

Some Sins for a Life Worth Living

A sermon delivered to the
Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship, Thunder Bay, Ontario
Sunday, December 30, 2012

Readings:

“The Great Affair” by Diane Ackerman in *A Natural History of the Senses*

The great affair, the love affair with life, is to live as variously as possible, to groom one’s curiosity like a high-spirited thoroughbred, climb aboard, and gallop over the thick, sunstruck hills every day... It began as mystery, and it will end in mystery, but what a savage and beautiful country lies in between.

“Your Enjoyment of the World” by Thomas Traherne [1636-1674; English poet & religious writer] in *Enjoying the World*

Your enjoyment of the world is never right, till every Morning you wake in Heaven; see yourself in your Father’s Palace; and look upon the Skies, the Earth and the Air as Celestial Joys: having such a Reverend Esteem of all, as if you were among the Angels.

Sermon: “Some Sins for a Life Worth Living” by The Rev. Suzanne Wasilczuk

This is the time of year we may be making resolutions. Trying to keep them. Already breaking them.

We might be thinking of cultivating the virtues. Like wisdom – we’ll read a really good book, every week. Virtues like compassion – we’ll regularly volunteer at a local agency. Virtues like temperance – we’ll stop being angry, we’ll stop using angry words, we’ll stop fuming over not much. We’ll start practicing prudence – go on a diet, exercise every day

All good stuff.

But living this virtuous life may be more than a little daunting.

This life of virtue demands that we: “Be all that we can be!”

Keep learning and learning, so we can ultimately arrive at wisdom.

Keep doing and doing, so we can ultimately arrive at excellence.

Embrace all these virtues and – we think – we will realize the Good Life and personal perfection.

I am reminded of an acquaintance who would often quote Horace Mann, founder of Antioch College:

“Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity.”

I never knew we ex-Catholics were quite so laissez faire about the work ethic, about striving for accomplishment and success, until I heard that very Puritan statement.

A very noble statement, but very, very daunting.

So today I am going to talk about the flip side, about doing nothing, and enjoying it.

I was aided in my thoughts by a little book entitled *Seven Sins for a Life Worth Living*, by Roger Housden.

What is this “sin” that Housden talks about?

Sin, in the Catholic sense is, according to Thomas Aquinas is “nothing else than a morally bad act (St. Thomas, "De malo", 7:3), an act not in accord with reason informed by the Divine law.

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14004b.htm>; accessed 5 May 2011.

Sin, for the Puritans, seemed to be whatever gave delight or excitement or bodily gratification to the participants.

One quote about Puritans, comes from Thomas Macauley, an early 19th century British poet and historian who writes:

“The Puritan hated bear-baiting not because it gave pain to the bear, but because it gave pleasure to the spectators”

And there is the quote from H. L. Mencken, the early 20th century American journalist and satirist who defines Puritanism as “The haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.”

<http://www.great-quotes.com/quotes/category/Puritans>; accessed 4 May 2011.

So, Catholics and Puritans agree somewhat on the nature of sin. The traditional litmus test for a sin according to the Catholic Church is: “Did you take pleasure in it?”

Housden couches his “sins” in the language of happiness and of pleasure.

The Pleasure of Not Knowing

I know a man who reads voraciously. He always seems up on the latest theory. And he definitely keeps up with the latest news – local, national and international. John is quite a bright guy, a veritable receptacle for, a fountain of, information.

His wife once shared a story with me. Back in 1971 Nikita Khrushchev died. Somehow John had not heard the news, and was so mortified by his ignorance that, to this day, he is relentless – religious – in his efforts to keep up with all the very latest.

I know a number of folks like John. Sometimes they specialize in a particular body of knowledge: railroading, or British history, or genetics. There is always more to learn, and more to discover. And they want to know it all.

Housden writes of the pleasure – the sin – of “not knowing” – of recognizing that, though our body of knowledge is huge, and ever-expanding, we – whether individually or communally – we can never know everything.

Housden writes:

“The pleasure of not fully knowing where you are going or why doesn’t mean you merely drift through life like a leaf in the wind. The fact that we can never see the whole picture doesn’t mean we don’t bother to form any personal intention –

[The fact that we can never see the whole picture] acknowledges that our intention is best served by an open, attentive mind, one that is receptive and cooperative with the larger forces of life around it, whatever [those larger forces] may be.

Then life can be what it is, a mystery, and not just an agenda; a mystery that is constantly revealing itself, and of which we are a part, instead of an agenda we have to laboriously work through.

Life as revelation is a pleasure indeed.” [85]

There is too much to know. We can never know everything. And, that’s okay. In fact, we can take not mortification, not shame from that fact of not knowing. We can take pleasure in not knowing.

Not knowing is a practice in humility.

Not knowing provides a platform for a holy curiosity; an opening for not only new information, but an opening also for revelation and wisdom.

Diane Ackerman tells us: “The great affair, the love affair with life, is to live as variously as possible, to groom one’s curiosity like a high-spirited thoroughbred, climb aboard, and gallop over the thick, sunstruck hills every day... It began as mystery, and it will end in mystery, but what a savage and beautiful country lies in between.”

Not knowing invites us to continue to wonder, to question, to listen.

