

Divine Desire

A Sermon Delivered on January 31, 2010
by
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrman

*“The desire for imaginary benefits
often involves the loss of present blessings.”
-- Aesop*

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Opening Words: (from *Singing the Living Tradition* #434)

May we be reminded here of our highest aspirations,
And inspired to bring our gifts of love and service to the altar of humanity.

May we know once again that we are not isolated beings
But connected, in mystery and miracle, to the universe,
To [all humanity] and to each other.

Meditation: by the Muslim poet and scholar Mohammed Iqbal a piece entitled “The Journey of Love” (from *Singing the Living Tradition* #610)

Where in our hearts is that burning of desire?
It is true that we are made of dust and the world is also made of dust,
But the dust has motes rising. Whence comes that drive in us?
We look to the starry sky and love storms in our hearts.
Whence comes that storm?
The journey of love is a very long journey,
But sometimes with a sigh you can cross that vast desert.
Search and search again without losing hope;
You may find sometime a treasure on your way...

Reading: by Erich Fromm from *Escape from Freedom* (p. 277)

Modern [people seem], if anything to have too many wishes and [our] only problem seems to be that, although [we know what we want, we] cannot have it. All our energy is spent for the purpose of getting what we want, and most people never question the premise of this activity; that they know their true wants. They do not stop to think whether the aims they are pursuing are something they themselves want. In school they want to have good marks, as adults they want to be more and more successful, to make more money, to have more prestige, to buy a better car, to go places, and so on. Yet when they do stop to think in the midst of all this frantic activity, this question may come to their minds: “If I do get this job, if I get this better car, if I can take this trip - what then? What is the use of it all? Is it really I who wants all this? Am I not running after some goal which is supposed to make me happy and which eludes me as soon as I have reached it?” These questions, when they arise, are frightening, for they question the very basis on which [a person’s] whole activity is built, [our] knowledge of what [we want]...

Yet all this bespeaks the dim realization of the truth - the truth that [we live] under the illusion that [we know what we want], while [we] actually [want] what [we are] *supposed* to want. In order to accept this it is necessary to realize that to know what one really wants is not [as] easy, as most people think, but one of the most difficult problems any human being has to solve.

Reading: by William B. Irvine from *On Desire: Why We Want What We Want* (p. 1)

We are awash in desire at virtually every waking moment. If we fall asleep, we temporarily subdue our desires - unless we dream, in which case our dreams will likely be shaped by our desires. Our skill at forming desires is truly remarkable. No one has to teach us how to do it... When it comes to desiring, we are all experts...

Desire animates the world. It is present in the baby crying for milk, the girl struggling to solve a math problem, the woman running to meet her lover and later deciding to have children, and the old woman, hunched over her walker, moving down the hall of the nursing home at a glacial pace to pick up her mail. Banish desire from the world, and you get a world of frozen beings who have no reason to live and no reason to die.

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My sixteen year-old son, Noah, has developed a profound passion for playing the electric guitar. Every free moment, it seems, he gravitates toward the instrument, sometimes cranking up the volume so loud his sound is heard in every corner of the house, other times leaving the amplifier off, and almost silently practicing his scales and riffs.

He often thinks about getting a new guitar. His present instrument is a pretty basic model. It works fine. But Noah dreams of some day getting a more refined and reputable model, a real Gibson, maybe a Gibson Les Paul. Those can easily cost over two thousand dollars, so I don't imagine he will have the required savings for such a purchase anytime soon. Nevertheless, he gets a big charge out of leafing through the pages of the guitar catalogues that arrive in the mail, or browsing websites that specialize on guitar sales and accessories.

I love to watch him. His intense desire for a new guitar reminds me of similar obsessions I had when I was his age, when I spent a fair amount of my time playing the guitar, too. And plans for purchasing a newer, better guitar were never far from my mind. When I was in my teens, guitar catalogues didn't appear in the mail, and there were no such things as personal computers. Instead I would make a habit of passing by the music stores in town, whenever I had a chance, lingering in front of the shop windows, gazing at the fine instruments on display, dreaming of the day when one of them would be mine.

I knew, of course, that an expensive guitar was a frivolous luxury, and that one could make fine music on a very basic instrument. But that knowledge did little to dampen my desire.

It is a strange tragedy, that now that I am an adult, and have the financial resources to purchase the kind of guitar I once dreamed of, I am not likely to do so. Over the years my priorities have changed. The habit of practicing an instrument daily has long disappeared.

As an adult I have learned to pay less attention to frivolous luxuries, and more attention to the practical necessities of family life. Time and money is spent maintaining a home, buying groceries, paying the bills, making payments on cars and mortgages. Being a responsible adult means paying less attention to frivolous wants, and more attention to essential needs.

So, for instance, when we decided to renovate our kitchen a few years ago, it wasn't because we had a hankering for a more luxurious home, but because our financial advisor told us it was the sensible thing to do, a wise investment. When the contractor drew up plans for the new kitchen layout, he included a spot for a dishwasher. Up to that point we had been in the habit of washing our dishes by hand. But since we were told a dishwasher is a must in any modern kitchen, we had one installed. When we went to the appliance store to purchase the obligatory new fridge, every model the salesman showed us included a nifty water and ice cube dispenser. We had no desire for such a gadget. Our past fridges never had one. It is only one more thing that can break, I figured. But all the refrigerators of the size we needed included a dispenser. And so that is the kind we bought.

Now we have had a great kitchen for a few years, and I can't imagine how we managed in the tiny, cramped space we had for the first ten years in our house. Now, when the dishwasher periodically breaks down, the prospect of washing dishes by hand seems like a major catastrophe. Now, drinking nice icy water drawn straight from fridge is the norm. Tap water has fallen out of favor.

