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Sunday Sermon: Voluntary Simplicity

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“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”

~ Henry David Thoreau

Thoreau penned these words when he wrote about the time, from 1845 to 1847, he spent living in a 10-foot-by-15-foot cabin he built near the shore of Walden Pond in Concord, Mass. Author Walter Harding, in his biography of Thoreau, says Thoreau's few belongings initially included three pieces of limestone on his desk, but he threw them out when he found they required daily dusting. “When a friend offered a mat for the floor,” Harding wrote, “he declined it, saying he wanted neither to spare the room for it nor to take the time to shake it out.”

More recently, Joe Dominguez, a stock analyst on Wall Street, decided he wanted to live a simpler life. In 1969, when he was 31 and had saved something like \$70,000, he left his job, moved to Seattle and started the New Road Map Foundation, a nonprofit that offers a free financial integrity program to help people stop mindlessly spending money and get themselves into a stable financial position. He also co-authored a book with Vicki Robin, “Your Money or Your Life.” This book in part encourages the reader to consider how much of their life energy they are willing to trade for money.

After he left New York, Dominguez lived on roughly \$6,000 a year. When he pulled the plug on his N.Y. City job, he had no way of knowing that, at the age of 58, cancer would end his life. But in the years before his death in 1997, he lived life doing what he found fulfilling – volunteer work.

Both Thoreau and Dominguez chose what might be called *extreme* voluntary simplicity.

Please don't get the impression these two examples of simplicity are the only options. William Power asked in the first reading, "Where is your 12x12"? He pointed out that most of us can simplify our lives right where we are right now. He managed to do so living in N.Y. City.

Author Janet Luhrs said that after living simply for a number of years, she finally understood the most important word in the quote by Thoreau. She said she at first took the quote quite literally and thought it meant if we honestly wanted to simplify our lives, we needed to go live in a cabin in the woods. So she signed up for a class on building log cabins.

"Six years later," she wrote, "I'm still living in the same house in the same city." She wrote that she looked pretty much the same on the outside, but inside a lot had changed. And she finally, really deeply understood the quote. She said the key word in the quote is not *woods*. It is *deliberately*. Living deliberately, she said, is a hallmark of a simple life.

If I could use only two words to define a life of simplicity, they would be *deliberately* and *enough*. To live simply is to live your life deliberately and to live simply is to know what is *enough*. William Powers said, "It is possible to scale back from overdevelopment to enough." But what does *enough* mean?

The fulfillment curve is often used to illustrate the concept of enough. It plots your feeling of fulfillment versus the amount of money you've spent. As our basic needs are met (food, shelter, clothing), the line on the graph moves up to the survival level and our feeling of fulfillment rises rapidly in relation to the amount of money we've spent. As we have more money to spend on comforts beyond the basics, our feeling of fulfillment continues to rise, just not as rapidly. We spend more money to move the line upward. The line representing fulfillment continues

to rise until we reach the point we can afford some luxuries. After that, the line starts moving downward. No matter how much money we spend on more stuff, our feeling of fulfillment continues to lessen. The peak of the curve is where spending and fulfillment are in balance. That is *enough*. And enough varies from person to person. My enough might seem too much or too little to you.

Our consumer society and a constant barrage of advertising messages tell us we never have enough. There is always something we need to buy to make our lives better. Simplicity tells us to ignore those messages and decide for ourselves what is enough. Those who live simply minimize their consumption and their pursuit of wealth and material goods.

The Rev. Sharon Wylie summed up voluntary simplicity this way:

“Voluntary simplicity is about turning off the automatic pilot of our lives, it's about having less, going slower, saying “no” more often to the usual things and “yes” more often to unusual things. In voluntary simplicity, we want our actions to demonstrate intention and choice, reduce wastefulness and consumption, reduce our environmental footprint favoring sustainability, cultivate non-materialistic sources of pleasure and satisfaction, and value community relationships and our interdependence.

You can listen online to audio of Rev. Wylie's 10 sermons on this topic. She delivered them to her Escondido, Calif., congregation during the September 2015 to June 2016 church year. I must admit seeing that she had spread this topic over 10 months made me wonder if I had bitten off more than I could chew by proposing to cover the same topic in one Sunday homily.

Let's just say that this morning you are getting the Cliff's Notes version of VS. If you hear anything today that intrigues you, and you want to learn more about living a simpler life, I encourage you to read any of the many books and articles available on the subject.

