

## The Unitarian Church of Barnstable, UU – April 7, 2019 – Rev. Tracy Johnson

### “The Eighth Word”

As I made my way down Independence Drive in Hyannis, heading toward Mary Dunn, I noticed a sign in the median at one of the stops along the road. Maroon with white lettering, I don't know why I hadn't seen it before now. I've driven that route many times since we came to the Cape. But there it was: “We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.”

These words from American author, philosopher, scientist, ecologist, forester, conservationist, and environmentalist, Aldo Leopold, jumped out at me as I waited my turn to go. Leopold was influential in the development of modern environmental ethics and in the movement for wilderness conservation and it is no wonder given the many spheres in which he traveled. His ethics of nature and wildlife preservation had a profound impact on the environmental movement.

The commodification of our lives has been building over the decades, becoming more of a way of life over the span of my time here on earth. Commodities are goods and services that can be bought and sold. They assume one has ownership over something in order to offer it for sale and that one has means to purchase. There has been instilled in us a sense that everything is up for grabs; everything has a price. We are about the business of “getting,” of consuming in our culture. Leopold's example of the land is just one that we face. He suggests that we have it backwards; that the land doesn't actually belong to us – to anyone, but instead that we belong to this community; this space; this land, together. It is part of us and we of it and so it is to be loved and respected.

A steward is a person who looks after others – think flight attendants here – the person who brings you your meals, or these days your snack, or a blanket – the one who ensures your comfort and safety on the journey. To steward is to act in ways that keep order. In the bible we see it used to mean having oversight or to be charged with the scrupulous care of that which one has been entrusted. This is what Leopold is talking about; the stewardship of the land; this earth being entrusted to us in a sense as thinking, acting, presumably, or at least potentially, responsible beings.

Someone practicing stewardship as it relates to us here at the Unitarian Church of Barnstable, is one who in community aligns their actions and resources with their values & loves in order to live a life of meaning and purpose wherein they enrich and shepherd life's gifts from generation to generation. It is an orientation & practice more so than a role. These thoughts come to us from our UUA Regional Office; from a workshop our Stewardship Team attended last month. So, let's unpack that a bit.

It suggests that we are in this together; this care for our spiritual home and well-being, and that we are working to bring things into alignment: our resources; our values; the things we love, as individual persons and as a people called to be bearers this liberal religious tradition here on the Cape. It says that when we line these three things up our lives will have more meaning and purpose and that makes sense because it sounds like we begin to operate from our most authentic place. This stewarding is likened to shepherding the gifts we bring personally, and as a whole, now, for the good of this generation, but also for generations to come.

This is what Unitarian minister and theologian James Luther Adams was talking about when he said that the free church is not bound to the present – perhaps here I want to insert the idea that we are not bound to current ideology about commodity; but instead he says that we “earn and create a tradition binding together past, present and future in a living tether, (I love that – a living tether) in a continuing covenant and identity, bringing forth treasures both new and old.” We have inherited a legacy in Barnstable that comes with a history, traditions, symbols, stories, theologies and ancestors in this faith. Ours is to carry this forward; to build on its gifts and wisdom. When we bind ourselves to tradition it means that we strive for integrity between what was and what will be and that we are about this process of reconciling disconnections that we encounter along the way.

In her recent book *No Other Gods: The Politics of the Ten Commandments*, Unitarian Universalist minister Ana Levy-Lyons posits modern day interpretations of the ten commandments; ten words, she writes, which is what they are in the Hebrew; words by which to live our lives, scrolled on stone tablets in ancient times to guide the lives of the Israelites on their mythical journey. The eighth word is all about systemic theft, according to Levy-Lyons, and she, too, is talking about this idea of commodification; about getting the most we can for the least money; the best deal. It is ingrained in our culture; part of what keeps capitalism ticking along through time.

For her it comes down to how we treat people. Do we relate to them with love and respect or do we consider others as a commodity also? And I can see that we do it all the time in our interactions with people in the course of our days. I speak with women mostly in my ministry, but it is not unique to them, that an opportunity for affordable housing doesn't exist for year round Cape Codders because a property owner can get more from a seasonal renter; that a living wage is hard to come by in this area; in this state really, as we slowly climb to the \$15 per hour rate, which is not now and most certainly by the time it is the law won't be sufficient. We buy cheaper, less healthy groceries instead of paying the higher fairly-traded price; the actual cost of better options grown locally and more sustainably. We do it without even thinking about it. Stewardship is about this, too. Our orientation to life and relationships, including how we relate to money in the midst of those relationships.

