an elegant sufficiency
November 18, 2007
UU Church of Ellsworth

Reading: from Thoreau's Walden
SERMON
The holidays are upon us with a capital H. Christmas decorations are already on display in the store, turkeys are ordered, we're ready to roll…so it must be time for the annual anti-consumption service. We live in the United States; our individual carbon footprints are enormous, and our cultural solution for problems is to buy things. We even talk about retail therapy—what's not to be ashamed of?
Not so fast. It's true, many of us could probably put the soul back in Solstice and do a little less running around. But self-flagellation by itself isn't going to do us much good. In this faith where reason meets intuition we can ask what feels good, what feels right, what feels necessary, and why. Then perhaps an elegant sufficiency will emerge.
One or two generations back, it was considered uncouth to say at a meal that one was full. The Victorian-sounding workaround was to say, "thank you, I've had an elegant sufficiency." It sounds awkward in today's mouths but it does embody the sense not only of enough, but of grace. One gets the feeling that a game of tag football would not be out of the question after an elegant sufficiency. Being stuffed is another matter. It is more something done-to than done-on-purpose. And perhaps that is the key—intention. Of course, in both cases the person has eaten their fill, so what has one engaged that the other has not?
Likely, some combination of mindfulness and intuition.
We have a long history with intellect and instinct.

historic Unitarians and Universalists—the value of intuition
Between the 1930's and the 1950's an idea which had its beginnings in the 1700's finally took root and began to grow. A world that could consider the absence of any deity became a reality, and the atheists and humanists needed places to gather. After the publication of the first Humanist Manifesto, one of those places was the Unitarian church. Their presence changed the course of our history forever, broadening our scope, drawing us away from liberal Christianity into a world of theological and organizational possibility. Without the humanist presence our churches would not have developed the broad base of beliefs that is so characteristic of our current identity. It is largely the humanists who made room for the Buddhists, the polytheists, the Wiccans, the Pagans, and the naturalistic theists among us. Before the arrival of the humanists the American Unitarian Association was fundamentally Christian; afterwards, it was anything but. In fact, it has taken us until now to start reintegrating UU Christians and Christian theology into our association's identity along with the Buddhists, the polytheists, the pagans, and others. We have no creedal test, no dogma, no set theology, but we are always working to become truly theologically welcoming.
The Universalists had a different story. Much more Christian identified until merger, they came out of a culture that included tent revivals and adult baptism. They were less influenced by the industrial revolution, less separated from the affective denominations that relied on emotion and instinct at least as much as intellect. This is not to say that Universalists were less smart, simply that they saw religion differently, as something that could and should be felt to be understood. They were in many ways older-fashioned than their Unitarian siblings, more tied to tradition and

to ritual, more connected to history. Where the Unitarians followed the "modern" thinking about industry and evolution into the mobile and factoried world, the Universalists resisted, although both groups realized that their theology was increasingly liberal, and that works mattered more to them than faith.

Because of their resistance, the Universalists were struggling much more than the Unitarians by the time they attempted their third discussion on a denominational merger, in the 1950's. Also, the Universalists had a strong working-class membership, while the Unitarians had, in general, more money and more status. With more people, higher standing, and better funding, the Unitarians held an unintentional advantage at merger that seems to have influenced our faith development for many years. A part of that influence, strengthened by cultural biases in the sixties and seventies, has been a strong tendency to privilege the intellectual over the intuitive.

Sometimes it serves us well.

Sometimes it does not.

In answer to those larger cultural biases, since the 1970's and the beginning of second-wave feminism, there have been studies of women and their understandings of their bodies. The theses have tended to revolve around an idea that in our culture, women pay better attention (in general) to their bodies than men do, and that women "just know" things about their health status long before western medicine is able to produce a diagnosis. Whether gender plays a role or not, there is evidence for ways of knowing that Western science and medicine haven't historically documented or understood, and those way so of knowing can give us access to otherwise inaccessible information about ourselves and those around us. This kind of intuition, more prized by our Universalist forbears than our Unitarian ones, has drifted out of our religious practice, but it is too useful to let it go. That intuition can help us connect with a level of wisdom that cannot be derived from conscious logical thought.

Some people explain good intuition as subconscious processing of an enormous amount of data. Some people resist finding an explanation. Like luck, sometimes intuition is wrong. But the closer the questions get to our essence, the more likely our gut is to speak some unexpected truth to us, in our role as the deciding power in our own lives.

