

Reverend Claire Feingold Thoryn
January 25, 2015
Theme: Stuff
Sermon: Divine Detritus

Call to Worship:

This is our last Sunday contemplating the spiritual response to all the stuff in our life—the trash and treasures that surrounds us every day. The writer Naomi Shihab Nye describes the stuff of life:

The T-shirts we fold into
perfect white squares
The rich egg scrambled in a gray clay bowl
The bed whose covers I straighten

This table I dust till the scarred wood shines
This bundle of clothes I wash and hang and wash again

The days are nouns: touch them
The hands are churches that worship the world.

Let us reflect on the power of the stuff that touches our lives in simple yet profound ways:
What it means to hold something, to throw something away, to give something, to keep something.
The way we take care of our stuff can be a way that we take care of each other
And the way we take care of each other is the way we worship the world.
Let us worship together.

Reading: “The Rules of the New Car” by Wesley McNair

After I got married and became
the stepfather of two children, just before
we had two more, I bought it, the bright
blue sorrowful car that slowly turned
to scratches and the flat black spots
of gum in the seats and stains impossible
to remove from the floor mats. “Never again,”
I said as our kids, four of them by now,
climbed into the new car. “This time,
there will be rules.” The first to go
was the rule I made for myself about
cleaning it once a week, though why,
I shouted at the kids in the rearview mirror,
should I have to clean it if they would just
remember to fold their hands. Three years
later, it was the same car I had before,
except for the dent my wife put in the grille
when, ignoring the regulation about snacks,
she reached for a bag of chips on her way
home from work and hit a tow truck. Oh,
the ache I felt for the broken rules,
and the beautiful car that had been lost,
and the car that we now had, on soft
shocks in the driveway, still unpaid for.
Then one day, for no particular reason except
that the car was loaded down with wood
for the fireplace at my in-laws’ camp
and groceries and sheets and clothes
for the week, my wife in the passenger seat,
the dog lightly panting beside the kids in the back,
all innocent anticipation, waiting for me
to join them, I opened the door to my life.

Sermon: “Divine Detritus”

“The days are nouns: touch them
The hands are churches that worship the world.”

“I opened the door to my life.”

On the one hand, the poet is saying that he stopped caring about his car, and turned his attention to his family. But on the other hand, that car still was the container that held the family. The dented, dirty, crowded car was the stuff that held them together and took them down the road.

On this table we have some stuff people brought in that are the kind of objects we’d save if our home was on fire. It may look like old junk, but *we* know—we *know*—it is gold.

This stuff—and the stuff that you brought to
your covenant group,
or the stuff that has popped into your mind just now—
these items are important expressions of who we were—who we are—
who we wish to be—
who we have loved—
and who has loved us.
A love we can hold in our hands.

What we do with our stuff
can be a way we show respect or disrespect
and a way we show love or withhold love.
What we do with our stuff
is all connected with how we choose to live our lives,
and that is a spiritual question and quest.
Our reading, about the rules for the new car, reminded me of one of my favorite stories.

It’s from Randy Pausch, the computer science professor whose “Last Lecture” was both a Youtube phenomenon and a best-selling book.
He was a very involved uncle with his sister’s kids.
He also was known for enjoying the finer things in life
and had a special fondness for fancy cars.

One day when his nephew Chris and niece Laura were seven and nine, he picked them up in his brand-new convertible.
He’s leaning against the car cool as can be
And the kids start to run towards the car
but their mom, Randy’s sister,
steps in-between the kids and the car
and starts giving her kids a little lecture:

“Be careful in Uncle Randy’s new car.
Wipe your feet before you get in it.
Don’t mess anything up.
Don’t get it dirty.”

Randy listened to her, and thought, in his dotting uncle way:
“That’s just the sort of admonition
that sets kids up for failure.
Of course they’d eventually get the car dirty.
Kids can’t help it.”

So Uncle Randy made things easy.
While his sister outlined more rules,
behind her back he slowly and deliberately
opened a can of soda, turned it over,
and poured it on the cloth seats
in the back of the new convertible.

Chris and Laura just stared, speechless, at their crazy uncle Randy, completely rejecting
adult rules.

What he wanted to tell them was this:

“People are more important than things.
A car, even a pristine gem like my new convertible,
was just a thing.”

Randy writes,
“I ended up being glad I’d spilled that soda.
Because later in the weekend, little Chris got the flu
and threw up all over the backseat.
He didn’t feel guilty.
He was relieved;
he had already watched *me* christen the car.
He knew it would be OK.”¹

In the poem and in Randy Pausch’s story,
not getting angry when our loved ones
mess up the stuff we love
can be a way we show them we love them.
The value of our relationship with them is
beyond the value of a clean car...
even a really nice clean car.
We might be frustrated in the moment—

¹ Story, with few edits for third person perspective, from *The Last Lecture*, Randy Pausch, pgs 69-70.

but then, after a deep breath or two,
we can “open the door to our life.”

Moving from cars to other fast-moving objects: celestial bodies. Often when I am feeling religious, I sometimes look up to the sky. The heavens, as it were. And I learned something recently that I have to share with you. There is a lot of *stuff* up there.²

I’m not even talking about the [more than 21,000 pieces of space junk](#) orbiting the planet, surrounding us in a cloak of abandoned satellites, spent rocket stages, and fragments of disintegrated spacecraft.

No, I’m talking about the trash we have dumped on the moon.

