



Prayer:

This prayer was written by Unitarian minister Joseph Barth sometime in the late 1950s. Rev. Barth served in the Unitarian ministry from 1938 to 1971, 12 of those years at one of our oldest and most beloved congregations, Kings Chapel in Boston:

Abiding and abounding spirit in whom is our life and all our ways, we praise thee that thou hast made us, each one, centers of consciousness, gifted with freedom, open in sympathy, lighted in conscience and sources of responsibility. O God, by thy truth and power deliver us from the vanity which leads us to suppose ourselves, each one, thine only child, in consciousness directed chiefly to our own pains and hopes, disregarding others in the use of our freedoms, in love with ourselves and loving none else, with conscience insisting that we be served as highest good and our responsibility abdicated unless we be its profiteer. Reveal thyself to us who art the ultimate situation of our lives, in whom all our judgments are returned to us as judgment made upon ourselves. So pray we, O God, not as helping to make thee, too, the servant of any private interest but seeking understanding of ourselves, in the light of an elder brother's life who prayed: "Thy will be done." Amen.

Stewardship Moment

This past week, Jewish people around the world finished the eight day cycle of Hanukkah. This festival celebrates the resilience of a people faced with extinction many times over. The story of Hanukkah goes something like this. A very very long time ago, the Greek Empire took control of Jewish lands. The Greeks were very harsh rulers and wanted to make everyone Greek. They did this in two ways. First, they made it illegal for the Jewish people to practice their faith and speak their language. Second, they made Greek culture look really glamorous and modern, hoping that many Jewish people would abandon their faith and culture by choice rather than through force. Some of their people resisted, willing to pay the price for maintaining their ancient ways. But others were not that strong. Fearing for their lives and for the safety of their families, and perhaps even intrigued by Greek culture, they began to drift away. Jewish leaders were alarmed, and one man by the name of Judah Maccabbe decided enough was enough. He gathered a band of men and went to war against the mighty Greek empire with the goal of restoring the freedom of the Jewish people to be Jewish.

We are a long way from that ancient time and from that ancient war, but our issues are not so different. How do the expectations and challenges of our time draw us towards and away from the highest values that we hold dear and believe are the essence of life itself? What laws do we follow, what boundaries do we set so that we serve not our own selfish needs but rather the wellbeing of humanity itself? One of our answers is the spiritual practice of generosity. When the central purpose of our lives and our communities is not personal fulfillment, but rather an outwardly focused service, then we are transformed, our communities are transformed, and this world is transformed. In the spirit of transformation, we will most graciously accept this morning's offering.

Children's Story – The Mitten, by Jan Brett

Reading Barry Schwartz “Can You Say No to Too Many Choices?”

On a recent trip to the market, I encountered 285 varieties and brands of cookies, 75 iced tea drinks, 40 toothpastes, 230 soups, 175 salad dressings, and 275 cereals. In an electronics store, I found 110 different TVs, 30 VCRs and 50 DVD players. We assume that we have the best of all possible worlds. Freedom requires choice, so more choice means more freedom. Right?

Consider this:

- For every 10 funds added to the array of retirement plan options, the rate of participation drops 2 percent
- As the number of optional assignments available to students increases, the likelihood that they will write on any of the topics decreases, and the quality of work produced by those who do write also falls.
- As the variety of snacks, soft drinks, and beers offered at convenience stores increases, sales volume and customer satisfaction decrease.
- As choice in medical and pharmaceutical treatment goes up, patient satisfaction goes down.

Plentiful choice increases the chances that people will regret their decisions because of all the alternatives passed up, many of which might have been better. The more alternatives, the deeper our sense of loss and the less satisfaction we will derive from our decision.

Too much choice raises people's expectations of how good the chosen option will be. There seems no excuse for anything less than perfect, and when you end up with less than perfection, the fault must be yours, and you end up feeling bad rather than good.

We should rethink our worship of choice.

A significant determinant of well-being is the web of close relationships in our lives. Yet close relations and their attendant responsibilities constrain us rather than liberate us. We can't do whatever we like. But perhaps these constraints are not a price we pay but a benefit we derive from these relations.

