

“All We Need is Here: A Sermon on Stuff and Our Relationship to It,”
a sermon preached by the Rev. Nathan Detering
at the North Parish of North Andover - April 22, 2007

First Reading:

For our first reading today, I brought with me words from a classic source – – Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* – most of which was written during the two years Thoreau spent in a small cabin on Walden Pond in Concord. Some of these words are so familiar to us, and his story so well-known, that both lose their power to speak to us. This morning I wanted to try to hear again the famous words that preach of a simpler life from Thoreau, a Unitarian and, in our honor of Earth Day today, one of America’s first environmentalists. To do this, I looked through the opening pages and found this selection of lines, these snapshots from Walden:

On the fifth page, this ‘cut-to-the-chase’ declaration: *“The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the desperate country, and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats. A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind. There is no play in them, for this comes after work. But it is a characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things.”*

Later, this line: *“Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of humankind.”*

And then this line, which will have all the makeover shows screaming in protest: *“A man (or woman) who has at length found something to do will not need to get a new suit to do it in; for them the old will do. Only they who go to soirees and legislative halls must have new coats, coats to change as often as the man changes in them. But if my hat and trousers, jacket and shoes, are fit to worship God in, they will do, will they not? Whoever saw his old clothes – his old coat actually worn out, resolved to its primitive elements? And really, [what] all people really want, [is] not something to do with, [something to wear], but something to do, or rather something to be.*

And this line: *“Most men appear never to have considered what a house is, and are actually needlessly poor all their lives because they think that they must have such a one as their neighbors have.”*

And for the thrifty among us, or those who wish they were, this accounting by Thoreau of how much money he spent in a year to support himself:

Buy materials and build a house - \$28.12 (!)

Farm one year – 14.72

Food for eight months – 8.74

Clothing, etc., eight months – 8.40

Oil, etc., eight months – 2.00

In all – 61.99”

And finally, these famous lines: *“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”*

Second Reading

I bet we never thought we would hear the immortal words of the comedian George Carlin here at church on a Sunday morning. Well, it's always good to break expectations. And these words from Carlin are wonderful ones to break expectations with. I need to credit my colleague Roger Paine for sending them along to me a couple years ago – I've been wanting to use them ever since. They come from his “collected works,” if it deserves that title, His book “Braindroppings.” Here it is (and don't worry, I have omitted the ‘colorful, spicy’ language Carlin is known for):

“Let's talk about stuff. Stuff is important. You gotta take care of your stuff. You gotta have a nice place for your stuff. That's what life is all about, tryin' to find a place for your stuff! That's all your house is: a place to keep your stuff. A house is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it. If you didn't have so much stuff, you wouldn't need a house. You could just walk around all the time.

So when you get right down to it, your house is nothing more than a place to keep stuff...while you out and get (wait for it)...more stuff. ‘Cause that's what this country is all about. Trying to get more stuff. Stuff you don't want, stuff you don't need, stuff that's poorly made, stuff that's overpriced. Even stuff you can't afford! Gotta keep on getting' more stuff. Otherwise someone else might wind up with more stuff. Can't let that happen.

So you gotta keep getting' more and more stuff, and puttin' it in different places. In the closets, in the attic, in the basement, in the garage. And there might even be some stuff you left at your parent's house: baseball cards, comic books, photographs, souvenirs. Actually, your parents threw stuff out long ago. So now you got a houseful of stuff. And, even though

you might like your house, you gotta move. Gotta get a bigger house. Why? Too much stuff! And that means you gotta move all your stuff. Or maybe, put some of your stuff in storage. Imagine that. There's a whole Industry based on keepin' an eye on other people's stuff. You could clean out the closet, the attic, the basement, the garage, the storage locker, and all the other places you keep your stuff, and you get things down to manageable proportions. Have a yard sale. You can even give your stuff away. Get down to just the right amount of stuff to lead a simple, [Thoreau-like,] uncomplicated life. Of course, that's when the phone rings – it's your lawyer. Seems your aunt has died...and she left you all her stuff...

Sermon:

I was thinking when I sat down to write these words that we barely need a sermon this morning, what with a beautiful day waiting for us outside, and a couple great readings that pretty much frame the message I have all by themselves, and the wonderful music.

I was thinking perhaps we could all just squeeze up against the windows. We could listen to something meditative on the piano and we could just spend the next 15 minutes silently together watching the earth bloom as our own personal ode to Earth Day.

I'm always telling my own congregation that we don't give ourselves enough time for quiet reflection, but then I remembered I had some things to tell you – and in particular, a confession to make – so I went ahead and wrote this sermon anyway. But feel free, on your own, to do as I suggested and let yourself gaze out the windows and connect, while I'm speaking, with that soul part of you that perhaps has been neglected all week.

This is a sermon about stuff. And first let me start off with full disclosure (not the confession yet, which comes later): like I do with all my other sermons, in preparation for these words I spent time in the library stacks researching the topic, trying to find nuggets of wisdom and advice for us from all the experts. The books I found all had telling, wise, and clever titles – Books like John De Graaf's 2001 release, based on the PBS series, Called "*Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic*" which, with a clever play on words, treats consumerism like a disease and has chapter headings like "Shopping Fever," "A Rash of Bankruptcies," "The Stress of Excess," and "An Ache for Meaning." A terrific book from my cursory reading; I recommend it.

