

Presented by Susan Roberts, Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Sheridan, WY
4/24/2016

Letting Go of Material Things

I chose this topic, as this process is something I've been experiencing over the past 2 years. I have grappled directly with this issue and I have grown from it.

We live in arguably the most heavily marketed society in the world. Advertising, in a variety of ever-increasing media options is seemingly omnipresent. U.S. citizens have been carefully molded into the world's best consumers of commercial goods. Newspaper, followed by radio, were the largest mass marketing tools of the early 20th century. After World War II, the burgeoning industrial economy and the resulting expansion of the middle class gave more Americans buying power than ever before. The new prosperity allowed the Greatest Generation to paint the American Dream in vivid colors. Single family homes, automobiles, higher education, leisure pursuits, and higher standards of living became the norm for much of the U.S. Most Americans, especially the Baby Boomers, became thoroughly indoctrinated in the mantra of "I want my kids to have it better I did." And they did it.

Material consumer goods, THINGS, became an important part of "having it better." The advent of television exploded the ability to market to and coax people into becoming exponentially greater consumers. Americans rose to the occasion. We are the world's leading consumers. The flood of advertised THINGS continues to evolve. Now, even pumping gas has become a marketing opportunity. Do you remember doing an internet search without the first 2-5 results being commercial sites? Any of you with children in your lives know that especially with most "Children's" programming, a desire for toys, junk food, and even elaborate vacations is cultivated every 10 minutes. In our society, we receive constant messages that THINGS are good. THINGS make you feel happy. THINGS enable you to make friends. THINGS bring you love. THINGS can fill whatever voids you may have in your life.

We all like to think of ourselves as not materialistic. Other than Madonna, Vladimir Putin, and other unapologetic individuals who flaunt their pursuit of material things, most people would not openly declare their thirst for THINGS. Most of us would like to place PEOPLE ahead of THINGS in our lives. Nearly all world religions revere a life without excess. Living with only the basic necessities is seen as a universal path to a richer spiritual life. Reaching enlightenment, nirvana, or heaven involves a degree of detachment to worldly THINGS.

The Buddha gave up his life as a Prince to become enlightened. Jesus Christ was a poor carpenter who remained poor and humble despite his growing status as a prophet. Spiritual richness is the opposite of material richness. Unfortunately, we are wired as human beings to enjoy excess and comfort. Material goods can make our lives easier, more convenient, and down right enjoyable. We are instinctive hedonists. In the modern world, temptation by materialism is a constant.

In the pursuit of Spirituality, we are instructed to control our inner hedonists. H.H. the Dalai Lama instructs in his book "How to Practice: The Way to a Meaningful Life", "It is a mistake to think that it is really worthwhile to spend more on food, clothing, and adornments just because you have more money." He suggests we spend our extra resources helping the poor. And further, "Examine your attitudes toward food, clothes, and shelter. By reducing expectations you will promote contentment."

Contentment has as many permutations as there are human beings to imagine being content. Each person must find their own way. Within our materialistic society, practicing simple contentment is a challenge. Seeking historical guidance can be discouraging. Most religious traditions steer us toward ascetism as an ideal of contentment. One definition of ascetism is: rigorous self-denial; extreme abstinence, austerity. And also; the doctrine that a person can attain a high spiritual and moral state by practicing self-denial, self-mortification, and the like. Obviously, this is the far end of the spectrum of contentment, requiring a significant amount of discipline and faith. As such, it is an unrealistic goal that is unattainable for most of us. Exploring the middle ground is more practical.

Why do we become so attached to things?

Nature gives us a beautiful nudge in this quote by Jeffrey McDaniel, "I realize there's something incredibly honest about trees in winter, how they're experts at letting things go."

Let's talk about THINGS or objects. Objects have both functional and symbolic uses. THINGS have their own meanings, which are different for each person. Objects can evoke strong sentiment or emotions. A flag or a work of art can bring up very strong feelings. Watching Old Glory fly makes me proud to be an American. A variety of emotions can be involved with objects. Pride, joy, shame, fear, contentment, envy, and guilt, to name a few.

Objects also become infused with memory. We form memories related to them. "That baseball mitt reminds me of playing catch with my Dad." or, "I drank tea out of that cup with my Grandma."

