



Reading

“The Secret Hope of Emptiness” by Gerald May

Emptiness, yearning, incompleteness: these unpleasant words hold a hope for incomprehensible beauty. It is precisely in these seemingly abhorrent qualities of ourselves – qualities that we spend most of our time trying to fix or deny – that the very thing we most long for can be found: hope for the human spirit, freedom for love.

There is a secret known by those who have had the courage to face their own emptiness. The secret of being in love, of falling in love with life as it is meant to be, is to befriend our yearning instead of avoiding it, to live into our longing rather than trying to resolve it, to enter the spaciousness of our emptiness instead of trying to fill it up.

It has taken me a long time to learn this secret, and I continue to forget it many times each day. Befriending emptiness is mostly a tender thing, requiring such immediacy and vulnerability that my heart is rendered very delicate. I cannot maintain it, and it is only through the empowerment of grace that it comes to me at all. Yet nowhere else am I more truly myself....

Some recovering addicts have discovered the secret as they realize that the awesome, terrifying space left by their relinquished addiction is like that of an empty vessel, devoid of substance yet full of possibility... Some artists have discovered the secret as they endure ...[the battlefield of their inner space.]

Oppression by other human beings, like the oppression of our own addictions can teach the secret. But we can learn it only if we have the courage to face our emptiness with undefended clarity.

... If we really want to be loving, if we truly wish to respond to the call of justice and freedom, we must first have the courage to look into our own emptiness. We must somehow even come to love it.

Spaciousness is always a beginning, a possibility, a potential, a capacity for birth. Space exists not in order to be filled but to create. ... To the extent that we can bear the truth of the way things are, we find the ever-beginning presence of love. Take the time, then, to make the space. Seek it wherever you can find it, do it however you can.... Seek the truth, not what is comfortable. Seek the real, not the easy.

Sermon

I have a question for the women in the congregation. Is it only me, or do popular women’s magazines leave you feeling anxious, uneasy, and inadequate? Several years ago I stopped reading popular women’s magazines because they never made me feel all that good about myself. Despite my intellectual knowledge that being a good woman is more than good makeup, great hair, the latest fashion, and excellent organizational skills, when I opened up a magazine, all that cultural conditioning rose right back up inside me, and despite knowing better, it got to me. I would feel those old stirrings of anxiety, of not



being good enough, or beautiful enough or competent enough, and I would begin yearning for something I didn't have. When that happened, the magazine had been successful in doing what it was supposed to do - creating a sense of dissatisfaction in me with my life in the hopes that I would attempt to ease my feelings of inadequacy by buying something.

Now I have a question for the men in the congregation. You know those commercials, the ones with heavy driving music, a sleek black car whizzing through a twisting mountain road, driven by a sunglasses wearing chiseled looking guy whose strong hands firmly hold the steering wheel while he buries the speedometer needle? Well, what happens when you see one of those commercials, and then you look out the window at your mini-van? This type of commercial has pricked at the insecurities that every man has about what it takes to be a real man, right? Tough, strong, fast, and confident. And perhaps you will be drawn to fill that insecurity with something you can acquire, hoping that you will get that sense of excitement that seems to be missing from your life.

Advertising is very good at touching on our vulnerable places. It draws out universal needs like security, love, community, understanding, freedom, even survival itself, and pointing us in a particular direction to fill them. This is why advertising never leaves us satisfied. Usually, it leaves you restless and in a place of wanting. It's supposed to do that. And this makes advertising a profoundly spiritual issue.

Whenever our deepest needs are engaged it becomes a spiritual issue for we are dealing with the deepest places of meaning and purpose and identity. So often we think of the spiritual as an other-worldly thing, but spirituality is most real when it is grounded in this earth, in our everyday lives. How can you fill the ordinariness of life with the extraordinariness of meaning? That is spirituality. How can you follow the path of your needs in a way that brings you into the fullness of life? That is spirituality.

As we move closer to Christmas, I find myself thinking a lot about how we fill our needs. I've been wondering about that dissatisfied restlessness that each of us has experienced, and what we do about that. I don't think any of us would argue that our society highly values the ability to acquire things. We connect that ability to our self worth and our self esteem. I do think many of us are questioning how healthy this is, and if we've really lost something important.

What has happened to Christmas is an example of what has happened to our lives in general. Christmas is about the celebration of life, about the gift of hope, about generosity and love. And yet Christmas has been transformed into a frenzy of consumerism. For many people, it is one of the most stressful times of the year. Suicides go up. Depression goes up. Anxiety goes up. Heart attacks and strokes go up. Clearly in the loss of Christmas is a larger metaphor for the loss of something very precious in our lives.

This morning, I want to explore how we take back our power and how we reclaim true joy. I want to explore how we withdraw from the addiction of consumption and walk back into freedom. We need to explore this, not just for the sake of our own souls, but for the sake of our planet. We know deep down that the way we live is not sustainable. We know that the resources needed to sustain our levels of consumption are draining this planet, oppressing the poor, frustrating any hopes for peace, and destroying the environment. What we do about our needs has repercussions all the way around this tremendously interconnected world.



Now I could spend the rest of our time this morning trying to prove how damaging consumerism is to our world, but I’m going to assume that’s a given. I don’t think I need to convince anyone of this. I also don’t think we would use our time well were I to spend it giving you strategies for how to simplify your lives. There is plenty of information out there about voluntary simplicity.

