

**Channing Memorial Church
Unitarian Universalist
Ellicott City, Maryland
The Reverend Susan LaMar, Minister
May 11, 2008**

Clutter: Be Gone

Well, that's a gift that is still on my list! Simplicity. Being just where I want to be and nowhere else. To rid my house of all the piles of "stuff" that is all over the place. To rid my mind of all that activity, all that traffic . . . to be able to focus on what is really important. Man that really would be a gift, wouldn't it?

There is wonderful little story that goes like this: An Amish man stopped his farming to watch a new neighbor move in. The delivery van unloaded a deluxe refrigerator with ice-cube maker, a stereo system with a compact disc drive, a remote-control television with VCR, and a whirlpool hot tub. The following day, the Amish man and his wife brought a welcome gift of homemade muffins and jam. After cordial conversation, the Amish man concluded with ". . . and if anything should go wrong with your appliances or equipment, don't hesitate to call me. . . ." "That's very generous of you, the new arrival interrupted, "Thank you!" "No problem," the Amish man replied, "I'll just tell you how to live without them."¹

The year that I lived in Los Angeles, just before I moved here, I lived in a one room apartment. The bedroom section was here, the living room here, the study and dining room over there. Furniture placement provided all the information needed . . . no need for walls and doorways. I have to admit, it was great . . . even the middle few months, when Jack joined me, it was plenty of space. Of course. . . it was Southern California, so all we had to do was open the door, and the outdoors was a much a part of our living space as the indoors. . . . And of course, we didn't have any children living with us . . . And of course, we knew we still had all kinds of stuff back at our house . . . in Massachusetts . . . And of course, it really was only one year . . . But still, I find myself awfully nostalgic about that way of living.

Sometimes I wander around our townhouse and say things like, "you know, we don't really need this, we don't really need that . . . or that, or that . . ." Jack gets really nervous when I do that.

Join me for a few moments for an exercise. Imagine yourself standing someplace in your home where there is clutter. It could be your closet, your garage, basement, attic, playroom, maybe just a corner of the kitchen table. Just stand there staring at it. Does it make you feel calm, or does it make you feel anxious? Can you imagine yourself turning and walking away? Can you imagine yourself giving it away? (No, this is not a commercial for the church yard sale next year . . . although . . . !) When you stand there, are you feeling joy? Covetousness? Disgust? Frustration? Despair? What?

As you stand there: How engaged do you feel with life? How engaged do you feel with your family and community? How engaged do you feel with nature? Do you find yourself turning, spiritually, psychologically, emotionally, to the creative processes of life? Do you even know what's in there?

¹ Northwest Earth Institute. *Discussion Course on Voluntary Simplicity*, 1997, Page II.12.

David Fu shared with me two Chinese characters, made up of the same two parts. One part means “heart,” and one part means “to die.” When these two parts, or radicals, are brought together in one configuration, they mean “busy.” When they are brought together in another configuration, they mean “to forget.”

So as you stand there in front of your pile of physical clutter – staring at this place that is “busy with stuff,” do you even know what is in there? Or have you forgotten?

So again: Is all that clutter a life force for you . . . making your little corner of the world just a little better? Bringing more joy and hope and laughter, happiness and love into you and into the world? Or do you find yourself “dying” just a little bit?

We are just so surrounded by “stuff.” And it seems to take over our lives almost unconsciously – we seem to think we “need” things, and then our houses are full, and then we “need” things to sustain those other things, and then we need a bigger house . . . and then. . . who knows what.

I’ve been thinking about this particularly as fuel and energy costs have risen so dramatically over the last couple of years. That has happened before . . . the last time we had a huge energy crisis, “everyone” (whatever “everyone” means!) vowed to be better, more environmentally conscious. For a minute or two, people bought small, energy-efficient cars, turned down the heat and air-conditioning. Then we got *busy* again, and *forgot*. Cars got bigger, houses got bigger. And then the personal computer got invented, and more remote controlled “stuff,” and we all decided we needed it all, even if it draws more energy. Our appliances aren’t even “off” when they’re “off”! And our consciousness died.

This focus on accumulation spills over into other parts of our lives, doesn’t it? Not only do we have to have all kinds of stuff . . . shopping and buying and accumulating . . . but we have to fill up every moment of our time as well. We seem to think that we have to do all kinds of things at once . . . and so we even invented a word for it: multi-tasking. That word I suppose came out of the computer world, where a machine can do more than one thing at a time. So we think *we* have to *multi-task*. And we say it so proudly: *look at me!! Look at all I can do!! I must be a really great person!*

I often want to say, “*Yeah, but maybe you’re doing a crummy job on all of them!*” Maybe you are not trying with all your heart to do each thing well.

And besides, is *accomplishing* multiple *tasks* really what is most important? Whatever happened to quality? How about driving well, rather than talking on the phone while driving? How about actually playing with your kid at the park, rather than talking to some colleague on your cell phone?

