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PRAYING FOR SIN

I take for my text this morning, words of advice that were given to me when I first began my ministry. The President of my congregation wanted me to have a successful career, so he warned me: He said: "Remember to pray for sin, so you will remain in business."

At the time I took his admonishment as a "tongue-in-cheek" form humor, which I am sure was how he intended it. But, years later, I have come to see that that behind his quip, there lies an ironic and iconic truth, namely that we build much of our life upon the negative: upon our view of the world as divided and degraded.

I. Life Seen as a Problem

To speak first personally . . . I realize that I have built a large amount of my identity upon self-improvement, and my striving was founded on a sense of being unworthy and deficient as I am. Just as Thomas Jefferson's protection for the right to pursue happiness would have no meaning, if we were already happy, much of my striving has been motivated by a sense of incompleteness.

Growing up in the Southern Presbyterian church which, emphasized human depravity, reinforced a feeling I got from my parents that I was not quite good enough. Through hundreds of personal growth workshops, trainings, seminars, and retreats, I have become aware that, thereby, I have enacted two messages. My overt message has always been: I want to improve, but my covert message on which my need for self-improvement has been based was: there is something wrong with me.

This early sense of unworthiness and deficiency of mine is built into the belief system of our western culture. Our religious and economic culture has been woven around the belief that life is a problem for us to fix or - at least - find the meaning of. It is not PC today to promote "salvation" as the answer, as did 18th century preachers. Instead, as children of the Enlightenment, our phrase is: we need progress.

"Progress" is an elusive state. When I am in quirkish frame of mind, I wonder if the old concept of salvation is not better. After all you could achieve salvation; you can theoretically arrive in heaven. Perhaps you can even find your Shangri La. But, you can never, ever, have enough progress!

II a. The Answer of Material Consumption

In this 21st century we try to fix ourselves up materially. When Thomas Jefferson extolled the inalienable right to pursue happiness, he improved upon John Locke's earlier exhortation of the pursuit of property, but he did not succeed in convincing us of a self-

evident distinction. We have organized our economic system around material acquisition. This stands in contrast to a country such as Bhutan, that measures itself not only according to goods produced, but also according to a personal happiness scale.

The sad result of our excessive consumption is that we eat up 1/4 of the world's resources and still don't feel we have enough. The richest nation on earth, we can't scale back our carbon production to help people in other countries live with less pollution. What deficiency we must feel!

My congregational president was more profound than perhaps he realized. Not only does a sense of sin sustain our churches, a sense of impoverishment sustains our economy. Our economy is built upon growth which is dependent upon feeling needy.

Our attempt to counter this underlying sense of unworthiness is destroying our environment. Animals are worthless unless they are meat. Land is worthless unless it is "developed." We even go so far as to divide the world in half, the developed half and the undeveloped half. Obviously, we say, the undeveloped half needs progress, whether by missionaries or by Monsanto. The cross and corporation go hand in hand.

In the early part of this century, a problem developed. Our industry became capable of turning out goods at a faster pace than we needed them. In 1929, in the midst of the depression, Herbert Hoover's 1929 Committee on Recent Economic Changes found a solution. .crate new wants. Its recommendation read: "Economically we have a boundless field before us; that there are new wants which will make way endlessly for newer wants, as fast as they are satisfied." As a result, the average married couple with children was, by 2000, working almost five hundred hours a year more than in 1979, trying to earn the purchasing power to consume all of the products required by our new demands. We are so embedded in this system that it is hard to see the fear and sense of unworthiness that fuels it.

b. The Answer of Spiritual Consumption

If it is hard to see how we fall prey to material consumption is even harder to see how we also fall prey to spiritual consumption. If only we could visit the next sacred place, achieve a longer meditation period, or realize a mystical state, feel internal peace, etc., then we would be fixed!

Recently I thumbed through the catalogue of Omega Institute for personal growth, in Rhinebeck, NY. On its cover, it featured: "how to integrate your body, mind, and spirit, "reconnect with your creative self" and "connect with others in new, healthy, and understanding ways."

Then, I glanced at the winter journal of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, where I am a student. You would think it might be different there. But there on the front cover was: "Breaking-Free with Creative Awareness."

Our striving for self-improvement can unfold very subtly. This extent of this subtlety reminds me of the joke about the rabbi who strove for humility. He prostrated himself before the Ark and exclaimed. Behold, I am no body. The cantor, who happened to be in the foyer saw him, immediately came forward, stood beside the rabbi, and pronounced. Look, Oh, Lord, I am nobody. In an adjoining ante-room the sexton was cleaning. But when he heard these exclamations, he stopped where he was, raised his arms to heaven and loudly proclaimed. Look, Oh Lord, I am nobody. When the rabbi heard this he turned around to the cantor and remarked. Look who thinks he's nobody!

I do not want to disparage commitment to personal growth. During the decade when I directed my holistic personal growth center in Morristown, I myself, designed hundreds of such workshops. And when I question addictive consumption, I am not acquiescing to the tragedy of the large number of Americans who live below the poverty line or the 47 million Americans who don't have health insurance. I am talking about the feeling of neediness (what I suspect the old time theologians would have called sinfulness), - that drives the other 250 million of us to withhold income support from them, because we don't feel that we have enough for ourselves. I am talking about why we can't consider re-apportioning our carbon footprint upon the world, even though we are earth's richest nation.

III. A perspective Not Based Upon Neediness

When I first visited Boston, during my days of theological school, I visited Arlington Street Church, the famous church in which William Ellery Channing delivered his famous sermon on Unitarian Christianity. Directly across the street, from the church, in the Boston Garden, there is a striking statue of Channing.