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free will and a limited god

If we are religious and we believe that we have the final say in our lives, we're faced with an age-old dilemma, regardless of what we believe about god. The combination of free will with theology is tricky, because it requires that we accept a world in which we can make mistakes and survive them. Darwin says that a big enough mistake should eliminate us by natural selection, or if not us, then our unproductive gene. Theism says that there's a god who knows better, and if there is, we are left wondering why she doesn't protect us. The arguments to explain that have mostly to do with required development so we can become who we are meant to be, but why would god not just create us as fully-realized beings…unless, of course, they can't. And if they can't do everything, then what makes them holy, and not just like us…

or are we all small gods, blithely unaware that we are in fact holding destiny in our hands?

That's a big thought. That's huge—big enough to be overwhelming. We may be co-creators in the universe, but for comprehension's sake, what if we bring it down to size, back to our bodies, back to those galaxies of cells we wrap around our souls? On that tiny, almost infinitesimal scale, how are we doing?

food and eating and things

Not too well. Our bodies are amazing. With bones as strong as cast iron, …and as many nerve cells as stars in the galaxy, (http://www.visualhistology.com/Visual_Histology_Atlas/ accessed Nov 16, 2007) we can easily sit in awe of these mechanisms that give us a presence in the world. That deepens the tragedy of our own self-neglect: in this culture we think about our bodies a lot more than we take care of them. I don't mean people who are healthy but outside the body norms; I mean the rest of us. It's usually less about specific choices than about general cultural shifts, but like the spring peepers that die off from pollution or the canaries in the mines, our bodies are telling us that something isn't right.

Individually, some of us are fine. But many others of us are working more than ever, living for the weekend, praying for a day off, less healthy, less well-exercised, more poorly fed, busier and unhappier than ever. We get caught in several loops of consumption, not just the one that tells us to buy expensive gifts to prove that we love our loved ones. We consume TV, newspapers, and other media that are not particularly well-produced; we lose our time, often more precious than money, to things that don't awaken our passions or matter to the world; and we eat, absently, mindlessly, too much or too little. As individuals, we could use some help. And as a society we're hurting.

We are trying to fill a hole that's bigger than we can possibly reach with food, but even if we could address the root causes, and perhaps we should, there's a simpler way to deal with the symptoms.

In her cookbook *The Enchanted Broccoli Forest*, Mollie Katzen includes "A Pep Talk for Solitary Eaters" in which she encourages people eating alone to set the table and eat off plates instead of randomly sticking a fork into the refrigerator simply because they haven't got guests. It's good advice. It could start a revolution. In fact, the slow food movement is already asking some of the important questions.

So what if we stop for a second.

Turn off the TV.

Refuse the newspaper.

Unplug the radio.

They will still be there tomorrow.

Breathe.

Make a simple, balanced meal.

And most revolutionary of all, enjoy it.

pleasure as indicator and selfless acts

Pleasure can come from a lot of places. We get endorphins when we exercise, when we create, when we have sex; we feel good sinking into bed at the end of a long day; and we generally enjoy the act of eating, the sensation of food in our mouths, the tastes, the smells, even the textures, shapes, and colors. Almost everything good for us can be somehow pleasurable if we attend to it

Pleasure is our primary goodness indicator.

Sometimes it's a little more involved. Sometimes we have to look past the first response to a longer-term understanding of the situation—and that's a place where the rational continues to serve us, even as we seek the wisdom of intuition. We have to consider the whole picture, especially if the immediate gratification is relatively compelling but wrong. But if we consider the unease and discomfort of doing the wrong thing, then we can still use our pleasure response to gauge our choices.