I would rather focus on the deeper issue of need. If we’re going to undo, even in some small way, our dependence on acquiring things, we have to undo the spiritual assumptions we have about what it means to be happy and fulfilled. No how-to manual is going to make a bit of difference if we don’t change our hearts and transform our spirits first.

It’s all about how we understand need. It’s all about what to do when we get feelings like anxiety, unease, and inadequacy. The nature of our consumerist society means that our needs are going to get pushed and pulled and manipulated constantly. To withdraw from the assumptions of a consumerist society means going against the grain, and to do that takes strength. It takes focus and moral courage. If we’re going to commit to the courageous path of right living, we have to walk through the triggers so that we can make different choices about how to meet our needs, choices that bring us from a place of disharmony back into harmony with ourselves and our world.

According to Dr. Marshall Rosenberg, who developed a process called Non-violent Communication, we have nine primary universal needs: the need for physical survival, the need for safety and security, the need to be understood, the need for honesty, the need to give and receive love, the need to be in community, the need for recreation, the need for freedom and the need for a sense of meaning. These are basic legitimate human needs and they cross all boundaries of race, gender, age, culture, class, orientation, religion and nationalism. Everything we do in life, every decision we make, is a strategy that we use to meet one or more of these nine basic needs. Our addiction to consumption is one of those strategies.

Any recovering addict will tell you that to overcome an addiction, you have to recognize the basic needs that lie behind it. Part of the key to recovery is to repattern what you do when you experience need. Addiction is so often about muting the pain that comes with unmet need. Recovering from that addiction means allowing feelings of pain to resurface so that you can make new decisions about how you’re going to address the unmet need behind the pain. And usually, that has little to do with material things and everything to do with our relationships.

By way of an example, let’s look at one need, the need for community, often experienced as the need for acceptance. Let’s see how this need for acceptance works in the quintessential American dream – achieving middle class status. There are many unspoken assumptions about how you should live your life if you want to call yourself middle class, and your relative status and success will be judged by you and others according to a range of factors such as - the square footage of your home, the number and kind of vehicles you drive, the colour of your trim, your landscaping, your outdoor Christmas decorations, where you buy your clothing, where you buy your children’s clothing, the vacations you take, where your children go to college, the kind of entertainment you engage in, your appliances, the furnishings in your home, and more. These are some of the typical measures for middle class life, the markers of what is considered to be a successful happy life. Everyone wants to be middle class, right? And so we spend a lot of time and energy pursuing these markers, and they demand a high level of consumption, not just to



get into the middle class, but to stay in the middle class. This is clearly about the specific need for acceptance which is about the deeper need of community.

The challenge is, that so much of what we see as the normal expectations for that coveted middle class lifestyle are the very things that are throwing our entire planet into disarray. The whole range of consumer goods, the large homes, the automobile-based transportation systems – all of this is taxing our world towards a breaking point. And yet, we identify so strongly with this lifestyle and we have a whole political and economic and cultural system that supports it. And this is why I say that simply providing a how-to for voluntary simplicity is not even to begin the task that lays before us.

We’re not talking about a simple personal addiction, this is the addiction of an entire society, an entire way of life. Undoing these powerful assumptions of what gives our lives meaning and purpose, is deep soul work. We are talking about undoing the most basic understandings that are the foundation for modern American life itself.

This is one of the reasons why we have been so unsuccessful at building lives of voluntary simplicity even though we have known for at least 25 years that our current lifestyles are not sustainable. We have known for almost three decades, since the OPEC oil crisis of the 1970s, that big changes are needed if we intend to live in sustainable harmony with the earth. But, the cultural strength of that middle class ideal has been too powerful to overcome. We associate the middle class lifestyle with the meeting of our deepest universal needs.

The problem is that it doesn’t meet those needs and so we are left continuously hungry. The problem is that our level of affluence holds billions of others back from even having a decent standard of living. The problem is that the demands of a middle class lifestyle leave more and more Americans isolated from themselves, from each other, and from the world at large. There is a direct relationship between our spiritual malaise and our social, economic and environmental imbalance. It is all connected.

And so, ministers and economists and sociologists and politicians and writers and talk show hosts and environmentalists and journalists and social activists keep sending out the message that we have to change, hoping that it will make some difference. Hoping that we will be able to take back our power and reclaim the joy that we so desperately want. There is deep within the human psyche the need for balance, for harmony. We all have it. I don’t think you would be here unless you did.

That need for balance and harmony is drawing more and more people into the practice of voluntary simplicity. We know that the change cannot only happen through individual action. It must also be systemic, but the place where we have most control is in our own individual lives. We have to start somewhere. It starts in the heart. It starts at home. It starts with our children. We do it one by one, one heart at a time. One family at a time. One purchase at a time. One carpool at a time. We start closing the magazines of anxiety, and insecurity and inadequacy, undoing the assumptions of what gives us worth and meaning so that we can truly feel, truly love, truly give, and truly rejoice.

In the words of Unitarian Universalist minister Kendyl Gibbons:



“Living Simply”
Rev. Krista Taves
December 16, 2007

Emerson UU Chapel, Ellisville MO

“We are here because we are people of faith. We who would save the world must first save ourselves. We who would restore the planet must learn to restore the broken structures of the institutions closest to hand; to illuminate the lives of our companions and friends.

Let us open ourselves to that creative mystery which is at work in our striving, whose servants we are and seek to be.”

Amen and blessed be.