As the last lay leader on the summer Sunday services schedule, I have benefited from hearing those who went before me. Last week, Kent Smith talked about our Unitarian Universalist principles. They are printed on the back of today's order of service because his talk reminded how closely our Unitarian Universalist principles align with the principles of voluntary simplicity. Judging from the results of an online search for Unitarian Universalist and voluntary simplicity, I'd say the topic is near and dear to the hearts of many Unitarian Universalists.

Last month, Rev. Len spoke about being fed spiritually. Of course his sermon focused on whether or not people feel a Sunday service feeds them spiritually, but since I posed the question, "Can voluntary simplicity enrich our spiritual lives?" I listened carefully to his sermon. It reminded me that each of us experiences spirituality differently and so, even though I find the simplicity path enriches my spiritual life, I realize you may find it lacking.

Rev. Len said people often say they thought a service or a sermon was or was not spiritual and if it was, whether it was spiritual enough. He noted that spirituality is a difficult topic to discuss in a sermon because he has to use words to address an issue that is primarily about feeling or emotion.

He said people find it difficult to say exactly what is spiritual for them; they just know when something is or is not spiritual. He said, "I personally define a spiritual experience as those times when I feel part of something greater than myself."

When he said that, I realized it's that feeling of being part of something greater than myself that makes striving to live simply a spiritual experience for me. The saying that always comes to my mind is Mahatma Gandhi's "Live simply so that others may simply live." When I choose to live more simply I become part of the solution to world problems such as global warming, famine, and fuel shortages. And being part of the solution is a very spiritual experience for me.

To get back to books on the subject, author Elaine St. James, in her book, “Living the Simple Life,” tells us she and her husband decided in 1990 to start simplifying their lives. They began by getting rid of possessions that no longer added anything to their lives and were simply taking up space. After they did that, they discovered they could live in a smaller home that required less maintenance and freed up time for activities like watching the sunset, puttering in the garden or spending time with family and friends. St. James also has written “Inner Simplicity” and “Simplify Your Life.”

If you venture down the voluntary simplicity path, you may choose to do some of the following:

Spend time each day in silence, prayer or meditation. Voluntary simplicity encourages us to incorporate spiritual practices in our daily lives. Daily meditation, prayer or just periods of silence all help to increase our feelings of being connected to others and to something greater than ourselves.

You may consider the food you eat (1) learn where it comes from, how it was grown and how far it traveled to get to you. Based on that knowledge, you may make changes in your diet and your grocery shopping.

When you eat, you may sit at a table with your family instead of in front of a TV. You may say grace (there are some very nice Unitarian Universalist graces on the UUA website), and you may engage in conversation with your family.

You may think about whether you are buying too many things and whether you are surrounded by “stuff.” Rev. Wylie challenged members of her congregation to see how many days in a row they could go without buying anything. Voluntary simplicity helps us see that possessions don't increase our worth.

You may decide to change the way your family celebrates Christmas. You may ponder your relationship with gift-giving. Rev. Wylie reminded us that Christmas, like Hanukkah, is a religious holiday, and gift-giving has no religious significance. She encouraged her congregation to consider everything optional for the upcoming Christmas holiday. She said it was up to them to decide what was meaningful and joyful to them.

I'm not sure it's still being published, but a group called Alternatives for Simple Living used to publish denomination-specific pamphlets every year titled, "Whose Birthday is it, Anyway?" The pamphlet was filled with ideas for celebrating the Christmas holiday in more meaningful, less commercial ways. When I lived in Massachusetts, I went to an alternative fair at the Somerville Congregational Church one November. It, too, focused on celebrating the holiday in more meaningful, less commercial ways.

In simplifying your life you may decide to determine how much of your time is being given over to technology. You might track the time you are spending on the computer, on the telephone, or sitting in front of a TV. And you might decide to pull a few plugs or at least limit your technology time.

A simple living challenge I'm working on at the moment is slowing down and engaging more with others. In the past, I'd rush from one event to the next. A quick smile and "Hi" was all I usually had time for – or should I say *made* time for. Now I am deliberately taking the time to stop, talk to people and try to do some deep listening. I am really enjoying this.

I also may have to invest in my own singing bowl so I can use it as a daily reminder to slow down and really live my life. When you use the stick at just the right speed, the bowl begins to sing. If you stay at the right speed, its voice grows louder. But if you speed up, the bowl objects. It begins to chatter at you, telling you to slow down for the perfect sound.

Perhaps the most valuable lesson to be learned from simple living is that the most important things in our lives aren't things at all. They are the relationships we have with others.

Preparing for this service got me back on track for simplifying my life. I believe living simply enriches my spiritual life. Perhaps you will find it enriches yours.

Blessed be and amen.