

“The Unsolved Case of the Possessive”
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“Need not greed” was the proclamation that sounded from my friend, Ann, as we sat around the table at One, Three, or Five Dodd Street. This was many years ago, when my then young daughters and I were at home in Montclair, New Jersey and across the street and next door to two other families. All of us happened to be members of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Montclair. Coincidence? Probably not. We formed a veritable mealtime commune with our young families. Ann’s and my eldest were budding adolescents, ever ready to challenge what they simply must have if they were to show their faces to their peers—that is, the right parkas, the right jeans, the right sweaters. Thankfully it was the pre-smart phone era. Radios and TVs sufficed for their techno needs. As a high school librarian, Ann was accustomed to resisting the onslaught of “I must have it now!” and “I’ve got to get a hold of this article today; my paper was due yesterday!” Her retort? “What is it about No that you don’t understand?” I have borrowed her verbiage more than once!

A few years later, when Dan and I married and I gained a third daughter, the decibel level rose from our respective offspring on the dire need for trips to the mall. But expect the unexpected. The daughter who was most obsessed by her wardrobe is now a mother who is the most fiscally prudent of all our daughters.

What do I need and what do I want? Echoes of Barbara Kingsolver’s distillation of her lifetime goal. How “to live a happy useful life on this earth without using up an unnecessary share of its goods”? How “to be a good animal rather than one that fouls its nest”?

“Mine!” cries the toddler, grabbing a piece of Lego from the equally determined grip of his playmate. “Mine!” claims the adolescent spotting in her favorite boutique a sweater that the salesperson quickly confirms is “so you!” “Mine!” exclaims the young couple finding a house way beyond their means, led on by the encouraging nods of their realtor. “Mine!” maintains the investor, whose leveraged buyout has undone a few thousand lives, all of them invisible.

What am I saying? Is it bad to own anything? Is it selfish to refer to “my” anything? Is it pathological to draw boundaries around “stuff” or “space” that says Private Property? It’s an ongoing struggle to discern what we need, what we want, what we don’t need, and what desires will fade after the transactions of commerce. Do I regret living in a nice home? Do I regret spending so much at the holidays, even though it was on gifts? “No” to the former. An appropriately guilty “Yes” to the latter.

That ours is a culture of consumption is not news. Buy this; buy that. Your worth depends on it! Such seems to be the lure of a culture swept up in ownership as success—how much one makes—not earns, but makes—as success; what one drives and where one vacations (if one vacations) as success. “O what a piece of work are we,” rings the first phrase of the apt lyrics of the hymn by the same name.

*O what a piece of work are we, how marvelously wrought;
The quick contrivance of the hand, the wonder of our thought,
the wonder of our thought.*

I wonder if Malvina Reynolds wrote those words thinking of wonder as wonderful or wonder as, “Can you believe it?” I’m guessing that she was fully attuned to how her lyrics cut both ways.

In the life of Dr. James Doty, Reynolds’ lyrics resonate in the wonder of letting go, the wonder of generosity, and the wonder of commitment honored. Author, neurosurgeon, and director of the Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education (I know, that’s mouthful!) at Stanford University School of Medicine, James Doty has known hyper-affluence and bankruptcy. As a neurosurgeon, his earnings were ample; he invested, then lost the bulk of his wealth in the dot com fiasco. In the meantime Doty had committed \$30 million to various channels serving the common good. What to do? He had been living “the high life”—a penthouse, expensive cars, wining and dining whomever he chose. Yet he was waking up, in his words, “empty and unhappy”. As he now reflects, “... when there is no barrier to having everything, everything means nothing.”

What moved him to give practically everything away? Through a friendship with a person named Ruth, Dr. Doty discovered that “the only thing that can give you worth is to be of service to another and make their lives better.” By no means does he consider himself a saint. He did not starve; he did not go homeless; he probably didn’t go car-less. But he achieved what Barbara Kingsolver spoke of, telling the difference between need and want. He achieved what the people in the second room with the long spoons achieved [see parable of the long spoons], feeding one another. He achieved what our children discovered this morning, when faced with the opportunity to give away their precious stones. He let go and in doing so found new meaning, new purpose, and a surfeit of joy.

