

“Empty and Free,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill  
on November 22, 2009

When my children were little, and we would ask them, “Did you get enough dinner? Do you want any more to eat?” they came up with a response that became a staple in our house. They would say, “My dinner tank is full. But my dessert tank is empty.”

For five days last week I was in Ottawa at a conference of UU ministers. We had worship twice a day, in the morning and in the evening. I attended a number of workshops, and we ate breakfast and lunch together, more than four hundred of us. As you might imagine, when a bunch of ministers get together, there is no lack of words. It didn’t take long before my word tank--my brain--was full to overflowing. Thankfully, the worship there was great, it balanced all those words, and fed my heart and my soul. When they announced a need for tenors and basses, I decided to sing in the choir. At our last rehearsal, at the end of one piece, I turned to the person next to me and said, “That was a religious experience.” I didn’t expect to be so moved by singing with my colleagues. It reminded me of what church can be. So whether it’s singing in the choir, or making community meals, or being together in worship, or sharing in a small group, I hope you experience that here. I hope there are times when your heart and soul are moved and stretched, when you can say, “My spiritual tank is full.”

My experience in Ottawa, of feeling so fed by our worship there, reminds me that I am hungry--for community and connection, for meaning. I am hungry for worship that feeds me and I’m hungry for silence. For what one songwriter calls, “cool quiet and time to think.” I long to touch and be touched by what is holy and what is real. And I imagine that you are hungry too.

This is the week people all across our country will gather to give thanks for the bounty of this land, for the harvest that has been gathered in. When people gather to eat a really big meal. Overdone, Thanksgiving can become a celebration of gluttony, rather than what it is intended to be--a remembrance of what it’s like to be hungry, and gratitude for what we have received.

At the start of this Thanksgiving week, this time that celebrates fullness, I invite you to first reflect on emptiness. If you are like me, you’re more comfortable with being full. A full belly, a full calendar, a full house, whether a home full of people or a poker hand, these are good things, right? We quite naturally think full is good and empty is well, not so good. We forget the ancient wisdom that fullness has its risks too:

Fill your bowl to the brim  
and it will spill.  
Keep sharpening your knife

and it will blunt.  
Chase after money and security  
and your heart will never unclench.  
Care about people's approval  
and you will be their prisoner. (Tao Te Ching)

We live in a culture that seems afraid of and threatened by the prospect of emptiness--that rushes to fill empty time and empty space. That says, if you are busy, then you must be important! There's nothing wrong with being busy and productive, but people need down time too. If we were willing to explore those empty places we might find unexpected blessings, and even liberation there.

Thanksgiving is a lovely holiday. A time to gather around a table with others, and to give thanks. We could stand to do this more often. If your family life seems chaotic, try this simple, time-honored ritual: sit down around a table, hold hands and say a prayer, if you like, or light a candle. Eat together. Even do the dishes together. If you live alone, invite a friend or neighbor over to share a simple meal.

The mystic Meister Eckhart said, "If the only prayer you ever said in your entire life was thank you, it would be enough." It's good to gather with others in order to give thanks. That is what we will be doing here on Tuesday night, at the interfaith Thanksgiving service we are hosting, and I hope you can come.

Today as I encourage you to pay attention to your hunger and to inhabit the empty spaces in your life, I need to say that there are people in this building every week who are hungry--for food, for shelter, for opportunity. I don't want to spiritualize hunger and act as if there is something noble about not getting enough to eat. That's not what I'm saying. I'm saying those of us who do have enough food, that we are hungry too. And we would do well to be aware of our hunger--to pay attention to it, and ask "What does it have to teach me?"

Several times I've participated in a three-day fast with other church folks. It's offered as a spiritual discipline, and at the beginning the leader reminds us, "We are all hungry people." One year, on the first full day of the fast I took a walk with my minister, and we talked about what it was like to have that gnawing in our stomachs. He reminded me it's what many people in the world feel much of the time. Fasting helps you understand what it's like to live with hunger, when you can't make it go away.

