



Poverty of Abundance

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Try using those two words in a sentence or one that makes sense anyway and it is not easy; for they have opposite meanings. Poverty has meanings such as want, need, destitution, scant, deficient, insufficient, impoverished, deprived, all associated with the concept of not enough and abundance has words like plentiful, overflowing, lavish, luxuriant, or having more than enough. And yet, as I was thinking about the upcoming holidays, I could not uncouple those concepts.

I guess what I mean and want to address is the sense of emptiness that often accompanies the season that we or others try to fill with unfettered, unconscious consumption and or unexamined giving that we might engage in. Neither of which translate to feeling less empty. Giving more does not fill in the gaps of emotion we might feel of inadequacy, failure, or guilt. And, having more, having an abundance can still cause us to feel impoverished. We do know this and in part this is when we start to fight against the establishment who put up Christmas decorations after Halloween, who have Santa ads playing during fall afternoon football games and our favorite television shows. We know that and what I want to talk about is even deeper than that.

Perhaps it is because I am getting ready to retire and I have to look around my office, my life and make decisions about what is truly meaningful to hold onto. Or perhaps it is a function of aging and a trait of purging that I have always had becoming more evident, but I want us to explore together the poverty of abundance. A wise friend of mine once remarked about aging and our traits becoming more evident, she says that as we age we just get more so. If our

characteristic way of being is joyful- we get more so, if our characteristic way of being is grumpy- we get more so, forgetful, more so, selfish, more so, generous, more so. What this reminds me is that it is wise to start when younger to cultivate those traits in us that we want to manifest more of. Yes, I do believe we can modify our behavior, that we are not at the whim of every character trait and that with support we can become more so of our positive traits. Rev. Scott Alexander wrote, " Everything can be taken from us but one thing: the last of human freedoms to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances..." That is an abundance that has meaning.

One of the best Christmas stories, and one that I believe can illustrate my point about the poverty of abundance is the O. Henry story, *The Gift of the Magi*.

In case you have forgotten it let me just give a brief overview of it. Della and Jim a married couple struggling to survive due to the economic conditions of their time, found themselves on the day of the eve of Christmas with no money to be able to purchase a gift to give to the other. Della, wanted to give her beloved a watch fob/chain for the pocket watch, the one family heirloom that Jim had from his father, that Jim treasured and kept with him always.

Della had a full, long and luxurious head of hair, that Jim adored and that she was proud of and he wanted to give her a set of combs, made with fine bone and studded with tastefully placed jewels.

Christmas was the next day and neither had the money to purchase the most perfect gift for the other. Della acting on an instinct went to a shoppe that specialized in buying hair and making it into wigs and had her hair shorn. After her hair was cut she went to the clock maker and purchased the watch chain for her beloved. In the meantime Jim, went to a jeweler and sold his watch in order to have the money to purchase the hair combs for Della's long and beautiful locks.

Well you can only imagine the response that each had to the other when they each shared the story of how they came to the money to buy the gift they had gotten for one another.

O. Henry writes that perhaps it was the Wise Men, (the Magi) who began the tradition of the exchange of gifts and yet his story illustrates that it was the selfless giving from a sense of abundance of love that Della and Jim had for one another that is a more important tradition and lesson.

We can have too much and not really appreciate the true value of what we have personally nor what we have to give to one another. Thus when I talk about

the poverty of abundance I am speaking about the sense of lack that can accompany us when we attempt to surround ourselves with things that don't matter. It is true of course that uncluttering means taking time to be honest about what we are holding onto and why we are holding on to something, that something of course could be an emotion or a material thing.

Isn't it true that sometimes the simplest and to others silliest things might be those filled with joy and richness- take a moment and go into your mind and imagine yourself sitting down in a room in your home. Look around- what do you see, furniture perhaps, window dressing perhaps, but use your mind's eye and see what else is there. Is there a photo of a loved one on the wall or propped up? is there a little doodad, trinket, figurine, knick- knack, object that is now capturing your attention? What is it? Where did it come from? Why did you place it where you did? What emotion is attached to it? Now imagine it not there what feeling do you have? Is it a sad feeling? Would you feel sadness, grief, upset if you walked into the room and that thing wasn't visible. What does it mean to you, who does it remind you of, what time and place is conjured up for you? Is it a good feeling to not have that object, thing, there? Is there a sense of accomplishment that it is out of your way, and now something else can be placed, hung, set there?

As we approach the holidays I encourage you to engage in this same thinking. What of the holidays do you want around you? what is important that reminds you of something or someone precious or enlightens and brightens your space both inner heart space and the physical space?

For our Christian friends, this is the time called Advent. And now for the next four weeks, themes of waiting, emptiness, wanting, expectation, hope and finally celebration will be surfacing for them in rituals, worship and in the way they live their life. What abundance do you want to bring into this time of expectation and waiting?

It is not by mistake that we bring lights and music and sparkling baubles and growing things into our homes this time of the year. This is what has been called the bleak times and certainly at times gone by that bleakness and darkness could be overwhelming. We have not learned how to live in balance with the bleak-times. Our ancient forbears did this with far more grace than we have. For them this time of year was not a time of poverty, of want, or destitution, it was a time of living in harmony with the world. Many advent traditions were stolen from our ancient forebears but the messages are the same. This is a time to embrace the inward season, this is a time to fill our wanting with expectation of the bursting

forth of love and compassion- for the Christians this love and compassion was manifest in Jesus. For our forebears this coming out of the bleak times was the rebirth of nature, the renewal of promises made and repair of past shortcomings, and of the earth gods and goddess coming back to life. None of those stories is about poverty, about want, about insufficiency, all the stories are about being aware, of paying attention to what is available, of being joyful and grateful even in times of expectation and need.

The holiday seasons are for me a time for getting what we need, and giving what the world needs also.

It is easy enough to say don't fall into the commercialism of the season, it is easy enough to say don't become victim to the I want- what I want when I want it mentality and yet I am pushing us to go deeper than that. I am pushing to ask, what are you willing to sacrifice for? As the O. Henry story relays, both Della and Jim were willing to sacrifice something precious to themselves and when the irony of the situation came clear- do you know what they did? I will tell you. They cooked a modest meal together and sat together and ate it with a sense of abundance of love, gratitude and appreciation for one another.

May your season be filled with what you need and may you find a way to give back with love and compassion.

May it be so.