I remember how touched I was when I first read the words engraved there: "He breathed into theology a fresh spirit, and proclaimed anew the divinity of man."

Is there not a more satisfactory way of living in the world than with a sense of lack and deficiency? The Buddha counter-intuitively perceived that it is our need to fix everything that creates our "problem," not the other way around. This is, of course, a U turn in thinking, to consider that our need to resolve the tensions we live with creates our dissatisfaction. It is not that there are a bunch of us born dissatisfied beings who become frustrated at our ability to fix up the world. It is that our investment in trying to fix it all according to our dreams, leads us to identify ourselves as dissatisfied, deficient beings, who long for salvation, progress, self-improvement, and faster internet access.

All this wanting leads us to a condition, well denoted by the old English word: "wanton." We become wanton. We're lost in the vicious the cycle my church president called to my attention, what Buddhists call samara. Having built our identity around the necessity of sin, we find our purpose only in eliminating it.

What if we were to realize that our reality is larger than the opposites that pull us apart and divide ourselves within? What if we were to realize that we are neither sinner nor

saint, identities which need each other, but whole and complete? What if we could live from a larger perspective, the one that all of us, at one time or another, have experienced, if only for a moment. It is that gentle, loving place within us that rejoices in the wonder of this world, and weeps with compassion for every being who is isolated from it. What if we could identify this place of joy, bliss, and love as who we really are, instead of the overlay of conflicts, confusions, and catastrophes with which we cover ourselves? And as Mary Oliver wrote, relax into the soft animal of our bodies?

What if we could know, as the Buddha put it, that we are: "Luminous" "brightly shining," only colored by our attachments. (a liberal paraphrase of (AN1:49-51) Or believe as Jesus assured us, that we are ever loved: that God loves us even as he cares for the tiniest sparrow. As Christian theologian Matthew Fox put it, we are originally blessed.

Personally I like the affirmation of Swami Beyond-Ananda, who said: "We are not here to earn God's love, we are here to spend it." (from his State of the Universe Address)

What if we were to take our Universalist and Unitarian heritage really seriously? The old quip, before the merger of the Universalist Church and the American Unitarian Association in 1961 was that: the only difference between the two was that the Universalists believed God was too good to damn humans, and the Unitarians believed that humans were too good to be damned. The first purpose now of our UU Association states that we "covenant to promote and affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person." What if we were to really believe this?

Then we could be motivated by means other than a need for self-improvement. We could be motivated by a contentment and at-easiness with who we are –just as we are - that would make us want to bring to others the same satisfactoriness. We could be motivated by a sense of security that does not rely upon accumulating possessions, so that we might really believe Thoreau's suggestion that "a man is rich in proportion to the possessions he can do without."

Then we would be so sure of our worthiness that we would never need to put another down. We would be so strengthened by the security of our own beliefs, that we could live with other's differing beliefs - without the need to convert them: to UUism, Buddhism, or to democracy, or to Christianity or to capitalism. Then we might come to understand another sentiment of Thoreau, namely that: "Tolerance is proof of conviction."

Our lives do not unfold as problems to be solved, nor even questions to be answered. As mythologist, Joseph Campbell put it: "Life is not a problem to be solved, nor a question to answered, but a mystery to be lived."

I believe our nature is, in the words of the Buddha, a "luminous reality to be experienced."

If we didn't wonder what was wrong with us, and didn't define our life by a sense of what we had to do or to have, I suspect we could discover a more satisfying way of

living. We would find our place in the interconnected web, as we UU's describe it; or as Mary Oliver has said "your place in the family of things." We could rest in Nirvana as the Buddha taught, or realize our internal Promised Land, or oneness with Brahman, as Hindus declare. In Humanist terms, we would come to see ourselves as fully and completely human.

V. Be For Self improvement But Do Not Identify With Needing It

If we can free ourselves from the old tensions: the dichotomy between people and animals, humans and the earth, women and men, black and white, saved and unsaved, even the righteous and the unrighteous, we will discover that what is of ultimate worth is beyond these distinctions. We will live less in the gap between what's right and what's wrong, and act more from the oneness distinctions do not matter.

In the final analysis, the accuracy with which we define the nature of ourselves and the world, does not matter as much, as does the fact, that we become what we imagine ourselves to be. Since we want a better world, it is a matter of practical skill to view ourselves and others, less as lost sinners and more as potential saints.

If we can honor the earth – without assigning value to it only when it is "developed," we will find ourselves a home in it. We will love it and care for it. If we can grow to fully appreciate who we are – right now - we can become equally compassionate to others as they are –right now. Then there will be no more need to pursue happiness – because we will be happy.

Be for self improvement but do not build your identity on the need for it. Be for justice, but do not build your identity upon the lack of it. Be for peace but do not build your identity upon opposing war. Be a Unitarian Universalist, but don't identify with needing to find the answer.

It is a miracle of humanity and a grace of the universe, that there can be a waking up to the truth of our infinite wholeness.

Suzuki Roshi was a famous Zen teacher who taught for many years at the San Francisco Zen Center. Upon getting a new batch of students he was always surprised at their low self-esteem. In consequence they would work very hard at Zen, meditating long hours, trying to be very quiet, and expertly bowing - not realizing, of course, that the whole

message of the teaching - they were pursuing - was that they were already satisfactory and whole.

So Suzuki would frequently admonish them with these words: "You are all fine. You just need a little improvement."

And so I say to myself and to you. We are all fine. But, we could use a little improvement.