I once saw a cartoon that perfectly illustrated something counterintuitive about choice. Two goldfish, parent and offspring, are swimming in a tiny fishbowl. “You can be anything you want to be,” says the parent. “No limits.” We are supposed to catch the irony of the parent fish telling its young about possibilities in a world in which virtually every possibility is foreclosed. My own view is that the parent fish has it right. People say they want a world where everything is possible. But they don't understand that people want choice within limits, freedom with constraints. By providing unlimited choice, we shatter the fishbowl. And the result is not satisfaction, but anxiety; not liberation, but tyranny. We can say no to the tyranny

of choice.

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Sermon – Rethinking the Worship of Choice

Like so many of you, I'm spending a lot of time shopping, because it is the season. But truth be told, I don't like going shopping and do it as little possible. I guess I kind of shop like a guy, or what I imagine guys shop like. Make your list and try to get in and out as fast as possible so you can go back to doing the things you like to do! But, the stores set up their merchandise to make that very difficult. For instance, just last week, I went to Macy's because I needed a knit top. I'd seen a Macy's flyer and liked some of the tops I saw and decided to try it out. But I discovered that there isn't a knit top section in Macy's because everything is arranged in complete outfits by designer, so you have to go through the whole women's section to find whatever you're looking for. I know why they do that. They don't want me to buy just a top; they want me to buy a whole outfit and are betting that by making me go through the whole store, I will leave with more than I intended to buy. Well, obviously Macy's doesn't know Krista Taves! When I am in a place like Macy's, faced with a volume of options that I am forced to look at, I get more uncertain and confused the longer I stay. Everything starts looking the same and I think it's all going to look terrible on me! Quite predictably, I got so frustrated and angry that I left and went to my old standby, Sears, which is badly decorated, uninspiring, has a few shabby displays, and way less selection than Macy's. What Sears had that Macy's didn't was a Lands End section with a whole wall dedicated to knit tops, and within ten minutes I found what I was looking for and, and actually bought the same top in six different colors so I wouldn't have to think about shopping for tops for another 12 months!

Several years ago, Sheena Iyengar, a professor of business at Columbia, decided to study how people deal with making choices. She credits her fascination with choice with growing up in the Indian American community. Her Indian community told her that her family would make her choices for her. Her American life told her that she was to make those choices for herself. She experienced times when she was happier having choices made for her, and other times when she was happier making the choices for herself. She came to question one of the most common assumptions in American society, that more choices means more freedom, more happiness, and a better quality of life.

Iyengar set out a table with 24 different flavors of jam at a grocery store and then later replaced it with only 6 selections, and what happened went completely against what most of us would suspect. The table with 6 selections sold way more jam than the table with 24 selections. More choices made customers more anxious and unsure, and thus more likely to walk away. The fewer choices, the more empowering the experience, the more likely they were to choose something and go home.

She was fascinated and set up more studies. Students were given the opportunity of writing an optional paper for extra credit. Half were given six topics to choose from, half were given thirty. Those given thirty choices were less likely to submit a paper at all. Many became overwhelmed and gave up. It was easier to not choose than to choose. Those who did submit papers wrote papers of poorer quality than those with only six choices. Further investigation found that those students with 30 choices spent more time making their choice, time that could have been spent working on a paper, and once a choice had been made, they worried they'd made the wrong choice and had difficulty focusing on the task at hand.

Iyengar also studied the effect of choice in medical care. She studied parents in France and the

United States who gave birth to an infant that was not viable. In the United States, that infant is immediately put on life support and the parents are given the choice of whether to remove that life support. In France, the doctor makes the decision. Iyengar found that in France, parents were likely to go through a simple grief process. They grieved the child they had, remembered fondly their experience of the pregnancy, and were able to move through their grief and be ready to move on. American parents were much more likely to experience complicated grief. They doubted their choice. Some felt they had killed their child. They had so many regrets. And yet, when asked if they would have rather the doctor made the choice, every one said no, it was their choice to make.

