

Leading Generous Lives
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
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Reflection on the Theme – Jeff Coleman-Payne

By the time I was in my senior year in high school, I was a theater nerd. I took drama every year, performed in community theater and spent a lot of my free time volunteering as an usher at my local professional theater. By this point I was starting to recognize the power of the characters and the stories that I was reading, performing and watching on stage

Reading plays in my English class was certainly my favorite part of the semester. That year, we read *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller. Arthur Miller wrote and premiered *Death of a Salesman* in 1949 and it closed after 742 performances. It won the Pulitzer and Tony award for best play and many critics consider it to be one of the greatest plays of the 20th century.

Death of a Salesman is the story of Willy Loman, an aging gentleman who has worked as a door to door salesman his entire career. He has two failing sons, his marriage is failing and he feels like he's failing, as he watches the people around him getting the success that he so desperately craves. This is causing him to quickly give up and lose hope about the rest of his life.

What I remember most about this play was how much it made me understand the impact of the choices that I was going to be making in my life. I remember this being a very strange and new feeling for me. I don't ever remember feeling the existential dread that accompanied watching Dustin Hoffman show the tragedy of Willy Loman's downfall before

I remember the feeling of weight and gravity and the sorrow and was able to recognize, for the first time, the truth that Miller was trying to write into this character. What I took away was, you can do everything right or at least try to do everything right, and still come up short if you live your life comparing yourself to other people. For Miller, I think this whole play seems to be about the fallacy and lies of the American Dream and the dangers of trying to reach it.

I'm sure that many other generations have felt this way, and *Death of a Salesman* proves it. The play hits this spot deep inside of us that there's more to life than spending every minute of every day in pursuit of wealth and fame and having everything. Willy Loman couldn't avoid being sucked into the trap that many of us face and feel each and every day.

So what can I do? In remembering this lesson that I learned 20 years ago, I can try to remember that I don't need to buy everything or have everything I want. I may live in a world that's inundated with commercials and advertisements and a world that's always comparing and judging based on the gadgets we have, the cars we drive, or the things we're able to do and spend our money on, but I don't have to focus on that. I can spend my time surrounding myself with friends and family and remember that I only have one life to live and that I should live graciously and gratefully for what I have.

Leading Generous Lives© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

We don't need a jet pack suit to take us to the clouds! I love that line and that [video](#).

We do need Love, however, which powers the jet pack on our jet pig, if you'll recall. This is jet pig. We could all use a good plushie these days, a comfort object, something to remind us of our innocence and childhood – hopefully your childhood was innocent and nurturing and you had some toy that you turned to when you needed to comfort yourself. Our Jetpig is so named to remind us of our values – let's see if you remember them? J – justice, E – equity, T – transformation, P – pluralism, I – interdependence, G – generosity. Although Nimo Patel and Daniel Nahmod say we don't need a jet pack, our Jet Pig has one that is powered by our greatest value – what's that one? Love.

By holding this object up in worship as representative of our values, I thought of Jean Baudrillard. He was thought of by many as the leading postmodern social theorist, in 1970 wrote *The Consumer Society*,¹ about the impact of our relationship with objects, with things, which following WW II most of us in the United States and Western Europe were becoming rich enough to buy: clothes, furniture, candles, books, stereos. Now, we might include cell phones and ipads and plushies.

He describes the social rules of a consumer society in which we convince ourselves that if we buy this whole array of objects, which represent material success and the outward signs of happiness, then indeed we must be happy. That we aren't actually happy gets lost, somehow, in this symbol system of our society, and is ignored.

This month we're studying generosity and I want to explore how we can lead more generous lives. It can be hard to be generous when besieged by a consumer culture that promotes competition rather than cooperation, and individualism rather than community, where life is depicted as zero sum game.

However "true poverty," writes Jean Baudrillard, "involves not the quantity of goods a group possesses, but the nature of its human relationships."