And also, books like Harvard professor Juliet Schor's "*The Overspent American: Upscaling, Downshifting and the New Consumer*" published in 1998 that has on its cover a mocked-up version of the famous painting "American Gothic," (can we all picture that painting

in our mind's eye?) in which the staid, simply dressed husband and wife farmer of that painting are shown in this version on the book cover talking on cell phones and drinking Starbucks coffee. A giant satellite dish can be seen on the roof of their farm house behind them, along with a Cadillac SUV in the driveway, and instead of the pitchfork the man holds in the original painting, in this version he's got a titanium golf putter. We can't tell what his wife is thinking about all this because her eyes are hidden behind oh-so-fashionable Oakley wrap-around sunglasses, ones that I myself remembering coveting because they were the ones that my heroes, all the Tour De France riders, were wearing at the Tour that year, in 1998, And now, 9 years later, look so passé'. Anyway, you get the idea – the book's message is that we Americans have become consumed with consumerism, and that keeping up with Jones' carries with it the potential for spiritual, as well as economic, bankruptcy. Another worthy, time well-spent read; I recommend this book as well.

But as I searched for my words for this sermon - my message, I discovered my heart just wasn't into the exercise of weaving these books into a message about how our stuff is bad for us. I think we've all heard that sermon before, thank you very much, and though I invited you to gaze out the windows I *don't* want to drive you there out of boredom or feelings of "*oh, I've heard this before.*" And as I began to think about this theme of stuff - how much we have of it, how much we enjoy it (to foreshadow a little my confession), how we pursue it (another foreshadow to my confession), and how, in the end, it touches us and affects us, in ways both good and bad, I realized that I needed to look no further than my own life. And because I think some of the best sermons, mine anyway, are those that connect between the preacher's life and your life, I wanted to share this morning some of the lessons I have learned and discovered about stuff, about getting and spending, and about what we need and what we don't need. They are, I suspect, lessons that touch us all, which is why I share them.

First, the facts: at the end of February and the beginning of March, my wife Karen and I sold our very nice, plenty big-enough, newish house in the town of Medway and moved with our 3-year-old daughter and 6-year-old son to a work-in-progress, smaller, 1850's (i.e. older than dirt), Charming Antique (i.e. charm means floors that slant) in the town of Holliston. While we like old houses and loved the romance of bringing one back to life, the move was driven solely for lifestyle rather than materialistic reasons. Our old home in Medway was on a busy road with no sidewalks and no neighbors and our new home is on a quiet street with

sidewalks and kids everywhere. Tired of getting into the car for every errand, tired of the world whirring past us behind a windshield rather than seen at a slower, walking pace, tired of having to schedule and drive to play dates for our children rather than having them know the freedom of finding friends outside the door, and tired, personally, of always talking about the importance of community from my pulpit in Sherborn, but never really having one to live in, we moved house and home, and threw ourselves into basic chaos, to - in a phrase - change the way we live our lives.

This leads to *Lesson #1*, one I'm proud of, which is: sometimes it's worth giving up some physical comfort and settled-ness, some finish and fanciness in house, even the landscaping you tended to, nurtured and loved, in order to live the kind of life you want and imagine for yourself and those you love. I know there are far nobler actions in the world, I know that most people in the world can only dream of all that we have, my slanting floors and leaky roof aside, but I think there is something worthwhile in looking at where and how we live and asking ourselves whether it is what we want and if it consistent with the values we hold.

And when it isn't, how it can be worthwhile to upset routine and comfort and settled-ness so that we let our lives speak more about what our dreams are, and speak more about what we say we value. This is what I keep telling myself, anyway, as I live in the sea of boxes, and contractors fixing things, and questions like the one my 6-year-old asked me after he first saw the house, which was: *"It looks like it needs a lot of work. Are you sure about this?"*

Which segues to Lesson #2, which is: Moving one's stuff is filled with hardship, filled with questions and doubts, filled with opportunities to feel stressed and short-tempered and less than patient, loving and kind with the people closest to you. Here's exhibit A of my confession: I haven't been the easiest person to be around since March; if you were down my way in Holliston, taking a tour perhaps and happened to find yourself walking past my house, you might have heard some un-ministerial things. Because moving stuff isn't just moving stuff; It's moving things that, in many cases, hold memories and remind us of who we are, where we have been, who we love and where we call home.

I thought of all this on one particularly bad, rainy day a few weeks ago when we discovered the movers had put our box of wedding photos and the art we saved from the children's earliest years into the garage - which we discovered leaks, naturally - ruining some of our most cherished pictures and soaking some of our most cherish memories. Later that

day I remember thinking *“this is a taste, just a taste, of what it would be like to lose everything you value,”* and I thought of all the headlines we see about tornadoes or fires or floods or earthquakes or bombs destroying people’s homes, and of course, I thought in particular about all the people down on the Gulf Coast region who lost everything in Katrina a year a half ago, and the people in New England who this week saw their homes flooded by the Nor’easter, the people who lost not just one box of cherished memories, but whole houses, whole lives. And I thought: all I have to do is fix a few things and unpack a few boxes to make life easier, but these folks are given the work of rebuilding their spirits, of repairing their souls, in some cases of simply trying to survive.

