

All I Really Need
Rev. Kenneth Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Meditation

Returning... to this place... this community...
Returning... to ourselves... to our breathing... to our heart's rhythm...
Returning... to a centeredness in this moment...
 ever changing... yet eternal moment...
Returning... and remembering...
what matters more... what matters less...
So that we might live from the center... live from what matters more...
 Live... serve... care...

Readings

from the Tao Te Ching, chapter 80, as translated by Ursula Le Guin:

Let there be a little country without many people.
Let them have tools that do the work of ten or a hundred,
and never use them.
Let them be mindful of death and disinclined to long journeys.
They'd have ships and carriages, but no place to go.
They'd have armor and weapons, but no parades.
Instead of writing, they might go back to using knotted cords.
They'd enjoy eating, take pleasure in clothes, be happy with their houses, devoted to their customs.

The next little country might be so close the people could hear cocks crowing and dogs barking there, but they'd get old and die without ever having been there.

from *Gorgias* by Plato

In this part of the long dialogue, Socrates is in conversation with someone named Callicles concerning the nature of the good life, the kind of life most conducive to genuine happiness:

SOCRATES: Tell me: are you saying that if a person is to be the kind of person he should be, he shouldn't restrain his appetites but let them become as large as possible and then should procure their fulfillment from some source or other, and that this is excellence?

CALLICLES: Yes, that's what I'm saying.

SOCRATES: So then those who have no need of anything are wrongly said to be happy?

CALLICLES: Yes, for in that case stones and corpses would be happiest.

in response, a bit later, Socrates sets himself the following task:

SOCRATES: ...what I want to change your mind about if I can: to choose the orderly life, the life that is adequate to and satisfied with its circumstances at any time instead of the insatiable, undisciplined life.

Sermon

What *do we really* need? What do we *want*?

And how can we tell the difference? These seem to me to be important questions when it comes to trying to live a sane life in an appetite-driven consumer culture.

Some musings today on the theme:

To begin: I've always liked that brief chapter of the *Tao Te Ching* we heard earlier – and among other things to me it is suggestive of what our *needs* as human beings are. Not always more of this or that, but peace and community, simple pleasures of food and drink, companionship, nature, beauty.

This said, I don't know if I'd like actually to *live* in the imaginary little country described in that chapter or not; but I do like reading about it. I get a peaceful feeling reading about it, imagining it. I suppose that among other things it reminds me of what matters in life, and what doesn't matter so much.

What about you?

Would you like to live in such a place? Or would you find it boring and unexciting?

Or maybe you have busy, hectic days when such a place sounds quite appealing, and other days when it sounds soul-deadening to you?

And after all, we are each a little different when it comes to what kind of life feeds and nourishes our spirits, our souls.

One of the lines in this chapter of the *Tao Te Ching* I find particularly interesting and striking. Lao Tzu says that in this country he is imagining, they would have stopped using handwriting and instead have gone back to using knotted chords – a more ancient form of record-keeping.

Apparently for Lao-Tzu handwriting was one of those innovations that had taken people away from centeredness in those things that really matter, from contentment in the eternal moment, from peace – from the Tao, the eternal “way” of life.

We could of course re-write this line of the text to bring it up to 21st century circumstances. It might go like this: “Instead of texting, they might go back to email... or faxing....”

As for handwriting – who uses handwriting for anything much more than a post-it note anymore?

Remember handwritten letters? Remember having to think before you write? Then carefully folding the paper, sealing the envelope. Walking the letter to the mailbox on the corner...

Of course, most of us still do write letters now and then. And each time we do, we may rediscover that all the time we believe we may save with email may be time not gained, but lost. For the time it takes to write the letter, fold, seal, stamp, send... is *not* time wasted; instead, it can be time gained because it is time slowed, time gained because it is time more filled with care... the care which must go into the writing of a letter as compared with a hurried email or text message. Think what it must have been like to have to knot those cords!

Yes, it's an old story, this feeling we often have that for whatever we may gain from technological advances (so called), there are also losses, and that all too often they are losses we could call spiritual losses as we become more rushed and driven, less present and centered.

But I'm not sure that advances in technology can be (or even ought to be) slowed. And in any case it may be that the problem, if it is a problem, is not with the onrushing technology... but with us. (A gloss on Shakespeare's "the fault is not in our stars... but in ourselves...")

So – back to the *Tao Te Ching* – maybe the solution to our spiritual malaise in a consumer culture need not wait for the creation of a little utopia such as it describes. After all, if I can feel more peaceful simply by reading a few lines describing a peaceful place, perhaps peace and contentment and even happiness aren't dependent on the *place* or on the sophistication of technology... but on my state of being, on the condition of my soul you might say – which in this case has been affected by reading about such a place.

Good news, this, because I have way more control over the condition of my soul than I do over the condition of the world! This doesn't mean we shouldn't try to change the world, to heal the sick, house the poor, confront systems of injustice and oppression, not to mention to seek congenial surroundings for ourselves; but we can at the same time nourish our spirits without changing much of anything else. We don't *need* as much as we might think we do in order to become more content.

