

Wanting, Giving and Getting

Bonnie McClish Dlott

Dlott is a fifth-year student at Starr King School and member of the Mt. Diablo Unitarian Universalist Church in Walnut Creek, Calif. This sermon won the UUA's 2004 Stewardship Award and was originally delivered Feb. 15, 2004.

Last spring, I got a message from the universe. Now, I don't get too many messages from the universe; sometimes I don't even get my phone messages. But this message was very loud, and it came at four in the morning in the form of a tremendous thud from my closet. This particular message was one that my husband had tried to send me several times, but I managed to ignore him; however, messages from the universe are not so easily dismissed. They aren't like Post-it notes that you can throw away. They tend to be big messages, like "Your life is too stressful," or "It's time to find a new career."

This was one of those big messages. The message was, "You have too many clothes." The stupendous weight of my clothes pulled the bracket holding the closet rod right off the shelf it was attached to, and my beautiful wardrobe hit the floor. I was stunned. Hadn't I just gone through this closet and taken out a few dozen things to give away? How could this happen?

My recent wardrobe purge was the result of a class I took in seminary last semester about stewardship. Some of the early sessions focused on American consumerism and how it hurts our pocket-books, the environment, and even our souls. We did an exercise which included a visualization of our living space, and we tried to imagine what we would take out if we had 10 minutes to grab things before our house burned down. I had trouble thinking of anything that I would take except my photographs and the videotapes of my children. The thought of carrying out clothing hadn't even crossed my mind. I started to ask myself questions. If my clothes don't mean that much to me, why do I own so many?

I suspect that this is a good question for all of us to think about. We make more money than we ever have as a nation, and we buy more things, and yet we save much less than our parents and grandparents did. We carry staggering amounts of credit card debt, and more and more of us go bankrupt each year. Why do we buy so much stuff?

I thought about this as my husband fretted about the closet repair. Why do I have so many outfits? Hey, I know the answer to this question: because I want them! I see something on the rack and I fall in love. My heart pounds as I search for the right size. I start to breathe heavily as I try it on. Look at me, I look so... whatever: professional, sexy, smart, cool, tough, hip! It's like magic: I'm transformed into a new person in this outfit, and I like what I see! If I just had this outfit, I would feel good about myself. Each piece of clothing is a transformational opportunity.

My spouse announced that it was time for a pilgrimage to Home Depot. I felt so guilty about my clothes that I agreed to go with him. We drove there and navigated through the jammed parking lot, desperately vying for a space with several hundred other people, all just as anxious as we were to buy things. We walked down aisles towering with merchandise, and, as usual, I began to feel overwhelmed by the transformational opportunities I saw. Here is an opportunity to be transformed into a person with perfect kitchen countertops. Here is an opportunity to be transformed into a person with hardwood floors. How about an opportunity to be transformed into a person with a beautiful yard! I could be so happy!

Luckily, my husband was on a mission, and just wanted to be transformed into a person who could hang up his few shirts in a closet that was supposedly half his. He picked out some braces that looked like they could hold up an entire circus tent, and we headed to the cashier. We managed to get out of the store and back home without incident, and by the end of the day my clothes were hanging up again.

This wasn't the end of the story for me. I was starting to feel that I understood my own wanting; it had to do with becoming someone improved, someone I liked better than who I was without the item. And yet, I had to ask myself in the case of my wardrobe: had I actually become someone better once that new outfit was in my possession? Had that happy feeling persisted past one or two washings? Even more importantly, what was it about myself that needed transforming, and how is real transformation accomplished? Can it be accomplished by getting things?

I tried to think back to remember significant transformations in my life. Most of them happened as a result of a lifelong commitment: to my partner, to my children, to my work in ministry. Each of these commitments involved wanting and getting, but as I thought, I began to understand that I hadn't been transformed from wanting and getting. I had been transformed by the giving that had

happened after the wanting and getting. For example, I wanted the love and security of a life partner, and I got it; but what transformed me wasn't in the getting; it happened later, in the giving, in the learning that I was capable of making sacrifices and working with my spouse to make a life together.

The wanting and the getting of children was not particularly transformational for me, well, at least not permanently. It was later, in the giving, and giving, and giving, and giving, and giving, that the transformation happened. When my children were young, I learned that I was stronger than I thought I was, more patient than I thought I was, and capable of feeling more love than I had ever dreamed of. I learned that I could put someone else's interest ahead of my own, and that I could be counted on. Most importantly, I learned that even though I was not perfect and never would be, I was loved and needed. All this I learned not from wanting or getting, but by giving.