And I knew that lesson #2 was about remembering what the loss of home, and the loss of cherished things, means for other people. It’s about feeling grateful for all that we do have, and using our own moments of loss and hardship to connect more deeply. With the loss and hardship of others, and to act on that connection. I will never read about a homeless family, an uprooted child, a devastated house or neighborhood as objectively as I once did.

Lesson #3: Some stuff is worth cherishing, because it tells us we’re home, it helps tell us who we are, but a lot of stuff we have is just a waste of space, one moving truck after another of a very un-Walden-like, Anti-Thoreau state of existence. Exhibit B and C of my confession: while I am far from a pack-rat, and while I love throwing things away, I am embarrassed to tell you that I have a lot of stuff and that I feel a rush from getting from more. Whereas one truck was able to move us almost four years ago, now, I’m sorry to say, it took two. And a couple Sundays ago, in a move meant to serve as high irony and contradiction for this sermon and serving now as Exhibit D of my confession, I went directly from leading the worship service and giving my sermon to that other high-church that is sacred to so many, Ikea, where I fell into George Carlin’s portrayal of a stuff-seeker like a perfect, form-fitting Ikea glove, fawning there with my wife over storage boxes and shelving units and ergonomic, neon-colored cups for the children’s cheerios in the morning. Why? Because it’s such a good deal! Because for some reason that only the marketers know it feels good to fill your house with shiny, well-organized, Euro-styled objects that make you, in turn, feel equally shiny, well-organized, and Euro-styled.

But while I don’t how to preach this without seeming like a fraud, I must ask, because I’ve asked myself: doesn’t there come a point when the accumulation of things is done to fill a part or piece of ourselves that doesn’t feel quite whole, quite up-to-snuff, quite complete?

And even when that's not true, don't we have a responsibility to ask ourselves how much is too much? How much before we and or our kids become spoiled? And how much is too much for a world already straining under a lifestyle that equates much-ness and more-ness with well-ness and wealth?

As the movers drove away in their two trucks filled with all my family's stuff, as I surveyed our two cars, and the house, and boxes of stuff still left behind, the clear, troubling awareness that came over me was: the world we live in, the world I want to pass onto my children, cannot support this kind of lifestyle. It doesn't feel responsible, it doesn't feel fair in comparison with the rest of the world, and yet it's hard to know where or how to begin making changes.

Lesson #3 on this Earth Day is about looking for ways to reduce the stuff, consume less resources, and make some changes.

And finally, lesson #4. Go with me, for this final lesson, into the chaos of our just moved-in home several weeks ago. It's a Saturday morning, spring warmth is no where in sight and the furnace, for some unknown reason, has decided not to turn on and I'm at my limit because our wedding photos are still drying out by the gas stove and I can't find any of my clothes, especially my ties, which I need because after I call the plumber and figure out what's wrong with the furnace I need to get dressed, get to my church, and lead a memorial service. The doorbell rings, no it doesn't ring because then it was still broken. Someone knocks at the door; it's Gail Donaldson, a member of my congregation and now a neighbor of mine, and she's come to help us unpack, to make tea for Karen, to maybe find my ties, to help wherever and however we need.

There's a poem by Wendell Berry I love called "Wild Geese" in which, at the end, he has the line: *"And we pray, not for a new earth Or heaven, but to be quiet in heart, and in eye clear. What we need is here."* And it's this line that I think of and hold close on that Saturday morning weeks ago as Gail is there, being a friend to us in a needed, unexpected moment – *What we need is here* – And then, a single tie finally found, as I prepare to make my way to my church to lead the most tender of services, a service of celebrating and saying goodbye to a life. Karen reminds me before I walk out the door, in words that I shall never forget, how to put all these material frustrations behind me. She reminds me that all this is just stuff, and the work I have before me, that we have before all of us, is one of celebrating life, of holding a life up to the light and letting it shine.

Lesson #4, then, came as this reminder: not once in the dozens and dozens of memorial services I have led have I heard a person remembered for the things they owned or the stuff they accumulated. Not once have I heard from someone preparing to die spend their final hours talking or wishing about the world of things. To a person, to a service, what I hear about is the love and the light that shines out of them, and shined out of them while they were alive. *“Geese appear high over us, pass and the sky closes,”* the poet writes. *“Clear in the ancient faith: what we need is here. And we pray, not for a new earth or heaven, but to be quiet in heart, and in eye clear. What we need is here.”* This is the final question the final lesson gives to us, to you and to me, the one I leave of us with, which is: what will it look like for us to see that what we need is here, not in a world of new things, but in the life and loved ones around us? Who will we hold close, what things will we let go, how will we spend our time, and to what, or rather to whom, will we give our light and our life? Let us pray for quiet hearts and clear eyes in the giving of our answer. What we need is here.

Amen.