It is puzzling how, even though I think of myself as a stick-to-the-basics kind of person, with an only-the-essentials kind of life-style, over the years our household has mysteriously been filled with ever more appliances, nicer furniture, larger television sets, more cars and several computers.

I wonder, has the line separating our needs and our wants been blurred? I wonder, are our life choices indeed determined as consciously and rationally as we think, or are other forces at work?

Thomas Merton had his doubts about whether rational thought is indeed as powerful a motivator as we like to think. He wrote, the intellect "is constantly being blinded and perverted by the ends and aims of passion, and the evidence it presents to us with such a show of impartiality and objectivity is fraught with interest and propaganda." We are, he says, masters of self-delusion. Our desires "are fruitful sources of every kind of error and misjudgment, and because we have these yearnings in us, our intellects... present to us everything distorted and accommodated to the norms of our desire."

Erich Fromm makes the case that much of what we imagine we want is mistaken. For many of us, most of the time, our desires are misguided. We spend an inordinate amount of energy and attention seeking to fulfill wants that aren't truly our own, but are created by a consumer culture. We spend our lives trying to conform to certain social conventions, certain images of success. They are as all-pervasive as the air we breathe. We live under the illusion that we know what we want, while actually we want what we are supposed to want.

What do we really want? What do we really need?

* * *

Have you heard the story of the Salwen family? It is a true story. I read about it in a recent column by Nicholas Kristof in the *New York Times*.

Kevin Salwen, who is a writer and entrepreneur in Atlanta, Georgia, was driving his 14-year-old daughter, Hannah, home from a sleepover in the summer of 2006, when they came to a stop at a red traffic light.

As they sat there waiting for the light to change, they noticed a man sitting in a fine black Mercedes coupe on one side, and a homeless man who was begging for food on the other side. "Dad, if that man had a less nice car, that man there could have a meal," Hannah said. The light changed, she and her father drove on, but the innocent observation at the traffic light remained on Hannah's mind. Once back home, she repeatedly raised the issue with her parents, she complained about the inequity, and insisted that they do something about it. She wouldn't let it go. And so the family began to think deeply about how they could make a difference. They thought about selling their cars, or other things. But it was Hannah's mother who came up with the idea of selling their house - a luxurious historic mansion in downtown Atlanta. They figured they could donate half of the proceeds to charity, and use the other half to buy a smaller, more modest home. And that is just what they did.

Once the plan was set, they did research on which worthy cause they would want to support. They settled on the Hunger Project, an international organization that works to alleviate global poverty. Once the house was sold, the Salwens pledged \$800,000 to support health, microfinancing, food and other programs for about 40 African villages in Ghana. It is estimated that their money will affect more than 20,000 people in Ghana.

The Salwens had always assumed that living in a large house would be best for the family, and especially the kids. And here they were, in their dream-house, 6,500 square feet, five bedrooms, eight fireplaces, and a kitchen that would make any cook envious. But after they downsized, they found themselves spending more time together, since there were less rooms into which each of them could retreat. Their new smaller home turned out to be more family-friendly. Kevin Salwen said, "We essentially traded stuff for togetherness and connectedness... I can't figure out why everybody wouldn't want that deal."

For the Salwens the whole project was not so much a superhuman feat of selflessness and self-denial, but rather an educational adventure that served to bring the family closer together around something in which they each believed deeply. Kevin Salwen said, “This is the most self-interested thing we have ever done. I am thrilled that we can help others. I am blown away by how much it has helped us.”

Now, as you might expect, some people have reacted negatively to the Salwen’s course of action, calling them sanctimonious showoffs. Others are upset that the Salwens are choosing to help the needy in faraway Ghana, rather than the millions living in poverty right here in the United States.

Overall, though, the Salwen’s story is inspiring many Americans to reconsider their own priorities. They have written a book entitled “The Power of Half,” that chronicles their efforts, and encourages readers to reflect on how they might step off the treadmill of accumulation, and define themselves by what they give as well as by what they possess.

It is an amazing story. And while I am not likely to propose to Elaine and the kids that we sell our house, I am left wondering how much we truly need in order to live comfortably and well.

The Salwen’s story reminds me that what I truly want in life has less to do with the objects I acquire and more to do with the people I love. It reminds me that what I really want is to make a meaningful difference in the world beyond the walls of my home.

* * *

Our lives are driven by desires we seldom fully grasp. We are awash in desire at virtually every waking moment. William Irvine writes,

“Because we continually experience desire, we are oblivious to its presence in us. It is like the noise made by the fan of a computer. The noise is always there, a low whisper, and because it is always there, we stop noticing it. Similarly, we are usually oblivious to our desires - to the ebb and flow within us, to the role they play in our lives.” (p. 3)

The answer is not to ignore our desires, nor to suppress them, nor to rationalize them. “Banish desire from the world, and you get a world of frozen beings who have no reason to live and no reason to die.”

Our task is to understand the many desires that drive us. Our challenge is to recognize our fleeting desires for what they are - whether the desires manufactured by skilled advertisers, or the desires shaped by the social norms and family expectations we inherited. Our task is to look beyond superficial impulse and convention, toward the deeper dimensions of who we are and what we know.

When we look deeply, we see that we are not isolated beings, but connected in mystery and miracle to all humanity. When we look deeply, we see that our desire to live in health and happiness, is inseparable from the health and happiness of all people.

Our task is to see clearly a vision of the life we truly long to live, and yield to that desire.

May we have the wisdom and courage to embrace such divine desire.

Amen.