Our world, on a macro level and our church on a micro level, are the package from our reading this morning that arrives each day with more than what we need to get by. Our task is to consider how we use the contents. Vicki Robins, co-author of *Your Money or Your Life*, offers that part of discovering how to use it all is discovering how much is enough in order to be truly fulfilled, and then to consume only that. And having this figured out, asks if we can think about how much would be enough for everyone not only to survive but to thrive, and then to find ways for them to have access to that. These questions move us to restraint and justice making; healing ourselves and our world.

Sometimes we want more than the package contains and we are tempted to steal, perhaps unwittingly as we roll with the times, or we hoard the contents only to find that they spoil in the corner. We wrestle with these choices every day because of who we are; what we value; how we believe life is meant to be lived juxtaposed with what our cultural norms tell us consumption and enough-ness are about.

So, I wonder what some of the things you value are and specifically, some of the things you value about this place; this church; this community. Can we share a few of those together?

*Members of the congregation responded with things like authenticity, welcome, support for family, how we honor our seventh Principle and how one can pursue their values about the environment in community, music, our religious education programming, to name a few.*

Sometimes there is a tension between what we value and what our culture says is important. It's not easy to buck the status quo; to shift from the conventional thinking of modern society. It has never been easy to do the thing that is opposite of what the crowd is doing. Tack that on to our histories, the ways of being that are in our DNA as people and institutions and what we have been witness to as simply 'the way it is,' and the idea of change becomes pretty scary, no matter how lively the rebel in our souls may be. "Let's just leave that the way it is for a while longer; look the other way; for now," we may say.

There are risks in this line of thinking, though, this maintenance of the status quo, that might be more powerful if overcome, than any risks to change. We value this place and this ministry here in Barnstable – this building – this community of beloveds – all the services offered – our music – our religious education program. And we value our minister here – if I've heard it once since I arrived, I've heard it 50 times, how very much you love and value Rev. Harper. She has been here alongside you for – what? – 16 years? The materials in your pledge campaign this year talk about fair compensation for the minister and staff here and this is what Levy-Lyons was getting at, too, with her eighth word. Has our church, our religious home and all it offers, become a commodity to be treated like all the rest? Is it a place where we come to get as much as we can for as little as possible or is it more like the community that Leopold was talking about where we and it are joined as one in love and respect?

What does maintaining the status quo in compensation say about this place? Is there a disconnect between what we say about it – its value to us – our principles that speak to justice and equity – fairness, and what our actual practice is? And if I may dig a little deeper, what does it mean about us when we have a highly educated, compassionate, woman of color for a minister and we don't compensate her fairly? That seems to me to be a risk we should look at because it speaks to our relevance in these times when a progressive voice in the arena of anti-racist, anti-oppressive, multi-culturalism is so needed. A voice that speaks from a place of authenticity and connectedness with its values. The voice of stewards who take "scrupulous care" of that with which they have been entrusted.

A few weeks ago we talked about noticing; about discernment really. Thinking about stewardship is more than just making a decision about a yearly pledge. I wish I could say that I had planned this, but I didn't! Some greater Mystery was at work! Stewardship is an act of discernment wherein we really look at this place and our place in it in order to act from what we discover is important to us. Last week we talked about hope and you shared some things that you hope for this place. And those hopes were, clearly, grounded in your values and what you value here. If the work of this church is valuable to us, how do we act in response to that awareness? What adjustments do we need to make so that our actions are aligned with our intentions? There is a constant give and take in this process that involves a willingness to risk change on behalf of the good we hope is to come.

Bart Frost, in his Blue Boat Home blog, writes that one of the best things about church is that it is an intentional community where you can live your values and suggests that unlike our commodified world, church has the potential to be a place where things operate differently. A church shares its services with you joyfully, and joyfully we give back. There is a mutual relationship between who we are and what we each bring and what this place is and can be.

This is an invitation to discernment in the midst of our stewardship campaign. It is an invitation to a re-alignment between our values and our actions that makes possible our hoped-for things and their coming to fruition. This is an invitation to risk altering the status quo in ways that have a domino effect for the good of this church, this community and the world around us.

May it be so and blessed be.

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