

Having a Soul that's Not for Sale:
Personal Integrity in a Consumer Culture

North Shore Unitarian Universalist Society, Winnetka, IL
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Reading of the Day: A Sonnet by William Wordsworth

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours;
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not.—Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.

There are weeks, y'know, there are weeks, when the world is too much with me. There are weeks when my list of things I should have done feels utterly overwhelming. At times like these, my life can feel too much like juggling cinder blocks: it's okay when I'm in the flow, when my rhythm is steady and my hands are strong and the cold winds of

crisis do not blow. But when anything upsets this fragile system, cinder blocks start falling on my head.

Sociologists call this state of affairs *multiphrenia*. Multiphrenia is what results when we are overwhelmed with demands for our attention, demands for our energy, when we face so many competing responsibilities that the day never has enough hours, the week never has enough days. When we are over-scheduled, over-extended, multi-tasked unto lunacy. Spiritual lunacy.

Under the pressure of trying to absorb and respond to all these competing demands, sociologists warn, core identity can start to fragment. Core identity fragments because nothing in the world around us recognizes and relates intimately to all of who we are, to our genuine spiritual center. Most people know us only in fragments, and over time that becomes—in fact—fragmenting. As T. S. Eliot puts it, We prepare a face to meet the faces that we meet. Over time we can start to wonder if there is a solid reality behind all those masks. And if there is, who is it? Who am I, really? Do I know? Do you? The world is too much with us.

My research has convinced me that there is a profound anxiety at the heart of the American soul. There is nothing more acutely American, more centrally American, than this chronic unacknowledged layer of defensive insecurity and self-doubt. As Thoreau said more than a century and a half ago, “the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” And in those days, none of them had email inboxes with hundreds of messages.

Why? Why, amidst all our wealth and all our power, are Americans so frazzled? So often quietly unhappy? The answer to that question unfolds into a great story, and I think there’s something very liberating in understanding it. Culturally speaking, we are all children of a dysfunctional family, but like others in this situation we can free ourselves by looking plainly at our heritage.

Of course I’m going to be making some sweeping generalizations here: if you want the footnoted version, it’s in my book *Selling Ourselves Short*. The short form of the story

begins with the Puritans. They came for religious freedom, right? For freedom from religious persecution. That's the tale told in textbooks.

And its true, as far as it goes. But if you go just a little further, the picture changes somewhat. They were persecuted in England because many reasonable, open-minded people thought that they were genuinely dangerous religious extremists. Three of their central beliefs assemble into something like a psychological complex that has had an enduring impact on American culture.

The first idea is that all human beings are innately depraved. That is, there is something profoundly, deeply, irrevocably, personally wrong with each of us. With each of you. In your heart of hearts, you are awful, despicable, disgusting. You are all sinners. *And there's nothing you can do about this.* Humans are radically incapable of virtue except when God directly intervenes by providing his chosen faithful ones with divine grace.

Innate depravity owed its currency largely to the theology of Martin Luther—and Luther was probably bipolar. Innate depravity sounds to many people like a theology of severe depression—but it became a hugely influential part of the Protestant reformation, because in his manic phases Luther was also brilliant and, of course, stunningly productive theologian, biblical scholar, preacher, and hymn writer.

Luther's manic phases influenced his theology no less profoundly. Luther argued that hard work, unrelentingly hard work was a major moral obligation. It wasn't just a way put bread on the table. For Luther, leisure time was an invitation to sin. Or perhaps, the ability to spend time relaxing signaled the end of a manic phase and thus the prelude to a depressive phase. Who knows. But Martin Luther does now always show up in discussion of famous high creatives who were manic depressive.

So--if you have ever—even once—felt guilty about not working, if you have ever felt guilty about reading a novel or turning down a client or refusing to work late, if you have ever felt guilty about ignoring work or not working hard enough, maybe it's not just the fault of your demanding parents. It's an all-American trait.

The third key idea comes from John Calvin, a French lawyer about twenty years younger than Luther—he was born in 1509. He agreed with Luther about innate depravity and about the moral obligation to work hard. It is actively sinful, Calvin said, ever to pass up an opportunity to make money. But he went on to explore the idea that God is both omnipotent and omniscient—that God has both absolute power and absolute foreknowledge of absolutely everything.

But: A God who already knows who is going to heaven and who is going to hell, yes? Ponder that fact with a lawyer's mind and you will quickly work your way to the doctrine of predestination. Calvin argued that before time began God decided which human beings he could forgive and save, and which would be left in their innate depravity to rot in the everlasting torment of hell. In Calvin's view, those who are saved are not selected because they are good people. None of us are any good. All of us are depraved. Calvin's God is wildly arbitrary—or at least entirely inscrutable—in deciding to save a few folks from everlasting torment.

In combination, these three doctrines—innate depravity, the “Protestant work ethic” and predestination—set loose an astounding level of spiritual and psychological anxiety. It was horrific. There's no other word for it. Do you remember reading “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”? Or Hawthorne's story “Young Goodman Brown”? I laughed that stuff off when I was in high school. But it was taken seriously—and that's no laughing matter.

No wonder, then, that other Christians saw these people as dangerous religious extremists, and so efforts were made to control and exclude them. There were horrible religious wars. The most extreme and recalcitrant were forced out. Or they fled. They fled to America where they hoped to set up a pure theocracy in the wilderness.

That never happened, but their anxieties and their attitudes towards life proved massively influential—in part because these are fairly easily secularized into a simple chronic depressive anxiety about self-worth, masked as workaholicism. It's all too easy to set aside Calvin's vindictive, arbitrary God and worry instead about money and status.