I discovered that I use food and drink to insulate myself from things I don't want to feel. Fasting pulls back the insulation, so to speak, and helps me to touch things that I have buried or pushed away. Sometimes, during a fast, I can get kind of cranky. One time I got into an argument with my wife, and in the middle of it she said, "If you would just have a sandwich, this fight would be over!" And she was right. But those thoughts and feelings, the ones that I can push into the shadows, have a place too. They are real and deserve not to be buried down deep inside.

The Sufi mystic Rumi says our bodies are like musical instruments. He says,

There's hidden sweetness in the stomach's emptiness.  
We are lutes, no more, no less. If the soundbox  
is stuffed full of anything, no music.  
If the brain and belly are burning clean  
with fasting, every moment a new song comes out of the fire.  
The fog clears, and new energy makes you  
run up the steps in front of you.  
Be emptier and cry like reed instruments cry.

Have you ever thought of yourself as a musical instrument? The prayer of St. Francis comes to mind: "Lord, make us instruments of your peace..." What kind of instrument could you be? What kind of music might you make? Are there things you need to clear away in order to do this?

If you are someone who leads a busy life, do you know how to do things simply and slowly? Thich Naht Hanh has a beautiful meditation on doing the dishes while doing the dishes. That is, paying attention to what you are doing, doing that work mindfully and enjoying it, rather than seeing it something to get through as quickly as possible. Do you know how to do nothing at all? Do you make time in your life for silence, so you can listen for your own longings? Do you take Sabbath time, when you turn off the computer and the TV, when you can daydream or take a nap? Can you do one less thing than you think you ought to do, and not feel guilty about it?

When I was in Canada last week, I sensed something different there--a different pace, an ease of being. I mentioned this to one of my colleagues, who said, "They aren't trying to be a superpower, or tell the rest of the world what they should do, and it shows. You can feel the difference." If we want to be fruitful, if we want to contribute to peace, then we need to lead lives that are balanced and whole, with time for work and play, for action and contemplation. I know that some of you are frazzled and worried and pulled in too many directions. And sometimes I am too.

We live in a culture that is both full and hungry at the same time. The pace of American life is dizzying. There are so many things out there vying for our attention--hundreds of TV channels, the internet and e-mail, all kinds of activities and good causes. And yet, there is loneliness and disconnection all around. It can take some courage to say no to some of those things so you can say yes to the longing of your own heart and soul.

The writer and minister Frederick Buechner knows something about this. He writes about when he left behind the community of a prestigious prep school, where he was the chaplain, in order to move out into the country in order to write a novel. He says that first year was dark--he wondered if what he was doing had any value at all. "To make matters worse," he says, "that was the year when both Martin Luther King and

Robert Kennedy were murdered, and I remember wondering if there was anything the world needed much less... than another book.”<sup>1</sup>

Do you ever wonder, “Am I doing any good? Is this all there is to life? What really matters?” These are holy questions. Asking them means that you are facing your own emptiness; you are already on the way. I hope this church will help and encourage you to ask these questions, and enter your own empty places.

That’s what Frederich Buechner did. He says, “by examining and closely and candidly as I could the life that had come to seem to me in many ways a kind of trap or dead-end street, I discovered it really wasn’t that at all. I discovered that... if you really pay attention to it, even such a limited and limiting life as the one I was living... opened up onto extraordinary vistas. Taking your children to school and kissing your wife good-bye. Eating lunch with a friend. Trying to do a decent day’s work. There is no event so commonplace but that God is present within it, always hiddenly, always leaving you room to recognize (God) or not... It came to seem to me that if I were called upon to state in a few words the essence of everything I was trying to say both as a novelist and as a preacher, it would be something like this: Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden part of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments and life itself is grace.”

The way to freedom, and by that I mean living your own life, a life that is congruent with who you are, with who you were born to be; the way to freedom is more a process of subtraction than of addition. It is a winnowing down, an emptying, a letting go. It is good and hard and holy work.

Listen to your life. Pay attention to its emptiness and to its fullness. When your dinner tank is full, be thankful. And when your dessert tank is empty, be glad. There’s room for something sweet and delicious. There’s space to sing your heart’s own song.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Frederich Buechner, *Now and Then*.