Our society is characterized by a scarcity mentality. In society, there is a constant need; an ever present sense that one does not have enough. Rather than mutual sharing of what people have, modern society is characterized by competition which contributes to the feeling that there is never enough. Since the problem lies in social relationships, it cannot be solved by increases in production, a better economy or more things. The only solution to the problem, says Baudrillard, lies in changing social relationships and social logic.

This has been on my mind since the February 28th blackout that many of us participated in, or tried to participate in. This economic blackout was in protest of corporate greed, and targeted companies that have reduced or eliminated their diversity, equity and inclusion efforts in response to the administration's attack on federal DEI programs since inauguration day. That includes Walmart, Target, Amazon, and Starbucks. Consumers participating in the boycott were encouraged not to spend any money anywhere for one day. If they had to spend, they were encouraged to buy from a local business.

It seemed like an easy ask.... Except that I was hosting family from out of state that weekend. Though I love to cook, my day job keeps me pretty busy and so I ordered a birthday cake for my mom and wanted

¹ Baudrillard, Jean. *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*.

to pick it up on Friday, Feb. 28th – the worker at the bakery didn't want to take my money when I ordered it earlier in the week, so I had to pay for it on Friday, the boycott day.

That wasn't all. I work out on Friday mornings and generally have coffee afterwards with a friend. I didn't even think about the money we spend at the coffee shop – at least it wasn't Starbucks, but it was a chain – Black Rock which has a 3.9 diversity rating out of 5, by its employees. I paid cash and didn't give them my phone number to track my purchase.

Then I go to pick up my cake and paid in cash. But I learned if I put in my membership number, I could get the \$28 cake for \$20, which I did, making my purchase visible and entirely violating the boycott. But, I happily learned, that the Safeway where I bought the cake has extensive DEI policies, LGBTQ+ support, and corporate social responsibility programs which solidify its status as a notably progressive grocery store chain.

It was a really interesting exercise. I don't think of myself as much of a shopper, but I learned that even on a day I didn't want to shop, I made two purchases. This whole exercise has me paying better attention to where I spend my money. Giving up Target isn't hard for me, and I'm grateful that Costco is committed to progressive causes. I'll admit that I still buy Starbucks from time to time, but I am discovering local coffee shops and try to frequent them instead. I'm also working on being gentle with myself when I shop somewhere I don't wish to support – because I'm often weighing convenience, cost, and the realities of my life against ideals I wish to uphold and support.

I don't think that my dollar is going to affect much on its own and it's not up to me alone, but these mass efforts to boycott or blackout show some promise, in my opinion. Lent began this week, for Christians, and Atlanta Pastor Jamal Bryant is encouraging shoppers to refrain from purchasing anything from Target during the "40-day fast", the 40-day period of fasting and prayer leading up to Easter. That's a Lenten activity I can get behind. Friday began a week-long boycott of Amazon. I can give up Target entirely and am pretty sure I can avoid shopping on Amazon for a week, though you must know it includes amazon-owned companies like Whole Foods, Zappos, Prime Video, and more. I made a point of buying a pair of sandals recommended by my chiropractor on the brand name website, but guess how they were delivered? In an Amazon truck! So it's not easy. But the harder it is reveals how important it is – because we are interdependent and entangled and complicit.

There's another section of this book I am reminded of as I hold up my physical Jetpig to represent those intangible values...

Baudrillard suggests that the trend toward placing value on nature, space, clean air, and silence which *seems* to express an advance in society, "is ambiguous in meaning and one might, as it were, see it as representing quite the opposite. There is no right to space until there is no longer space for everyone and until space and silence are the privilege of some at the expense of others. The right to clean air signifies the loss of clean air as a natural good, its transition to commodity status and its inegalitarian social redistribution."²

The diversity, equity, and inclusion programs that are under attack by the administration – which are seen by many of us as progress – are of course, admission that we are operating under a white supremacy culture that doesn't value diversity, doesn't strive for equity, and intentionally excludes

² Baudrillard, 58.

people. The push-back to “woke politics” is not so much because people don’t want equity but because they think the DEI programs themselves promote inequity – because they don’t recognize or believe that the culture we live in is inherently unequal.

