically, the harvest the man hoarded and did not share during his lifetime was probably distributed after his death to the villagers who helped him build his bigger barns.

Jesus concludes the parable with the words, "And so it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich in God's sight." Eugene Peterson's translation of this verse in *The Message*, is striking: "This is what happens when you fill your barn with Self and not with God."

The gospel of Luke offers us many of Jesus' teachings about misplaced trust. The verses immediately following this parable show Jesus reassuring his disciples that they need not be excessively anxious about food, clothes, and saving for the future, because life is much larger than the sum of these things. Worry will not lengthen one's life. Neither will focusing on things that distract from the spiritual dimension of living or the work of loving one's neighbor.

"Consider the birds of the air; they don't plant seeds or gather a harvest, they don't have storage rooms or barns.... Consider the lilies of the field, they don't work or make clothes for themselves," Jesus tells his followers (Luke 12: 22-28). I don't think Jesus used these examples from the natural world lightly. Humankind seems to be the singular species that is both blessed and cursed by the ability to consider future catastrophe. I think Jesus is pointing to the solace of wild things as an antidote and corrective to our materialistic tendencies and ingrained anxiety. As Wendell Berry says in his poem, *The Peace of Wild Things*:

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Our stuff cannot offer spiritual solace or answers to our anxious ruminations about the future. God's presence shines reassuringly through the beauty and immediacy of wild things which travel through life lightly, accumulating nothing but grace.

A few verses later in Luke, Jesus speaks about the moral implication of the unequal distribution of wealth. It is an issue of justice that also profoundly affects our own spiritual health: "Sell all your belongings and give the money to the poor. Provide for yourselves purses that don't wear

out, and save your riches in heaven, where they will never decrease, because no thief can get to them, and no moth can destroy them. For your heart will always be where your riches are.” (Luke 12:33-34).

My own heart has had some adventures lately. As many of you know, I had a minor heart attack three weeks ago, an event that was a complete surprise, given my age and lack of risk factors. I am doing well, now, but any sudden health scare is traumatic. I am sure that some of you have been in similar circumstances where you felt blindsided by an event in which you are completely without control over what is happening. It can be a very anxious time. I remember lying in the ambulance and staring at the metal ceiling, thinking to myself, “I could actually be having a heart attack right now, and it is possible I may even die.” Thoughts like these can bring into supreme focus what is most important. I can say that the state of my bank account never entered my mind at that moment. My head was filled with images of my loved ones. I also remember thinking how beautiful the branch of a tree was which I could see from the ambulance window.

“Your heart will always be where your riches are.” Mystics and Buddhists refer to the negative image of this truism: the dangers of attachment. Attachment to things allows little room in the heart for the sacred. The Christian mystic, Meister Eckhart, invented the words for a spiritual attitude that is opposite to the selfish clinginess of attachment: letting go and letting be. The person who has learned to let go is one without idols or objects in his or her life, and in the words of Matthew Fox, has “true living without why or wherefore.” (Fox, *Passion for Creation: The Earth-Honoring Spirituality of Meister Eckhart*, Inner Traditions, Rochester, Vermont, 2000, p.221.)

For the mystic, letting go means detaching from what is superfluous or distracting. It does not mean that the world is bad, however. Rather, letting go is a way of seeing “the divinity behind the divinity of things”, and letting be is a state of being open, sensitive and receptive, letting oneself be oneself and letting others be themselves. Meister Eckhart calls this being “receptive of all spirit”.

This openness of spirit which results when we let go of the attachment to material possessions is an ancient practice. Voluntary simplicity has been chosen by religious people for centuries. As Duane Elgin writes in his essay, “The Garden of Simplicity”:

Simplicity of living is not a new idea. It has deep roots in history and finds expression in all of the world's wisdom traditions. More than two thousand years ago, in the same historical period that Christians were saying "Give me neither poverty nor wealth," (Proverbs 30:8), the Taoists were asserting "He who knows he has enough is rich" (LaoTzu), Plato and Aristotle were proclaiming the importance of the "golden mean" of a path through life with neither excess nor deficit, and the Buddhists were encouraging a "middle way" between poverty and mindless accumulation.

http://www.simpleliving.net/content/custom_garden_of_simplicity.asp

Voluntary simplicity as a spiritual practice is not new. What is new, however, is the urgency that makes it a moral imperative to shift from unrestrained global consumerism to practices that

promote equitable distribution and conservation of scarce resources. This should not only be an individual choice, but even more importantly, an issue of national and corporate responsibility. Our collective action is absolutely critical in addressing the “dangers of stuff”, because this is a matter of justice and stewardship that has far-reaching consequences.

I am grateful for the witness of people in my life, including many of you, who take these issues to heart, both in your concern for national policy and in your personal lives and spiritual practice. Some of you have scaled down the size of your house and the volume of your purchases, walk or bike to work, shop at consignment stores, buy “green” products, create your own gifts, purchase fairly traded items, and make carefully considered food and clothing choices. And you also create opportunities for community building and recycling through the wonderful vehicle of yard sales.

Most of us have become somewhat self-aware of our tendencies to pull down our barns and build bigger ones. We are trying to move in the opposite direction. But, we have a long way to go. We are not always very consistent, and we can find a hundred excuses to justify our default position of staying caught up in the American consumer culture. I, for one, am often guilty here. Just ask my daughter who has reminded me sternly on a couple of occasions recently about our family’s lack of a compost pile and that we really do NOT have to buy those new kitchen countertops I’ve been eying at Home Depot.

As LaoTzu said, “She who knows she has enough is rich.” There is a wonderful word from the Jewish Seder service which might help us remember this: “Dayenu”--it would have been enough. If God had only brought us out of Egypt, dayenu. If God had only led us to Mt. Sinai, dayenu. If God had only given us the Torah, dayenu. My friend, Jeanette Stokes, describes a December trip to the beach, and the way a series of wonderful and lucky happenings left her saying, dayenu, it would have been enough: If I had only had a weekend of silence, it would have been enough, but I also saw the sunset. If I had only seen the sunset reflecting the peach and fuchsia in the tide pools at the beach, it would have been enough, but it also snowed . . . God provides all of this and more. Every now and then, I remember to stop and say thank you. (Stokes, *Twenty -Five Years in the Garden*, RCWM, Durham, 2002, p.131.)

May we also remember to look at our lives, see the riches that are there, and say dayenu. We have been given enough, and so much more. May we rest in the grace of the world and be free.

Denise Cumbee Long
Binkley Memorial Baptist Church
Chapel Hill, North Carolina
August 17, 2008