

CONSUMER CONFIDENCE

© REV. DANA WORSNOP
ATKINSON MEMORIAL CHURCH
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READINGS

We offer two readings this morning.

The first from author, naturalist and activist Terry Tempest Williams

Desert as teacher.

Desert as mirage.

Desert as illusion, largely our own.

What you come to see on the surface is not what you come to know. Emptiness in the desert is the fullness of space, a fullness of space that eliminates time. The desert is time, exposed time, geologic time. One needs time in the desert to see.

As the world becomes more crowded and corroded by consumption and capitalism, this landscape of minimalism will take on greater significance, reminding us through its blood red grandeur just how essential wild country is to our psychology, how precious the desert is to the soul of America.

These lands have been here for millions of years, and they will certainly outlast us by another million years or more. But they will not remain ecologically intact without our vigilance, without our willingness to protect what is wild.

And this poem, entitled

**What Was Once the Largest Shopping Center in Northern Ohio
Was Built Where There Had Been a Pond I Used to Visit Every Summer Afternoon**
by Mary Oliver

Loving the earth, seeing what has been done to it,
I grow sharp, I grow cold.

Where will the trilliums go, and the coltsfoot?
Where will the pond lilies go to continue living
their simple, penniless lives, lifting
their faces of gold?

Impossible to believe we need so much
as the world wants us to buy.
I have more clothes, lamps, dishes, paper clips

than I could possibly use before I die.

Oh, I would like to live in an empty house,
with vines for walls, and a carpet of grass.
No planks, no plastic, no fiberglass.

And I suppose sometime I will.
Old and cold I will lie apart
from all this buying and selling, with only
the beautiful earth in my heart.

SERMON

As our culture would have it, we are consumers before anything else. We are consumers and customers before we are citizens, before we are complex, discerning beings with the capacity to think abstractly and to love profoundly.

This assumption is evident in the amount of time or space our media devote to consumer issues. Reporters and sources alike talk about the Consumer Price Index and consumer confidence – which is a good thing when it is high. Our consumption drives a world economy. When Americans stop consuming other markets tremble. I am sometimes stunned at how unthinkingly our media hold an assumption of a reality in which our role as consumers is paramount.

The Oxford English Dictionary does not quite rise to the level of Holy Scripture, even to the writer in me, but it can be instructive. Here are several of the OED definitions of the verb, to consume:

To make away with, use up destructively. Said chiefly of fire: To burn up, reduce to invisible products, or to ashes; also of any similar destructive or 'devouring' agent.

To do away with by evaporation or the like, cause to disappear or vanish *away*.

To destroy (a living being, or more usually, a people), by disease or any wasting process.

To engage the full attention or energy of, to engross.

To spend (goods or money), *esp.* wastefully; to waste, squander.

To take up and exhaust as material, usually with the notion of destructive employment; to use up.

To make away with (food), devour, swallow, eat up, drink up.

To waste away, decay, rot, perish.

To consume means to use up entirely. When we are consumed by something, we are used up by it.

Now I never have been especially thrilled at being defined, labeled and packaged as a consumer, but I read those definitions and I positively get the creeps. For that is what we are doing as a culture. We are consuming our lives, consuming the planet's resources. Causing them to vanish away. Using them all up. Devouring, swallowing up, destroying, using up, wasting, squandering.

Suddenly consumer confidence doesn't seem like such a good thing after all.

I once heard a presentation by a local school superintendent reporting on the job they were doing in customer service, customer satisfaction. I couldn't help thinking, I thought your task was the education children and youth. How did this become customer service? How did we become consumers of education? And who exactly were the customers? The parents or the students? Indeed our role as consumers – as customers who buy what is being sold – has become the assumed backdrop for all or most of our interactions. What does this do to the nature of the relationships we have in the world?

As a former teacher, I well know what it does in an area like education. As my job became more and more about satisfying my customers – be they the parents or the children – my effectiveness and authority as an educator was undermined. People do move through the world with the notion that the customer is always right. If I had to call parents about a child's misbehavior, how was I affecting customer satisfaction? When parents told me I must have gotten it wrong because, "I know my child doesn't lie to me." I would think, although rarely say, "Yes, your child is lying to you. And in fact, it's completely developmentally appropriate for them to lie to you. And do you not remember being a kid?" Satisfying customers requires a very different dynamic than does educating children.

"We've been trained as a culture to consume to feel cool as opposed to produce to feel cool," says author and trend watcher Douglas Rushkoff. "That's what America has been about since the Second World War ... [creating] a culture of consumers. You can't just be ... you have to have something in order to feel cool.... We are always consuming in order to establish an identity."

What ever happened to being creative and productive and having that be what establishes our identity? What ever happened to making music – composing a symphony rather than simply buying the latest CD?

Being rampant consumers damages relationships. It damages the environment. Yet it damages even more profoundly our sense of self and our sense of meaning. When our consumption disassociated from its consequences, we consume – use up and destroy – even more easily, with even less thought.