These are but three of many experiments that have led Iyengar the conclusion that American society remains committed to the idea that unlimited personal choice is a core component of freedom and value, despite personal experiences of choice making their lives more complicated and difficult. Iyengar isn't against choice. No choice is powerlessness. But too much choice can become paralyzing.

This is the time of year when many of us find ourselves asking why. The expectations of the Christmas season, expectations that take us into malls teeming with strategically organized merchandise and to websites where you can have what you want at a click of the button, lead us to question more than usual the big why. What values are we holding up here with the options of endless choices? What are we teaching our children? Why are there 285 different kinds of cookies at Schnucks? And why, despite my every intention of living life more intentionally, do I feel so frazzled, and like I can't ever stop? There is a growing hunger in many Americans for a return to a simpler way of living, but that desire is countered by our assumption that more choice makes life better and freer. So we yearn for quieter slower lives, and yet, to use the words of Henry David Thoreau, "we are determined to be starved before we are hungry."

Iyengar has come to the strong conclusion that you can have too much choice. Too much choice leaves us overfull and starving at the same time. To use the metaphor in our reading, we really need a fishbowl. Jan Brett's beloved story, *The Mitten*, which remains a beloved classic after more than 20 years on the bookshelf, would never have happened if it was anchored in our worship of choice, because then each of the animals would choose their own mitten. Imagine if each animal had first turned to Consumers Report to compare the qualities of REI as opposed to Northface? Instead, the animals piled into one mitten that stretched and stretched and stretched, big enough for them all.

Let me tell you the line that I think is the most important line in the story. It comes along just after the bear has wiggled his way into the mitten. It reads, "Baba's good knitting held fast." Iyengar is challenging us to rethink our assumption that choice is the primary fabric that holds us together, the assumption that millions of individuals each making individual choices about what they want for themselves creates strength and freedom and true happiness. She asks us to consider another way – the way of the mitten.

Did you know that many Unitarian Universalists are starting to take note of Iyengar's work because it is helping us understand the challenges we are experiencing in our faith tradition? Iyengar also studied levels of happiness in different religious traditions and found that, in the United States, people in more conservative faith traditions, with fewer choices about what they could believe, were the most happy, and the most unhappy people were ... are you ready for this? Unitarian Universalists. It seemed like the more choice you had in your beliefs, the more unhappy and uncertain you would be. I wonder if the difference between 6 and 24 jars of jam relates to religion as well? Whereas conservative churches asked for sacrifice and loyalty, progressive churches often seem more consumerist in nature, offering a plethora of choices based on personal desire and

preference, kind of like Macy's.

Now I would never suggest that we go and become conservative Christian. Many of our values are so different. We are here for a good reason. But I think we have something to learn from what Iyengar has discovered.

We are a faith tradition that, especially in the last 50 years, has become about the worship of choice. Sixty years ago, after World War II, the core of our faith was about duty and loyalty to our values of freedom and conscience. But since that time, as American society became more consumerist and individualist, our faith practice has shifted to the worship of diversity, our personal diversity, our personal faith journeys.

Our theologians have been challenging us to see that we have turned from worshipping our values, to worshipping ourselves. We have turned from a true worship of freedom and conscience to a consumerist worship of our personal freedom and our personal conscience. The prayer that I read for today's service was one of those alarm bells. Listen again, to the words of Rev. Joseph Barth:

“Deliver us from the vanity which leads us to suppose ourselves, each one, thine only child, in consciousness directed chiefly to our own pains and hopes, disregarding others in the use of our freedoms, in love with ourselves and loving none else, with conscience insisting that we be served as highest good and our responsibility abdicated unless we be its profiteer.”

In the 1950s, some UUs began to fear that we were making ourselves into Gods. Little could they have understood, as we do now, that disguising unlimited choice as power has actually become a form of oppression. Worshipping ourselves has left us overwhelmed and anxious, hidden from the true core of our faith tradition, which is to live the promise of unconditional love and unending grace.