Which leads me to Willy Loman and Jeff’s assertion that “For Miller...this whole play seems to be about the fallacy and lies of the American Dream and the dangers of trying to reach it.”

Perhaps the good news of this whole Trump administration fiasco is the final burial of the American Dream – at least for those outside of this country who longed to come here for the freedom and economic independence they sought. With the loss of basic freedoms and U.S. status in the world and the clear money grab of the elite, perhaps this idea of the American Dream can finally be put to rest. It was always problematic – built on the assumption of Empire and occupation, and economic exploitation.

Wait, isn’t this sermon supposed to be about generosity? Why did this get so bleak? I blame Arthur Miller and Jeff Payne for bringing Arthur Miller into it.

This month we’re studying generosity and I want to explore how we can lead more generous lives. It can be hard to be generous when besieged by a consumer culture that promotes competition rather than cooperation, and individualism rather than community, where life is depicted as zero sum game. Writes Jeff,

“For Miller, I think this whole play seems to be about the fallacy and lies of the American Dream and the dangers of trying to reach it. The play hits this spot deep inside of us that there’s more to life than spending every minute of every day in pursuit of wealth and fame and having everything. Willy Loman couldn’t avoid being sucked into the trap that many of us face and feel each and every day.”

His conclusion is “ I can spend my time surrounding myself with friends and family and remember that I only have one life to live and that I should live graciously and gratefully for what I have.” Baudrillard says that the solution to our problem lies in changing social relationships and social logic.

At least I can try to be a little more kind, Nimo Patel reminds us. Generosity is a social construct. That is, we think of generosity as having both a giver and a receiver of that generosity. One can be generous to oneself – and I try to be – but that is also rooted in relationships, right? We’re hard on ourselves because someone was hard on us or we witnessed someone being hard on themselves and we tend to carry that message in our bodies until we’ve worked it through with some measure of healing. But often, generosity feels like it has a giver and a receiver of that generosity.

I found an acronym online that helps remind us of the areas where we find generosity and can learn to be generous – LIFE is the acronym, and it stands for Labor, Influence, Financial Resources, and Expertise. (JETPIG has me enjoying acronyms lately.)

We can be generous with our labor, with our time, when we volunteer at the local school or here at church. Or even in our paid jobs – there is a way we can be generous in our work.

We can be generous with our influence – that social contract. We can influence our relationships by how we approach them. It could also be through that labor, but this is more about the relationships at the core of any volunteer or paid labor. The Intercultural Skills class is helping us be more generous with our influence because it teaches us how to be more effective in relationships.

We can be generous with our financial resources, when we have them. I think this is often the first thing people think of when we say generosity, but that is because we live in this consumer culture that places financial value on objects and values. Our society is characterized by competition which contributes to the feeling that there is never enough. The antidote to that competition is a mutual sharing of the financial resources we do have. That's why you often hear us saying "It is our hope and expectation that those who have more, will give more, so that all may participate in the life of our community, regardless of their personal financial resources."

And the E in LIFE is for expertise, which just means your unique experiences and knowledge. You have spiritual gifts and sharing them with others only enhances the world we share. We're better together, it says in the covenant adopted by this congregation in 2017.

The parable of the Miraculous Pitcher retold by Nathaniel Hawthorne – who was not a unitarian or a transcendentalist, though he was good friends with both Emerson and Thoreau – but the Greek parable he retells reminds us that we can find the spiritual nourishment to meet the needs of this chaotic age.

"If we do not let our fears have dominion," writes Barbara Rhode, and let me add to that scarcity thinking – the fear of not having or being enough – "If we do not let our fears have dominion, we may discover that in the midst of pain we find inner strength, in the midst of bewilderment we find inner clarity, in the midst of nourishing another we find ourselves nourished." This tale reminds us that one doesn't have to be young and rich to be generous, but that generous-heartedness is available to us all, and the gods may just reward us spiritually for that generosity. No matter how often we pour from the pitcher of generosity – true generosity - , it is always full.

This is how we counter systems of oppression, including the scarcity mindset of our consumer culture. This is how we build a new way.