Moving through the world as consumers first, as we all well know from personal experience, is ultimately unsatisfying. As much as we fill up, we still feel empty and seeking more. And in a culture which doesn't offer us lots of obvious opportunities to fill ourselves in non-material ways, this leads us to ennui and despair, an almost nihilistic sense of meaninglessness.

Youth culture often gets this most viscerally.

One of my favorite films is *Say Anything* which came out in 1989. In it, Lloyd Dobbler, bright, aimless and newly graduated from high school, falls for Diane Cort, the valedictorian who is on her way to a prestigious fellowship in England. He is scrutinized by her protective father at a family dinner.

When asked about his career plans, Lloyd nervously blurts out,

"A career? I've thought about this quite a bit, sir, and I would have to say, considering what's waiting out there for me, I don't want to sell anything, buy anything or process anything as a career. I don't want to sell anything bought or processed or buy anything sold or processed or repair anything sold, bought or processed as a career. I don't want to do that. My father's in the army. He wants me to join, but I can't work for that corporation, so what I've been doing lately is kick-boxing, which is a new sport...as far as career longevity, I don't really know. I can't figure it all out tonight, sir, so I'm just gonna hang with your daughter."

Needless to say, this speech hardly impresses the protective father, but it has become a film classic. Lloyd doesn't say it directly, but he wants out of the marketplace where he is defined only by what he can buy or sell. He sees no real avenue for being creative or productive, and so he drifts along – until he falls in love. Which is, of course, the other thing that can save us.

Rev. Margaret Keip, a colleague and mentor, once said something which has resonated. We humans are always looking for more, and More is the best definition of God available. Being human in a body means that we feel a sense of lack, a sense of something missing. Christians might name this as evidence of our human separation from God. Buddhists would call it our separation from our true nature, our Buddha nature.

Yet whatever the origin of this universal yearning, we do long for more to fill an emptiness inside. And when this yearning is misused, we find ourselves in our present dilemma. We end up filling the emptiness with whatever is at hand. Surely if we can just consume more, we will be filled. It

is much harder to think of filling up with something spiritual and non-material. Yet what if the more we sought was more love, more peace, more service, more faith. Indeed, I can think of no better definition of God than More of such qualities.

Yet in a capitalist society we are told – and it becomes all too easy to believe – that we should fill that emptiness with stuff.

And my, how we do fill it with stuff. As the poet laments, it's

"Impossible to believe we need so much
as the world wants us to buy.

I have more clothes, lamps, dishes, paper clips
than I could possibly use before I die."

We have so much more than we need, more than we can use, more than we really want, certainly more than we can fit in our homes. Hence the proliferation of garage sales and self-storage units. Hence the rise of E-Bay. If, as Jesus said, "where your treasure lies, there your heart will be also," then the mounds of stuff we have become downright frightening.

Now, you come to church in part looking for alternatives. For ways to move with integrity and intention in the world, in concert with your deepest values. For ways to be sure that your treasure – whether material or spiritual – does lie where you want your heart to dwell. I suggest you can begin by looking at what you consume and what your life is consumed by.

Next Sunday after the service the Adult Faith Development Team will show the short film *The Story of Stuff*, which is a reflection on how much we have and the implications of our consumption for other lands and for the planet. And on March 16, I believe, you are invited to a Green Tea by the Green Sanctuary Committee, to learn more about how we can be greener in our individual lives and as a congregation.

Yet I also will suggest to you an internal spiritual discipline. Now is the Christian season of Lent, a season of self-denial and reflection. We don't do denial well as Unitarian Universalists and as a culture in general. Perhaps as humans left to our own devices, we never have, and that's why most religions offer some sort of ascetic practice. We tend to reject such practices as too Puritanical, rigid and life-denying. Yet at its best, a religious practice of denial is intended to clear away the superfluous and superficial and leave only what is essential. Making room for that which is most Holy to arise.

Lent is a fast. A time to give something up that we might reflect on what we have. We think of it usually in material terms, giving up something that is bad for us, or an indulgence – coffee or chocolate. But listen to Rev. John Wolf's take on Lent.

Lenten Diet

Fast from criticism, and feast on praise;
Fast from self-pity, and feast on joy;
Fast from ill-temper, and feast on peace;
Fast from resentment, and feast on contentment;
Fast from jealousy, and feast on love;
Fast from pride, and feast on humility;
Fast from selfishness, and feast on service;
Fast from fear, and feast on faith.

We give up some things that we might have more of others. More praise. More peace. More contentment. More humility. More faith. More of what is Holy. "One needs time in the desert to see," Terry Tempest Williams tells us.

It's not too late to give something up for Lent. Now don't do what Susan Landis-Steward said she used to do as a child and give up something like liver – which you already hate. Give up something that will help you reflect on your life – the level of your consumption, your attachment to some self-defeating habit. At the very least, use this Lenten season to consider how it is you are defined as a consumer, how it is that you identify with what you consume.

For you do well know, you can't take it with you. No matter what you do in this life, you will still end up old and cold, [lying] apart from all this buying and selling, with only the beautiful earth in [your] heart.

Why not take the earth into your heart while you are still alive.