Socrates understood and taught this, as we heard in the second reading. In this passage, we find Socrates engaged in heated conversation with Callicles about the nature of a good life, about what it is that leads to genuine happiness. Callicles says quite clearly, with no shame or apology, that following one's unrestrained appetites to the fullest leads to happiness. This appalls Socrates, who argues that it is the disciplined, orderly, self-controlled life that is the good life, the wise life, and that leads to happiness and contentment.

At one point Socrates declares that the person following Callicles' prescription for living would be no better than a leaky jar – as much as you fill it up, it leaks right out, as you are driven by what amount to insatiable appetites for more and always more, never satisfied.

Whereas learning to be satisfied with what one has, with one's current circumstances, does lead to genuine happiness – an unleaky jar – which is not dependent on getting what you want, but on wanting what you have.

Though as we heard, Callicles for his part responds that such a person is no better and no happier than a stone!

What do you think? Bring to mind for a moment that feeling of intensely "wanting" something. What was or is that feeling like? How would you characterize it? Do you like the feeling?

Now think of a time or a moment when you didn't want anything.

What is *that* like? How would you characterize the feeling that accompanies *not* wanting?

For me – the feelings that come with intense "wanting" are mostly not pleasant. They are exhausting. I do feel driven – a "slave" as Socrates' puts it to appetites. And I am very much *not* in the moment.

Whereas the feelings that come with *not* wanting are generally feelings of peacefulness and contentment, and quite pleasant.

Of course sometimes that experience of not wanting and the accompanying contentment and peace comes because we have just gotten what we want! But then what – will the contentment be temporary, turn to boredom, and then we're off to the next desire?

Or can we nurture a way of living in which contentment, peace, and happiness are more the rule than the exception, than the feeling that *only* comes at the moment of fulfilled desire? This question matters, because if our happiness and contentment are dependent only on desires being fulfilled, then our happiness and contentment may well be quite intermittent at best, will be the wisps, almost always just beyond our grasp.

Yet it doesn't have to be that way. We *can* find contentment and spiritual nourishment without chasing after insatiable desires and appetites. To begin with, maybe by just paying a little more attention to what we already have.

One recent morning I returned from my run just before the sun rose over the horizon. The eastern sky was rich with pink and golden hues; even the western sky was lit with pink. The daily miracle! Not a miracle in the sense that a sunrise somehow circumvents natural laws of physics, but a miracle in the sense that it should be this way at all. Why should a sunrise be beautiful to our eyes? What is the evolutionary benefit to such beauty? Perhaps an evolutionary biologist could tell us, I don't know. What I do know is that I am nourished, daily, by this beauty.

So... what if someone were to give me a choice between a lifetime of sunrises and a lifetime of television and movies. No brainer. I would take the sunrises in an instant – as I expect most, maybe all, of you would too – and not just because they are free. No, because they are more nourishing, way more nourishing to my soul, to my spirit, to my life – to my sense of contentment

And what does it tell us, do you think, that most of the figures that we admire as spiritual exemplars and masters didn't have much concern for material accumulation, and in fact spoke and wrote about the dangers of believing that our happiness is dependent upon material accumulation, upon chasing desires? Whether Lao Tzu, Confucius, Jesus, the Buddha, Socrates, Mohammed... or more recently Thoreau, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa... whatever else they held in common, they preached and lived the teaching that care for the soul comes first, care for one another comes first, care for creating a world of greater justice comes first, care for living according to ethical principles comes first.

Not everyone on this list was an outright ascetic or perfect (whatever that means) in their personal lives – and fortunately you don't have to be either ascetic or perfect in order to find greater spiritual well-being day by day. But they all did have a clearer sense than most of us as to what was truly important, what we actually needed, and what was less important, what were only wants. And, paraphrasing Socrates who spoke words as true today as 2500 years ago: One of our big problems is that we pay too much attention to what is trivial, and not enough to what is important.

Finally, clearly this is *not* just of personal, individual concern – because the appetite-driven life is destructive on a much wider scale as well.

Can we somehow escape the vicious cycle of cultural and corporate conditioning that “more” is the answer to dreams of a better life, when the drive for “more” is heating the planet and, arguably, contributing to what now seems to be a never-ending state of war... as we blow

off the tops of mountains in the Appalachians to mine the coal to meet our supposed *need* for more energy – a need which is actually based on our insatiable wants... our appetite for more and bigger and faster...?

Now I'm not sure how we end this cycle. It is probably a generations long task. But in addition to calling or emailing our president, senators, and members of congress (or maybe sending them knotted cords...), we could do worse than to start with ourselves, perhaps to begin with by simply asking ourselves this question as a kind of koan or mantra: What *do* we really *need* and what things that we might think we need are actually more in the line of wants.

(Parenthetically – just to complicate matters - it's not that a "want" – a desire – is necessarily a bad thing. After all, one of the things that makes us human is our reaching for goals and striving for excellence. But let's just be clear to ourselves about the distinction between the essentials and the frills and extras, however pleasant and even soul-nourishing some of them might be.)

In any case, the central question to end with is simply this: Will we be ever *driven by* insatiable desire, by whatever it is we might want in our lives, or will we come to realize that once our basic needs for food, shelter, warmth, and companionship are met, at root our happiness and peace and contentment is much less dependent upon material accumulation and the satisfaction of desires and far more dependent on the condition of our souls – over which we do in fact have some control and influence?

So may it be.