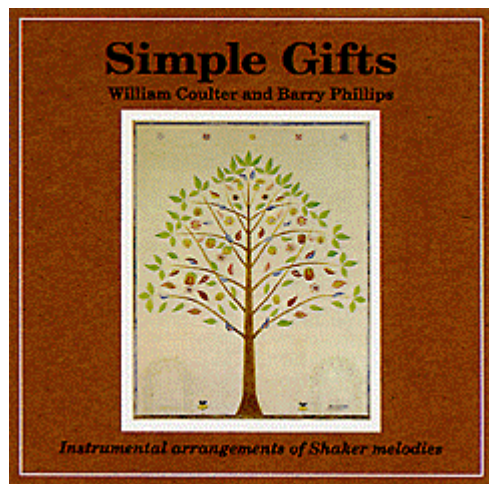


# Getting and Spending We Lay Waste Our Powers



A Sermon by **Rev. Carolyn L. Price**  
*Universalist Unitarian Church of Santa Paula*  
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The most common words I heard (and I heard them often) during my seminary years were “I don’t know how you do it.” I began seminary the same day that my youngest child started kindergarten. Each week, I drove 3 or more hours to Claremont, went to classes for 15 hours spread over two days, then drove home. In addition to that I completed the other requirements for our UU ministry – an internship with a local UU congregation, serving for 20 to 30 hours a week, and for four months straight during a summer break working 40 hours a week as a Chaplain in a Veteran’s Hospital 4 hours from my home.. And in the midst of those years my marriage ended, which had most certainly not been a part of the plan.

So those words “I don’t know how you do it” were like a mantra. Even when I didn’t hear them from the people around me, I heard them in my head. Only then it was more like: I have NO idea how I’m going it!.

The question is - how do any of us do it – extend ourselves either time-wise or financially beyond our means? For make no mistake, those years, as precious as they were both in the training I received during them and in my joy in the process, were beyond my means. They were beyond my means financially, to be sure, and my student debt load is the consequence of that. But they were also, week after week, month after month, for three full

years without a break, beyond what any sane person could reasonably expect to achieve in any one period of time.

Let me say that not for one minute do I regret living beyond my means for those years. That said, it is a habit both of mine and, dare I say, of some of yours, and one perpetuated in our culture – a habit which, once begun, is hard to break. And that, my friends, is the topic of the sermon this morning.

In that wonderful sonnet that William Wordsworth wrote in 1802, he begins:

*The world is too much with us; late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;*

Literary types, (you will recall that I majored in English Lit. in undergraduate school and taught high school literature) agree that Wordsworth's writing speaks to the socio-cultural phenomena of the times – of a world growing more materialistic with the rise of the Industrial Revolution, with the speed of life increasing as more people moved to the cities to be near the factories.

This move had many effects, but some which Wordsworth and fellow Romantic Poets most objected to were the move away from the land and from the family, from a slower paced life on the farm that bred

interconnection and interdependence, to the realm of the factory with its emphasis on machinery, noise, and obsession with speed, which Romantic poet William Blake deemed the "*Dark satanic mills*" of the time.

Now, 200 years later, Wordsworth's words still ring true. More than ever, especially in the west, the focus is on "getting and spending", and the cost continues to "lay... waste to our powers." It has been suggested that as a people we have lost the ability to move, to think, to listen, to speak, and to act slowly. So much of our lives are rushed. So many of us are so often in a hurry. Spending our lives like this, how can we help but lay waste our powers.

One of the best things about Claremont was its international student body. I had a friend there who was from Nigeria, a tiny and primitive village. One night we walked together across the campus, and he spoke to me about how it was for him to come to this country. He still, two years after arriving, had not adjusted to the sheer number of stores that existed. What he really couldn't grasp was how, on a 15 minute drive, he saw the *same* store, with the *same* name, three times. Surely, he said, people didn't need that many stores so close together? Wasn't there something better we could do with the land? It made no sense to him.

Here in affluent America we have learned to equate possessions with wealth, and to view shopping as a leisure time activity. Now the classic definition of a leisure time activity is one that restores the soul, which grants us through leisure the rest and regeneration that our work life can rob us of. That said, today and on any given Sunday morning in this country more people stream into Costco and Walmart, and the miles and miles of destination malls in America, than ever walk into the sanctuary of a church, or the sanctuary of the hills and valleys of this beautiful land.