“NASA uses terms like discarded, jettisoned, or offloaded to describe these deposits.”³

Now some of these items—which all told, add up to 400,000 pounds of man-made material—are not simply trash. They are meaningful items that were left with great intent, and they tell a story or bear a message. They are exactly the kind of things we have on the table right here: tangible expressions of human feeling. For example:

- [a small aluminum sculpture](#), a tribute to the American and Soviet “fallen astronauts” who died in the space race, left by the crew of Apollo 15
- [a patch from the never-launched Apollo 1 mission](#), which ended when flames erupted during a training exercise, killing three U.S. astronauts
- [a small silicon disk](#) bearing goodwill messages from 73 world leaders, and left on the moon by the crew of Apollo 11
- a gold sculpture of an olive branch, signifying peace
- [5 American flags](#) which by now are bleached white from exposure
- An urn containing the ashes of Eugene Shoemaker, the famed planetary geologist who dreamed, during his life, of going to the moon.

And then there are things that are testimonies to the gifts the moon has given us in the pursuit of science, like:

- a falcon feather from [the Air Force Academy's mascot](#) used to conduct Apollo 15’s famous “hammer-feather drop” [experiment](#)
- and more than [70 spacecraft](#), including [rovers, modules, and crashed orbiters](#)

But then there is all the other...stuff. Here’s an extremely partial list of more stuff we have left on the moon:

- [2 golf balls](#)
- 12 pairs of boots
- numerous Hasselblad cameras
- several ‘improvised javelins’
- various hammers, tongs, rakes, and shovels

² <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/12/the-trash-weve-left-on-the-moon/266465>

³ www.trashonthemoon.com

- backpacks
- blankets
- towels
- used wet wipes
- personal hygiene kits
- empty packages of space food
- 96 bags of urine, feces, and vomit

It is a very human combination:
the careful placing of objects that symbolize
gratitude, peace, memory, a message to alien life forms...

and the casual discarding of the trash
you might accumulate on any ordinary journey,
so that there is more room in your suitcase
to take home souvenirs.

(Although in this case,
making room for souvenirs is pretty crucial
for scientific research.)

And now both the treasure and the trash, it seems,
will circle our planet for eternity,
long after we are gone,
perhaps to be discovered and puzzled over
by some alien life forms...who knows?

I imagine alien archeologists discovering this stuff
and having no way of knowing
which items
were meant to be precious.

Maybe the moon is like the car in the reading;
the car was once beautiful and clean;
the moon was once magnificently desolate.
And then we humans opened the door and took a giant step into a new life.

But what about the stuff like this stuff on our altar:
the stuff that is so unspeakably, personally precious.

Especially the stuff that connects us to people we loved who have died.

Anne Lamott has a story about a gift her lifelong best friend Pammy gave her before Pammy died from cancer, at the young age of 37. She gave Anne her favorite shirt: it was white linen, long sleeves, pearl buttons, and it looked as flattering on Anne as it had looked on Pammy.

Anne Lamott writes:

“It almost looked like a holy garment, and it was one to me. Everytime I put it on I felt beautiful, and I felt the softness and lightness of my friend. It made me feel sad, but also braver, because Pammy had been so brave when she got sick.”

For years after Pammy died, it was Anne’s best shirt, the one she wore for special occasions.

But after years, the shirt grew thinner and thinner;
it ripped and she mended it, patched it,
and finally put it to the back of the closet.

It was no longer lovely.

In fact it looked like a rag.

But still she found herself pulling it out
and wearing it from time to time.

She writes,

“The shirt had been on her body, and her body was gone. But I could wear it on mine.
...I worried that if I got rid of it, and she floated free,
she might just float away
and I’d forget even more about her...
we forget so much.”

Anne took the shirt on a trip to Mexico,
intending to bury it in the sand, beneath a palm tree.

But as she held the shirt in her hands
and looked at the ocean, she couldn’t do it.

She took it back home again.

She just wasn’t ready to say goodbye.

Anne started to get mad at herself for holding on to the shirt.

She writes:

“I mean, let it go already, right?
But if something encapsulated all the qualities
of someone you loved,
someone who helped keep you afloat,
and those parts of life that made any enduring sense,
how could you let it go?”

“But the shirt was made of fine things that were meant to dissolve.

...The fabric had a life, just as Pammy had a life,
and life dissolves even as you call out, ‘Don’t leave!’”

Finally, seventeen years after Pammy had died, Anne was traveling again very far from home.

She had a terrible night where she was feeling deep sadness, loneliness, fear and pain.

She had brought the shirt with her,
and she held it to her face, stroked the sleeve, and felt the soothing, loving presence of
her friend.
She felt saved, and peaceful.

The next morning, standing beside a river,
she took the thin, raggedy shirt, put two fingers at the neck and ripped it in half.
Then ripped the halves into long strips
as though she was making bandages or a tourniquet,
and then smaller and smaller pieces,
and she dropped the pieces in the river
and watched them float away.

She opened a door into a new chapter of her life, a life without the physical mantle of
love her friend had given her,
yet a life that was still rich: loved, and loving.

Stuff is complicated.

Ultimately stuff is important when
it underscores our gratitude,
our meaningful memories,
our relationships with other people.

Whether we treasure it or trash it,
hold on to it or let it float away,
our relationship with these items is a way for us
to understand our selves,
our world,
and what we truly value.

If you haven't already—or even if you have,
talk with someone this week about what stuff
is special to you.
What stuff would you save from a burning building,
and why?

Tell the story of your stuff.

Tell the story of how love has been made tangible for you.

Open a door into your life,
and let others step inside.

Amen.