Our first sin: the pleasure of not knowing.

The Pleasure of Not Being Perfect

Very few of us are supermodels. Or astrophysicists. Or brain surgeons. Or enlightened gurus or bodhisattvas or wise women.

Few of us are perfect in body, mind or spirit.

None of us was the perfect child. None of us is, or was, the perfect parent.

But, we humans can and do imagine a perfect self, a self that wins the game, paints the masterpiece, discovers the cure, wins that victory for humanity.

The desire for self-improvement will not go away (as witnessed by the lines and lines of books in the self-help section of any bookstore or library). The desire to be perfect, to match some sort of ideal self, persists.

Roger Housdon, on the pleasure of not being perfect, writes:

“Whatever technical wizardry we have at our disposal, however sophisticated our spiritual practices, we shall never get to the bottom of who we are, never uncover all our fault lines and layers of subtle unrest. These are puzzles that will remain as ungraspable and nebulous as ever... That is their beauty, and our beauty, too: we will always be just beyond our own grasp. There’s great pleasure in accepting that we are fine just as we are, cracks and all.” [108]

We are not perfect. We never will be perfect.

We are wonderful, ordinary, imperfect – the very definition of being human.

As Leonard Cohen writes:

The birds they sang
at the break of day
Start again
I heard them say
Don't dwell on what
has passed away
or what is yet to be.

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.

Anthem, Leonard Cohen

The good news is: we are good enough.

The good news is our second sin: the pleasure of not being perfect.

The Pleasure of Doing Nothing Useful

A poem by Meredith Holmes. *In Praise of My Bed*:

At last I can be with you!
The grinding hours
since I left your side!
The labor of being fully human,
working my opposable thumb,
talking, and walking upright.

Now I have unclasped
unzipped, stepped out of.

Husked, soft, a be-er only,
I do nothing, but point
my bare feet into your
clean smoothness
feel your quiet strength
the whole length of my body.
I close my eyes, hear myself
moan, so grateful to be held this way.

Ah, some days there is nothing quite like the clean smoothness of our beds. Or, the pleasure of a midday siesta. Bliss!

The Puritans may warn us that idle hands are the devil's workshop. But Roger Housden recommends taking regular and frequent breaks from our busy lives – lingering in a café with a latte or a hot tea; taking a leisurely stroll; sitting and watching the birds in our back yard.

Minister and therapist Wayne Muller in his book *Legacy of the Heart* writes about busy-ness and doing nothing this way:

Brother David Steindl-Rast reminds us that the Chinese word for “busy” is composed of two characters: “heart” and “killing.” When we make ourselves so busy that we are always rushing around trying to get this or that “done,” or “over with,” we kill something vital in ourselves, and we smother the quiet wisdom of our heart.

When we invest our work with judgment and impatience, always striving for speed and efficiency, we lose the capacity to appreciate the million quiet moments that may bring us peace, beauty, or joy.

As we seek salvation through our frantic productivity and accomplishments, we squander the teachings that may be present in this very moment, in the richness of this particular breath.

Muller concludes:

In the Book of Ecclesiastes, there is a proverb: “Better one hand full of quiet than two hands full of striving after wind.” Unpracticed in the art of quiet, we hope to find our safety, our belonging, and our healing by increasing our levels of accomplishment. But our frantic busyness actually makes us deaf to what is healing and sacred, both in ourselves and in one another.

Not only is there pleasure, there is healing and wholeness in doing nothing, in the art of quiet.

And in the New Testament, in the book of Luke, chapter 12 (verse 27) Jesus tells his followers:

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; but I tell you, not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these.

The camas lily is a periwinkle blue flower that grows in profusion in moist meadows in Montana and British Columbia.

Poet and Unitarian Universalist minister Lynn Unger writes:



CAMAS LILIES

*Consider the lilies of the field,
the blue banks of camas opening
into acres of sky along the road.
Would the longing to lie down
and be washed by that beauty
abate if you knew their usefulness,
how the natives ground their bulbs
for flour, how the settlers' hogs*

uprooted them, grunting in gleeful
oblivion as the flowers fell?

And you – what of your rushed
and useful life? Imagine setting it all down –
papers, plans, appointments, everything –
leaving only a note: “Gone
to the fields to be lovely. Be back
when I’m through with blooming.”

Even now, unneeded and uneaten,
the camas lilies gaze out above the grass
from their tender blue eyes.

Even in sleep your life will shine.

Make no mistake. Of course
your work will always matter.

*Yet Solomon in all his glory
was not arrayed like one of these.*

Lynn Unger Blessing the Bread

To echo Thomas Traherne: Our enjoyment of the world is never right, till every
Morning we wake in Heaven; see ourselves in our Father’s Palace; and look upon the Skies,
the Earth and the Air as Celestial Joys: having such a Reverend Esteem of all, as if we were
among the Angels.

Our third sin: the pleasure of doing nothing useful.

So, happy wintering.

Let us be gentle with each other, and gentle with ourselves. We only ever do the best
we can.

Let us linger over cocoa, admire our cracks, empty our minds, stretch out in our
beds.

Let us go to the fields to be lovely. And come back when we’re through with
blooming. Amen.