A lifetime or so ago I visited the Cairo Museum—yes, Cairo, Egypt. On display was a sample of the 5,000 artifacts—clothing, chariots, weapons, and more—discovered in 1922 in the tomb of King Tutankhamen, known to most of us as King Tut, a pharaoh of the 14th century BCE who died at the age of 19. His was one of the smallest of the tombs in Egypt’s Valley of the Kings. While the entrance had been broken into, the interior had been hidden by debris that left its contents intact for over three millennia. As I paced slowly through the museum, gazing upon these artifacts that overwhelmed the exhibit space, I marveled at the accumulation of wealth that those in power understood as necessary for this teenage pharaoh’s ultimate journey. His life was cut short from what tests now reveal was a bone disease in his left leg and complications of malaria. Yet the assumption was: “You really can take it with you.”

What passed through my mind was akin to what I experienced a few years later amid a tour of the Hearst Castle in San Simeon, California. Begun with the late 19th century purchase of 40,000 acres by George Hearst, it was inherited by the news magnate William Randolph Hearst, who purchased over 200,000 additional acres. On this expanse overlooking the Pacific he erected a gargantuan structure with pools, gardens, and 165 rooms furnished with the most costly of artifacts—perhaps akin to what King Tut’s interior decorator would have chosen. Not my taste, but I wasn’t consulted. I must admit a brief bout of pool envy, but aside from that, it felt like a betrayal of possibility. Hearst Castle embodied a beyond-the-beyond of greed over need. Am I being judgmental? I am.

Am I personally privileged? Yes, in so many ways. I am constantly challenged to separate need from want, must from must not, essentials from surfeit.

Do we ever really own anything? Might we possibly “take it with us?” Can we, with even a dollop of integrity, accumulate goods beyond a certain limit when someone else needs them far more than we do or when someone else could benefit mightily from the fiscal value of our extraneous possessions?

What awakened me above all to the illusion of property was amid a trip to Berkeley, California. The purpose was to meet with the Ministerial Fellowship Committee of our Unitarian Universalist Association to determine if I was ready and qualified to be ordained as a Unitarian Universalist minister. My anxiety was high, and I needed a diversion. Why not a visit to the campus of UC Berkeley—the University of California at Berkeley, home to the heartbeat of student resistance in the 1960s and yes, resistance in the past few days to the tyrannical forces unleashed in our nation. What was I in search of? Sproul Plaza, where in 1966 Mario Savio had stood on the steps of Sproul Hall and delivered a passionate speech that became iconic in the Free Speech movement. Once on campus, I had no idea how to get to my destination. One person after another didn’t even know about Sproul Plaza. At long last an elderly gentleman directed me, and I found myself in front of the steps of that famous—some would call it notorious—space. Then I looked down. At my feet, embedded in the walkway, was a bronze medallion engraved with these words:

“This soil and the air space extending above it shall not be a part of any nation and shall not be subject to any entity and jurisdiction.”

Yes, yes, I whispered to myself; and I took a piece of paper from my notebook [hold up] and wrote it down, in case I might forget. I even dated it—December 3, 1998.

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What is mine? What is yours? What is ours? What belongs to whom? Are we not beneficiaries of the gift of life, passing through on borrowed time in borrowed space with borrowed provisions? What does this mean for our journey? How shall we respond when confronted with the unsolved case of the possessive?

Hear again the lyrical wisdom of Brian Wren, words that we sang moments ago:

*We are not our own. Earth forms us,
human leaves on nature’s growing vine,
fruit of many generations,
seeds of life divine.*

*Let us be a house of welcome,
living stone upholding living stone,
gladly showing all our neighbors
we are not our own.*

So may it be and Amen.

Sources

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