The gospel has become “more is better”. More things to buy and own. But much of this nation shops at our own peril. According to consumer researcher Howard Dayton, “The average person in our country is three weeks away from bankruptcy. He has little or no money saved, regular fixed obligations to support a relatively high lifestyle, significant monthly credit obligations and a total dependence on next week’s paycheck to keep the budget afloat.<sup>1</sup>”

And always, there is more to do, more to do. Our lives, despite all the modern advances, are busier than ever before. The 1990s were termed the “decade of the time famine<sup>2</sup>” The workplace is one of the worst culprits in terms of pressure to give up our time. But the famine reverberates in the

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<sup>1</sup> See Kerby Anderson, Probe Ministries, *Time and Busyness*, <http://www.leaderu.com/orgs/probe/docs/time.html>

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

laments of Religious Educators of all denominations who have trouble getting families with children to come to church on Sunday, rather than to a soccer match or a performance. As Unitarian Universalist researcher and writer William Dougherty has said in the *UU World* (Dec. 2003):

“This is a social justice issue, not just a personal issue. We are being pressured by competitive forces in business to work too many hours either so we can keep our jobs or because one job does not pay a living wage, and we are voluntarily enrolling our children in their own version of the adult rat race. There's a saying worth keeping in mind: Even if you win the rat race, you're still a rat.”

Just to be here, my friends, is to be counter-cultural. Just to be here, is for a moment or an hour, to enter into a slower time, to step away from that culture of speed and acquisition. We have, almost all of us in this room, so much more than we will ever need in terms of material goods. Here, we can remember that. Here, we can remember the people of Nigeria, where my friend lived, who have so little, and we can ponder what it is that we might live without ... we can ponder how to live simply, so that others might simply live.

Our lack of time and our obsessive consumption are a spiritual issue as well. For to be in touch with the life force that is greater than any one of

us, to be a spiritual person, requires that we not live always in the rush of the ordinary world; it requires rest and a quieting of the incessant demands of more and more and more!

So, how then do we counter this culture of more, so that our minds and our bodies and our spirits are not laid waste and drained? There are many books out there on the subject, even whole movements to reclaim our time and make smarter and simpler financial decisions; I have read many, as I am sure you have. But reading is abstract. This morning I want to talk about the real choices we are making with our lives. TO begin with, does turning away from a culture of speed and acquisition mean saying “no” to everything, but that which for duty or love we cannot deny?

My own answer – for I can only speak for myself – is that it is not as simple as that, and in its own way, it is far more simple than that.

For we cannot say no to all the opportunities that come our way – opportunities to “spend:” our lives – to learn, to be in relationship, to be challenged, to serve, to give, and to grow. To say no to everything would be to deprive ourselves of the inherent richness of this life. It would be to live and move from a place of scarcity, denying the inherent beauty and abundance of existence. It would be to refuse to fully share life’s bounty

which, in religious terms, would be to sin; for by so doing we limit the potential of our lives, and reject the very grace of the world.

Even with how we “spend” our currency, we cannot say no to everything. For beyond love and duty, a myriad of needs and desires exist to sway our hearts and minds to give of our finances. These too are opportunities to participate in the abundance of the world, not only for ourselves – that is where we can get into trouble – but for one another, for the good of our neighbors, near and far.

So it is not as simple as saying no to all but love and duty, and yet it is far more simple than that.

One night in seminary I sat at an outdoor café in the village of Claremont. Racing to keep up with an endless amount of things to be done, to be paid for – more and more and more – I was aware that I was at a breaking point. Having done and spent too much for too long, for too far beyond my means, I had finally laid waste my own powers. I was exhausted and afraid.

I did not know what the answer might be, for I knew that the journey was not over, not until I was done with my training. I knew I could not say no to everything. For a moment I felt desperate, with no way out, no way to stop what felt like a journey I might never finish, nor one that allowed rest

along the way. But I had with me a book. So, like I often do when all else fails, I opened the book. And my eyes fell on this short poem of Rumi's. From far back in the 13<sup>th</sup> century I heard this wise man, this timeless mystic calling out to me, calling:

Sit down and listen.  
You are drunk  
And this  
Is the edge of the roof.