My path into the ministry is yet another example. When my second child was born, I realized that I had everything I had ever wanted, and yet, I wasn't really happy. In the years that followed, I searched for the missing "thing" that would do the trick. It won't surprise you to hear that the "thing" that I needed was the opportunity to use my gifts to express my love for life within a community. After the wanting and the getting, I needed to give myself back; to my partner, to my family, and now to my Unitarian Universalist community and movement.

So now you know about some of my struggles with wanting, getting and giving, mostly as it applies to my energy and time; but I'd like to get back to my wardrobe. It cost a lot of money, and yet it has very little actual worth to me. My Old Testament teacher would tell me that it was "idolatrous"; that the money I spent on it was spent for my own glorification and thrill. I'd have a hard time arguing with him. Wouldn't it have been nice if I had spent that money on something that was more meaningful, something that reflected my values as a Unitarian Universalist?

I think it's hard to talk about money, and maybe to some, a discussion of money seems out of place in church. I don't agree. Money is something that means a lot to us and so does our faith; and somewhere, I believe that the way we use money should have something to do with our faith. As Unitarian Universalists, we are no different than folks in other denominations; we need money to pay for our food, our shelter, our clothes. We need to save for our children's education and for our retirement. We give some of it away to our church and some to other good causes.

We are different, however, in two important ways: Unitarian Universalists make more money than people in other denominations and we give less of it away. I worry about this; all religions stress the importance of generosity. After all my reflections about wanting, and getting, and giving, I start to wonder; are we hurting ourselves by not giving? Are we missing a real transformational opportunity?

I know that sitting in this room now are some exceptional people that do give to our churches and to other charities very generously, perhaps so generously that they have to make sacrifices in other areas in their lives. Maybe they want things, but they don't buy them because it is more important to them to be generous to this church or to others. Here is what I want to know: what is it that they are getting by giving that is so important to them? What am I missing out on with my comfortable pledge? Could I risk giving up something to find out?

My first impulse is to say, "No! I already give to the church, and I don't want to deprive myself of something I want. It will feel uncomfortable to want something and not to get it." Then I think of a conversation that we had in my stewardship class. We talked about how it might feel to invite people from our struggling partner church in Transylvania into our homes. I imagine showing them my closet bursting with clothes and my refrigerator stuffed with food and fine wine, and then I imagine saying to them, "I'm sorry, but I just can't afford to help you feed and house your minister, or help you buy a cow so your children can have fresh milk. I can't afford to help you, because I need to buy myself more clothes so I can feel happy for a few days."

When I imagine that scenario, I feel far worse than I would just passing on a great outfit. I understand that wanting and getting things doesn't really transform me at all; in fact, I suspect that wanting and getting might be preventing me from becoming the person I long to be.

Who is that person? One way to find out is to ask myself, "How do I want to be remembered?" I can just see the obituary now: "Loving daughter, wife and mother; she was a snappy dresser." I would much rather read that my life-long commitment to giving reflected the love that I felt for life and for Unitarian Universalism. I hope that others will be inspired when they read that I tithed to the church I served, and left part of my estate to the Unitarian Universalist Association. I don't want to leave as a legacy for my children the ideal of wanting and having. It wasn't enough for me, and I know that it won't be enough for them either.

I would like to ask you to think about some questions this week. What things do you own, and what do they mean to you? Do you have so many things that you can't fit them all into your home? How much more do you think you need to buy to be happy? Is wanting and getting "enough" for you?

What would you give up to feed someone who is hungry? Does your checkbook register accurately reflect your faith and principles? Who is the person that you want to be, and how does that person spend time and money? Are you ready to be transformed into that person?

Let me end by saying that the message I received from the universe turned out to be a message of hope. The message was, “You have enough to make a difference.” If I can make a difference, together, we Unitarian Universalists can make a big difference. I believe that if we are willing to look carefully at our lives and give as generously as we can, we can be transformed into the people and the movement that we dream of being. We can bring our life-affirming vision of love and justice into a world that so desperately needs it. That is my hope and my dream, and it is worth more to me than anything I could buy.

May you go in peace, and give your very best this week. Blessed Be.