Did you all see the comic strip *Cul de Sac* last week? The two children are playing on a swingset, the little boy talking about how his mother scrapbooks *everything* he does. All through his diatribe, the little girl is trying to get her swing going, trying to pump, to no avail. [Demonstrate] So as the little boy hits his punch line, that parents have fetishized their kids and worship them as miniature deities, the little girl cries out: “*And yet no one will push me on this stupid swing.*”

No one will connect with me as a human being. No one will recognize my humanity, play with *me*, rather than a scrap book. Look in my eyes, not in the eyes of a state-of-the-art digital photograph, taken by a camera on which they got a good buy, by researching all cameras on the internet, watching for sales, comparing notes with friends, while I play alone.

So let's do another exercise. Stand now, in front of a mental closet, or attic or garage, where there is all kinds of "stuff" on your mind. Where you "have to" do this, or "have to" do that, or "have to" do the other thing. Do you? Do you *have to*? Do you even *want to*? Are you *living in a way deeply connected to truth, beauty, goodness, justice, and love* – turning toward them – or are you dying just a little bit? Or a lot?

When, I would ask, did you consciously and intentionally give up the right to make your own decisions? And what, really, would be the consequences of making a *different* choice?

When we are filling our houses up with stuff, when we are making ourselves so busy, when we are multi-tasking, filling our lives with *stuff* to do, it is easy to forget what is really important.

Like what? What *is* really important? What if we said to our guru, as the man said to Jesus, "I live a pretty good life, follow the basic rules of ethical conduct. I don't murder, commit adultery, steal, lie, defraud, take seriously the wisdom of my elders." Most of us can probably say we do pretty good with those things . . . we may slip from time to time, but we do OK. And what if our guru said to us, sell every *thing*, give to the poor, and follow me . . . what would that look like? Who -- or what (in spiritual stories values are often personified) – who or what is the "me?"

What is being asked of us?

What is being asked of us is a turning toward – loving – that which is beyond our selves and our things, our stuff and our busy-ness. What is being asked of us is turning away from the clutter and all the *things* that fill up our lives, physically and mentally.

Get out of *your* self and *your* things. Look outward, toward the other. Look for what is lacking in the other: Look for the swings that want pushing, the hungry that want nourishment, the thirsty that need water, the sick who want comfort, the desperate who want compassion.

And at first, our faces will fall. We like our stuff! I like mine!

But when we clean out our closets, literal and metaphorical, we realize that there is plenty of room to store up treasure in heaven: the love, joy, peace, comfort, beauty, justice and goodness that exists around us, within us, and among us *if we choose to activate our wills to make it so*. Heaven isn't some place we go, later. It is the imagined world of goodness, the abstract hunger for the right. We don't "get there" by walking from point A to point B. It is not a reward for heeding rules and laws. It is the eternal life that exists in our ability to imagine and know a world of peace and compassion. Heaven is not a place where *that which* we follow is going. It is a *way* which we follow.

And religion, in its best sense, reminds us of that. It reminds us to question the culture of consumerism, of accumulation of things and activities, a culture that grabs us and won't let go. One philosopher recently said:

"Religion is by far the most widespread *source* for values that run counter to consumerism – the unending accumulation of stuff, that profoundly anti-sustainable form of life – before which all human purposes pale. If religions sometimes join in with consumerism (megachurches celebrating their wealth, spiritual leaders becoming celebrities), they also teach that community, morality, piety, and pleasures that cost nothing are the only true foundations for happiness. . . . Secular environmentalists who critique consumerism often (sadly) come off like shrill spoilsports. 'Don't', after all, is not much of a basis for a

political movement. Religious environmentalists, on the other hand, can offer satisfactions that don't play into the addictive tendencies of always wanting more. The delights of a quiet Sabbath, the peace of a long-term practice of meditation, the joys of celebrating creation in a community of people you know – these cannot be bought or sold, but surely promise more real satisfaction than another trip to the mall.”²

Religion as a source for values that run counter to consumerism. I love that. In fact, it may be a centerpiece of next year's preaching.

What about a group of people, practicing a religion that calls them to dispense with stuff, to seek and honor instead the value of walking together in the spirit of mutual love? What about a people who come together to honor the value of doing one or a few things well, carefully, caring fully for one another, *and* for those beyond their walls? What about a people who decide together to turn toward a full engagement with *life* rather than with things? What about a people who together seek the source, or sources, of values that run counter to consumerism? What about a people who choose to *actually* live – in the eternal life, walking together in the spirit of mutual love sense -- rather than to figuratively die – in the treadmill, consumerist, busy-ness sense?

What about it?

² Gottlieb, Robert. *Reflections: Journal of Yale Divinity School* (yale.edu/reflections), Spring 2007. Quoted in *Context*, Martin Marty, April 2008 Volume 40, Number 4.