And I saw what I had done, how I had allowed myself to be lured by the sirens of “more and more and more” until I had become intoxicated. I had followed those alluring voices so intently that I was no longer aware of where or who I was or what I was doing. All I could think of was the list, and what I had to get and spend and do in order to place check marks on that list.

Now our Buddhist cousins would say, I was not awake, not even close to mindful. I was in the place of ego, our psychologist brothers would say, self-centered and closed. The place of *koyanisquatsi* “out of balance”, our Native American wise-women would say.

I couldn't think of those illuminating words that night. All I knew was that I was living outside of my own being, living not in the deep sense of purpose that had called me to study for the ministry, but in a shallow and hurried quest for more. I had forgotten or relinquished the ability to slow

down, to be quiet, to listen. My body was not well; my mind half crazed, and – even though I was in seminary – my own spirit was starving.

That night, I took in the poet’s words. “Sit down and be quiet. You are drunk, and this is the edge of the roof.” I saw the edge of the roof. I felt it under my feet, I sensed below me the darkness with its terrible, soul-breaking loss. And I stepped away.

I can’t pretend that my life changed the next day. But it did change. I met with a spiritual director, a retired UCC minister who had become a Quaker. She helped me to find my core values, first of all, something that to this day serves me well as I make choices about what to say yes to, and what to let go. She challenged me to find 30 minutes a day for myself, to be in stillness and contemplation. I recoiled, “no, 30 minutes is impossible!”, listing for her all the things to be done. 20? She said. No, I shook my head, slightly panicked. 10?, she suggested quietly, as if soothing a petulant child. Finally we made a deal. I would give the important practice of slowing down, centering, and being still exactly one minute a day, in the morning, before I hurled myself out of bed.

Well, good things have a way of growing, and before long the 1 minute turned to five, soon with a lovely cup of coffee in my hand, because – as I proudly told this woman in our next meeting – the god of my

understanding would WANT me to have coffee while I meditated. And the five turned to twenty, as I spent my time in silence, staring out at the tipu tipuana tree in my yard, or at the native gardens of Claremont. IF my mind was too active I would read poetry or contemplative writings, and the twenty became 30 or 40.

And the quiet I learned in those mornings followed me through the day. And sometimes in the middle of class (especially a dull class on Christian history!) I would step outside, into the open spaces, and look out over the mountains and sky, and feel again the peace of the early morning. In the midst of a meeting I would see through the window the color of the clouds at evening – pink and blue and grey. And it would sustain me. So it was that I learned to grasp – in the smallest spaces and places – and to hold that stillness, and to feel it fill me and grant me peace and strength

This practice sustained me during my seminary years, during the loss of my marriage, during the difficult illness and death of my father. It is simple. Each time I turn away from the culture of speed and greed and come down to where I ought to be – to live within my means, both with time and money, I rediscover the healing powers that are available in the quiet of the heart and the stillness of the mind. And my own powers are no longer are laid waste; instead they are gently nourished and born anew.

This *turning*, as the Shakers call it, or *mindfulness*, as the Buddhists might say, is a spiritual practice which I continue to this day. It is but one of many, but it has worked for me. During our Congregational Response, I am interested in hearing from you – in what you have done in your life, or heard about or read about – that has been an effective antidote to a culture of speed and acquisition.

I will end as we began - with the words of Wordsworth, who knew of this practice, who knew that ever near us is a way to live that rises not out of scarcity, but from a place of abundance, offering us a way to be at home in the world that is sustainable and good. In Wordsworth's words:

“And I have felt a presence that disturbs me with the joy of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused, whose dwelling is the light of setting suns, and the round ocean and the living air and the blue sky, and in the mind of man (and woman); a motion and a spirit that impels all objects of all thought and rolls through all things.”

As this new year begins, I wish for you a life well balanced, with mind and body and spirit open to the abundance of life's bounty. I wish you the courage and will to make choices that do not lay waste your powers but that fill you, more and more and more, with the beauty and the grace of this wonderful world.

Please join me for our closing song, *Simple Gifts, #16*