Partly as a result of that secularization, and partly for complex and fairly dubious theological reasons, financial success and material prosperity came to be seen as an excellent measure of the probability that you were saved. Success and a goodly measure of solid middle-class respectability could remedy the overwhelming anxiety that followed from the doctrines of innate depravity, predestination, and the “Protestant work ethic.”

I contend that this state of affairs is a set-up for rampant consumerism: your skill at shopping and your disposable income prove your moral worth. Shop til you drop and then you'll be saved.

Which is to say: a secular form of classic Puritan anxiety underlies the incredible, nearly manic energy Americans bring to doing more, being more, owning more, achieving more, moving up in life, gaining market share and posting rising quarterly profits. Financial success--material prosperity—has gotten itself hot-wired into the routine concern with social status that we share with every other herd animal—often now in ways that are clearly detrimental to genuine human flourishing and reproductive success. According to a recent Unicef report, for instance, American children score last or second-last in twenty measures of well-being in comparison with children in other wealthy nations.

Consumerism is fueled by a second issue as well. I contend that the secular form of “what would Jesus do?” is “What will people think?” All too often I find myself wearing that invisible bracelet, changing my clothes, changing them again, staring at myself in the mirror. Or standing in a store, considering a purchase, feeling suddenly, desperately uncertain. Plenty of us wear an invisible bracelet asking *What will people think?*

What I'm describing here is the flip side of the American Dream. The American Dream is that you can grow up to be anything. You can become anybody. You can be President of the United States, you can work your way from your garage to the wealth of Bill Gates, you can become the next Picasso or Einstein or Ernest Hemingway. Isn't that what we tell kids? Isn't it?

But the flip side of the American Dream is the American Nightmare: it's the threat that you can become nobody at all. The dark side of the dream is that unless you prove yourself, unless you "make something" of yourself, you are nothing. You are nobody. We all know these doubts; we all know this version of the dark side. There's not a person in this room who has not at one point or another felt like an utter and complete failure. That's damnation, American style.

I've done a lot of work on consumerism in recent years, and so I can say with some confidence that the pressure we are under from advertising is astounding. Marketing very skillfully exploits these deep-seated insecurities and unconscious fears. I don't think I have to explain that to anyone here. Just one little point: the average 8-13 year old watches about 3 hours of television a day, which translates into 40,000 commercials a year. Forty thousand . . . That's 110 messages a day saying, in effect, if you buy this or if you buy that, then you will be "saved." You will be happier, more confident, more popular, whatever.

So what are we to do? Can we have souls that are not for sale? Can we be or become something much more potent, much more secure, than anything we might buy at the mall?

Yes. Yes, absolutely. The most important determinants of identity are not necessarily the exterior ones, the socially-determined ones, the conspicuous-consumption ones. The crucial determinants of core identity can be inward and spiritual.

As we move closer to the spiritual dimension of our own experience, we encounter an abundance that has nothing to do with adjusted gross income. This abundance is described with images of water—it flows freely and unceasingly. It's described with images of energy: our lives become easy and graceful, our burdens are lifted, cold places are warmed up and hot places are cooled off. It's described with images of light: we can see, we understand, nothing is dark or obscure or gloomy. Call it Chi, call it Christ, call it Buddha, call it compassion. Find it, and you have enough. You have more than enough. You become satisfied with who you are, what you are, what you have. As a result, there is no more hunger, no more yearning, no more restless anxious

searching. There is well-watered, high-energy growth, perhaps; but it's fueled by joy not by anxiety. Genuine spiritual growth is not compulsive or anxiety-driven or workaholic in its extremes.

But let me warn you, If you opt out of competitive consumption and the professional rat race to make space for your soul, some people will decide you are odd. Maybe even a quitter. A failure. I've been called named like that. There may be long-term financial implications, just as there are long term personal implications if we "lay waste" our spiritual identity in order to earn more money. Live in a more modest circumstances than your colleagues, and there will be condescending remarks. That hurts. It hurts a lot. Insecure people can be remarkably mean. And insecurity is as American as apple pie.

The crucial question here is very simple indeed: does what I think about my own life matter more to me than "what people will think"? Can I dare to be nonconformist?

And harder yet: can I be a nondefensive nonconformist? Can I resist my own snide and insecure remarks about people who drive expensive cars? Can I stop drawing lines of my own between the saved and the damned?

It seems to me that we get one big choice in life. And that choice is upon which altar we will lay our sacrifices. Because sacrifices are inevitable. Suffering is inevitable.

Obedying the bracelet, living your life to gain the approval of "what will people think" will not keep you safe. The only real comfort in this life comes from finding the courage and the moral strength requires for a profound personal integrity. Of course, integrity won't keep you safe either. But we can console ourselves far more easily when we suffer for a damned good reason—not simply in conformity to what Coleridge called "the poor loveless ever anxious crowd."

On last point: in this process, you have one big advantage. You have one another. The company of good misfits can be a beautiful thing. Together we can decide that kindness matters more than style, that generosity counts for more than prestige. We can agree upon heroes who have more than money. I'd like to close with a little more Wordsworth, a few lines that come from his very famous Tintern Abbey ode. He is writing about the influence "Nature" has on us. "Nature" is his word for the entire

spiritual dimension of reality. You can substitute God or Buddha-Nature or Enlightenment or whatever other title you prefer.

... she can so inform

The mind that is within us, so impress
With quietness and beauty, and so feed
With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,
Rash judgments, nor the sneers of selfish men,
Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all
The dreary intercourse of daily life,
Shall e'er prevail against us, or disturb
Our cheerful faith that all which we behold
Is full of blessings . . .

Go forth today refreshed and renewed in your own personal struggle against the dreariness of daily life, confident once again that your life is indeed full of blessings.
And thanks, thanks much, for your generous attention.