We have paid a price for this. Did you know that 85% of our youth leave Unitarian Universalism when they graduate high school? They don't know what there is to hold onto. To use the words of John Robinson, the former minister of Eliot Chapel in Kirkwood Missouri, we became a religion of the buffet dinner, pretty broad but not very deep, and there's some reasons for that that are actually pretty striking.

Many Unitarian Universalists come from religious backgrounds that hurt them. They felt forced into certain belief patterns, and they didn't want their kids to have that experience. So for a whole generation, many UU parents made the choice not to tell their children what they believed because they didn't want to pressure their kids. I heard a woman once say, “I don't want to bias them one way or another. I want them to make up their own minds.” Now I want to affirm the good intentions here. Parents were making a choice to protect their children from a pain they experienced. They had the best of intentions. But we've learned that the kids didn't experience it that way. They received the message that what you believe is not important enough to share, that faith is just another optional paper and you've got 30 choices. Those kids, given no direction except that they could choose anything they wanted to, often chose nothing, or grew up and chose religions with more structure and definition.

In response, many Ministers and DREs are encouraging parents to take the risk and to tell their children, over and over, what they believe. Show them in your actions and your words that your faith is important to you and is worth committing to, because your children respect and trust you more than anyone else, regardless of what they may say. And if you need help, expect us to support

you. Ask for classes on UU parenting. Even if you've been here for years, come to my introduction to Unitarian Universalism classes, especially the theology class, because it helps put into words the things you probably know but aren't sure how to say. In fact, that is why there are copies of my handout for the theology class at the back of the sanctuary, so that you have another tool to explain your beliefs to your children. They want and need to know what you value. They need to know that living our faith asks us to live in harmony with all of life. This isn't an option for us. It's not one item on a long menu. It is our calling.

Let me tell you what else we're seeing. Of the 12% of UU kids who stay UU as adults, most of whom are now in Generation X and Y, who are now parents bringing their kids to religious education, many are challenging Unitarian Universalism to create more form and structure. They've come from so little definition and they are yearning for clarity and direction, for themselves and their children. These Unitarian Universalist parents are more likely to require their kids to come to church, and are more likely to stand firm when their kids fight back, and their kids do push back in all kinds of ways, because they're kids! How many of you have heard this one from your kids? "Unitarian Universalism says we can choose whatever we want, so why can't I choose not to go to church?" If we allow that argument to convince us, we are letting them down. We are living the same values as a table with 24 selections of jam.

There's a wonderful story in the Jewish tradition. A Rabbi asks his congregation, "How many of you expect your children to grow up Jewish?" Everyone raises their hands. Then he asks them, "How many of you expect your children to grow up to be professional soccer players?" Not one raises their hands. "Then why," he asks them, "are sports mandatory and synagogue optional?"

Jewish people around the world have just finished celebrating the 8 day cycle of Hanukkah. The story of Hanukkah is a story about freedom. It is a story about resistance to oppression. It is also a story about mending a fabric that has been torn. The Greek Empire tried to unravel the mitten that had held the Jewish people together for thousands of years. The Maccabean resistance was about trying to knit anew the mitten, to restore the Jewish nation through the threads that bound it together. When the Maccabean army regained control of the temple, which had been desecrated by the Greeks, they saw their opportunity to do just that, and sought to light the temple flame. They found only one day's supply of oil. Without a Home Depot in sight, they lit the flame and began to work on making more oil. It would take 8 days. Miraculously, the flame burned for those eight days and that is why Hanukkah is eight days long.

Our worship of choice, or the idea that more is always better, is our own Greek Empire unraveling the mitten, and I firmly believe that our central calling as people of faith, as Unitarian Universalists, is to be very intentional in knitting a mitten that will hold fast, that can stretch and stretch and hold us as one people, not defined by what we own and what we have or what we could have if we wanted it, but rather defined by how we love each other and how we manifest that love in all we do and say.

May it be so.

Sermon Sources

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http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/18/books/review/Postrel-t.html?_r=1&pagewanted=2