An object may symbolize a set of beliefs, such as a chalice or a cross. Such objects have collective value or meaning to many people. Many wars have been fought over symbolic objects.

The practical use, or function, of a THING may also help us form an attachment to it. "I can't cook a meal without my favorite kitchen knife." or "My dishwasher saves me so much time and effort."

Many objects may involve more than one type of reaction, as well. These memories, emotions, and functions all form the basis of our complex attachment to THINGS.

How do we speak to ourselves about THINGS? How do we justify ownership? How do we really decide what we need versus what we simply want?

Some people believe "He who dies with the most toys wins." Others believe one robe is enough of a wardrobe to be content.

Needs are pretty basic: food, clothing, shelter, love, transportation, education, and health care are among them. We have numerous justifications about acquiring and owning THINGS. "I want it" is simply the most common justification. It has been with each of us longer than our memories. Other forms of this include: I think I need that. I deserve it. It's mine and you can't have it!

We might feel entitled. I got this education or completed that certification or training and I should have a car and a house to prove it. I worked hard to earn that. Social status may be a motivator. I want to feel powerful and well-connected. Naturally, envy can creep into justifying THINGS, as well. It's human nature to want what someone else has, if it's pleasing to us.

Greed is a reason for acquiring and possessing things without regard to others. One can certainly argue that capitalism is based largely on greed. More growth, more production, more sales, more money,

more stuff- and on it goes. We all know someone who lets greed be the guiding force in their lives. Most of us do not aspire to that model of life.

My own path in letting go of material things has become well-worn in the past 2 years. I had a major change in my health. That translated into closing my business and losing my livelihood. The material cascade starts there. The house goes to foreclosure sale, the car has to be sold. Moving to affordable rental housing has space constraints. Storage becomes impractical and storage space expensive. EVERYTHING needs to be downsized. While nearly all of us will face this eventuality, it's something we'd rather put off as long as possible.

During this painful time, I've had to reflect on my attachments to everything I own. Initially, embarrassment, guilt, and shame clouded the entire task of letting go. I worked hard, why can't I keep it? Is there a way I can? The most powerful attachment I had initially was status. I was losing status every minute in my mind. It took me some time to remember that a home is made by people's hearts, not a specific structure. The loss of my house felt like erasing my American Dream. I had always planned to live in a house most of my adult life. I felt like I wasn't providing the American Dream. Eventually, with time, I was able to let go. I attended my own auction sale to be informed about my situation. I found another place to live.

Will my family be embarrassed that I'm driving an old car? No, they weren't. My expectations were getting in the way. I still wish my replacement car got better gas mileage. I've learned to be content that I have reliable transportation. The process of deciding what to shed and what to keep was very long and very hard. I tried to examine why I wanted to keep things. It turned out that much of what I owned I didn't really need. I used the edict that if you haven't used it in a year, you probably don't need it. That is largely true.

Dealing with inherited and sentimental objects was the hardest. If I had never met my great Great Grandmother whose dishes were in a box for 40 years, how can I expect someone else to want them? Is it fair to expect the next generation to feel the same way? No, I don't think so. I still store furnishings that were made by family members, even though I haven't got room to use them. I'm happy I never had a large collection of anything but textbooks.

Letting go of THINGS is difficult. One of the things I did not expect to experience was actual grief. I grieved some THINGS, and my American Dream. It took me a long time to get completely moved out of my house. I find I miss my appliances the most. The most functional objects in the house. I guess that means I'm practical at the end of the day.

I do feel lighter not to be struggling to pay a mortgage. I have fewer bills and financial obligations, which does reduce stress. I have to be more creative with what I have. I still have the occasional urge to re-accumulate THINGS. Limited storage is a very good reminder for me. I still have some "Why me?" days. I realize that that is an unanswerable question.

Have I achieved some elevated spiritual plane? No. But I am learning to lower my expectations and to increase my contentment. And even if growth is very painful, it is still moving in a direction. And that is a lesson that is not wasted.

I'd like to close with an excerpt from James Baldwin.

Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one identity, the end of safety. And as such a moment, unable to see and not daring to imagine what the future will now bring forth, one clings to what one knew, or thought one knew; to what one possessed or dreamed that one possessed. Yet it is only when a person is able, without bitterness or self-pity, to surrender a dream they have long cherished, or a privilege they have long possessed, that they set themselves free- for higher dreams, for greater privileges.