The mechanisms are simply not that complicated.
And they're not complicated, because the vast majority of us are good people, wanting to do good things. Doing those good things gives us pleasure, which is probably why we want to do them.
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An English teacher of mine (Mr. DeFeo, Stamford High School, 1990, personal conversation) once asked if there can ever be a truly selfless act, since we derive pleasure from being giving. I don't know. But I'm not sure it matters. Sometimes reasons matters…and sometimes it is enough that we are making a positive difference in the world. What motivates us doesn't often change the impact of our choices. We may not all be angels, but perhaps our limited deity, flawed and even selfish though it may be, can still change the world for the better.
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limits, and how we learn to ignore them.
We are certainly not omnipotent. There's nothing we can do about that, and most of us wouldn't want to. But there are other limits that we can and do learn to ignore.
In a well-known Far Side cartoon by humorist Gary Larson, a student raises his hand in class. "May I be excused?" he asks, "My brain is full." School is really bad training for most of us, teaching that we must take whatever we are given on the schedule determined by someone else, somewhere else, presumably for our own good. I once saw a film on homeschooling in France, where a homeschooling mother noted that in school we even have to ask permission to go to the bathroom. Because of our institutional structure we give up a lot of our humanity—and one of the first things to go is our ability to make decisions for ourselves, based on what we think is best for us.
So outside our institutions we must return to ourselves, and teach our children how to do the same. We already know this, and we're already doing it.
GOLDILOCKS
If you grew up in this country you may well remember the story of goldilocks and the three bears. In it, a little girl with golden hair goes walking through the woods one fine day, and comes across a house which has been vacated by its resident bear family, who are also out for a walk. The house is furnished with three of everything—and Goldilocks tries them all. Inevitably, the one for Papa Bear is too big or too hard or too hot, the one for Mama Bear is too soft or too cold, and the one for Baby Bear is just right. What I took away from that story as a child is that we shouldn't take or use things that aren't ours, because when the bears come home they are justifiably upset to find Goldilocks there, and they chase her away. But there's a subplot—a subplot of moderation. Not too much, certainly, but not too little, either. What we are seeking is a path of *just right*.

Thoreau on balance
In *Walden*, Unitarian and transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau wrote, "I had three chairs in my house: one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society." He had withdrawn a bit from his usual haunts and gone to live for two years in a tiny cabin beside a small pond—a kind of sabbatical from his usual life, an extended writers' retreat made possible at least in part by the relative ease of the rest of his life. When he returned to ordinary life he found people curious about the time he had spent away, and so he wrote a slim volume entitled *Walden, or Life in the Woods*. It details everything: what he did, how he ate, and most important, why he did it.

He notes at the beginning, "When we consider what…is the chief end of man, and what are the true necessaries and means of life, it appears as if men had deliberately chosen the common mode of living because they preferred it to any other. Yet they honestly think that there is no choice left. But alert and healthy natures remember that the sun rose clear. It is never too late to give up our prejudices. No way of thinking or doing, however ancient, can be trusted without proof." (Henry David Thoreau in Walden: http://thoreau.eserver.org/walden1a.html, accessed November 17, 2007)

He had gone to the woods in search of some alternative, some evidence that choice was still present, alive, and well. Embedded in the relatively high society of 19th century eastern Massachusetts, he could have lived reasonably well by most standards without changing anything for those two years. Trouble was, he began questioning the standards themselves. How much is really enough? When does more become a burden instead of a blessing?

As we heard earlier, what he found was that sometimes there are good reasons for what seem to be excesses, and sometimes there are not. He was obliged to talk across the pond to get enough space for big ideas, and yet in his 10x15' house he could reasonably fit 25 or 30 people as standing guests. As long as he had the pond, for two years, small was enough.

Someone once said, "I apologize for the length of this letter—if I had had longer, it would have been shorter." (Sundry attributions) Often our shortcuts amount to long-cuts for everyone else: insufficient or sloppy editing results in lower quality and higher volume. It's not just writing that works like that. Local architect Robert Knight shows the same principle in his architecture. Well-balanced meals are more satisfying. Even LED light bulbs, using less power than fluorescents, are brighter. Our whole lives can be the result of deliberate crafting or simply, as Thoreau said, quiet desperation.

Discerning *enough* is the work of mindfulness.

and Mindfulness is the work of a lifetime. If we manage not to do anything absently, but instead to be fully present at every waking moment…it's a miracle. If we were to manage it, we would still make mistakes, but we would at least have had reasons for making them. I recently watched someone work on a math problem with that kind of half-presence which leads to unnecessary errors and recognized in her myself and all of us, working away at our lives out of habit, missing things we should have seen and at best half-comprehending our choices. At least for her it was only about math. For most of us it is nearly everything.

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Enough is enough when it no longer serves us. It may not always feel good, it may not always be immediate pleasure, but when neither intuition nor rational thought can find the use of it for us, we are done.

When our days are well-occupied and our gifts are well-used, we are done.

When our brains are full, we are done.

When our hunger is satisfied, we are done.

When we have found balance between possession and freedom,

we're done.

Let us therefore seek an elegant sufficiency not just now, but always.

Blessed be.