

Sunday December 30 2007 – Dave Gerlach

To Lead a More Simple Life

I am a co-facilitator of a Covenant Group here at the Fellowship. Our group is unique in that we have a definite focus--that focus is on “simplicity.” Each month when we gather, we try to reflect upon and talk about ways in which to live a simpler life and then to lend encouragement to each other as we head down that road together. We are fairly new as a group--starting up earlier this year. At each meeting, our theme is a different facet of living simply. We have talked about our travel and entertainment choices, food and buying locally, making the Christmas holidays simpler, simplifying transportation, using barter systems and time banking among other things. But there are many more areas to explore so we'll have plenty of opportunities to get together in the months to come. An added bonus of this group is that we just simply enjoy each others company.

Just one caution before I start talking about the heart of my presentation. Although I have received input from different members of the group and incorporated some of it, the reflections below are mostly my own and don't necessarily represent the other members of the group.

Since the topic of simplicity is so broad, I've decided to narrow the focus of my remarks today to affluencia--which I define to be the disease of having and buying too much and the resulting problems. I suspect a large percentage of people here can relate to that. So here we go.

We are just coming near the end of the orgy of excess that we usually called “The Holidays.” So it is very appropriate in this moment on the cusp of the New Year, as the glut of Christmas shopping is winding down, to stop and reflect upon how fulfilling our Christmas shopping spree was this year. For this is traditionally the moment when we begin thinking about next year and considering what New Year's resolutions to make in hopes of improving our lives. Just like after overeating on Thanksgiving Day as we are spread out on the couch straining to hold our bulk, that's when we begin to think about changing our eating habits, eating a little less next time, or maybe starting a diet. So too, after the Christmas season of excess buying and spending, we might also want to reflect upon how we could extricate ourselves from this habit. This is a good time for such reflection as we might even feel remorseful for having spent more than we could afford, failed to give to others who were truly needy, or received embarrassingly too many gifts ourselves. There may even be some disappointment associated with the past few days. Perhaps the holidays didn't turn out as we had hoped despite all the money we spent and our best efforts of making the holidays special. So this would be the time to turn our attention to ways in which to make the holidays more meaningful.

Yes, surely there are some of us who have scaled back the holidays, but they are the exception to the rule. Most of us just keep chugging along, churning out

money and gifts to keep the tradition going. Some of us will actually save all year long to have the money with which to buy presents. What is the impulse that leads us to keep doing this? Are we afraid that if we don't that we'll be viewed as cheap, have we lived through the depression or been the children of the depression mentality and now feel that we and our loved ones deserve all these presents, do we think that this is the way it is and are afraid to make changes, is there a deep emptiness inside us which can be temporarily overlaid by spending and buying, or does all that buying make us feel big or important? Whatever it is, or any combination of these impulses, it seems to keep this tradition of excessism going on year after year. I suspect that many of us feel downright uneasy about it.

I offer today two notions which I invite each of us to reflect upon as we enter 2008. First how can we scale back the holidays in order to keep them more in proportion to the rest of the world. And secondly how can we center our holiday celebrations more on the profound values of love, peace, family, and joy. Hopefully doing these things will lead us to greater contentment when we head back into the holiday season next December.

Unfortunately, we Americans tend to buy way more than we need, not just at Christmas time, but actually throughout the year to the point that we often have trouble finding places to put all our treasures. As I walk around the city, I have seen garages so full of stuff that the people can't even put their vehicles inside. Some of the new developers and builders have very cleverly addressed that problem by building even more massive houses with 3-4 car garages. The problem gets compounded by decades upon decades of constant, unending consumerism. I was reminded of the impact of all that accumulation over time most recently this summer when a neighbor was moving out of her house where she had lived for at least four decades. To be rid of all the accumulated stuff, it took a three-day sale. Even in the third day there was so much stuff leftover yet to be sold. I wondered how she could even have gotten around in that house. To some I'm sure that such a sale represented a great bonanza, to me I was just simply aghast.

Over the years as an apartment owner, I have rented to many Hmong families just beginning a new life in this country. They came here with almost nothing. Their apartments were very Spartan indeed. I thought about how my neighbor's house contained enough furnishings to have set up 6-10 Hmong families.

Like my neighbor, I am very familiar with the model of buying and keeping everything. It is in my family. My mother in particular refers to her inability to unload anything as a sickness. She has it, and her mother before her had it. They lived the depression and making some use of everything and anything was survival to them. But passing through the depression to the age of excess did nothing to change their habits. On an intellectual level, my mother knows she really doesn't need or want all those possessions. But she won't take the first step in sorting and culling it. So I have threatened my mother that when she dies, I'm

bringing in the dumpster. Hull it away! That's a great threat to someone who has worked so hard to preserve every little item. But the threat has not yet nudged her off her complacency. I fear the day when I'll be dealing with it.

But I suspect that most of us Americans are like my mother to one degree or another. Almost all of us have too much, and some of us are actually drowning in it. But we can't take the first step to be rid of it. Maybe we don't know how or where to start. Plus old habits are exceedingly difficult to break. We humans tend to be creatures of habit. Often we need a little nudge to bump us off the path of the usual to start heading down a different path. I, too, am not immune to this disease of keeping everything as I was truly affected by my mother's affliction. I found myself following her example of keeping things that likely I'd never use. I hated it when I saw it in myself. But fortunately I got a few nudges to help break that cycle and start down a different path.

Personally I suspect my first nudge on the new road to decluttering my own house came unexpectedly when my wife asked me years ago to be a parent supervisor on a student field trip to the Outagamie Co. landfill. On my way there, I never expected to have a transforming experience while riding on a bus with about 50 or so 5th graders. (Oh, and by the way I gained a new profound respect for what my teacher wife had to put up with every day in dealing with a class full of 25 or so of those squirming masses of protoplasm.) That day among the students, we stood there in a huge mound of garbage looking into a pit dozens of feet deep being filled by one huge truck after another in an unending parade of dumping. It was so obvious that very much of that refuse could have been recycled or reused. It seemed like such a colossal waste.

With my eyes newly opened, upon returning home, I made sure that we recycled with ever greater vigilance, whatever the city allowed, in order to keep it from going to the landfill. Even now with our small 30-gallon garbage container, it is a fun game to see how many weeks can pass before having to put it out for pick-up. I'm delighted when I can go a month without rolling it out to the street. Same with recycling. I challenge you to join in the game. First consider getting a smaller garbage can if you have one larger than 30 gallons. Then see how long you can go before you have to wheel it out to the curb. By doing that, you will likely think about reducing the amount of buying you do. Plus you will consider how an item is packaged before buying it to reduce the amount of packaging material headed to the trash. Further consider taking your family on your own little field trip to a landfill some day for a very eye-opening, first-hand experience of the effects of our supercharged consumer society. You may come back transformed as well.

A second nudge came during one summer when my wife attacked the attic with alacrity dragging dusty things out that had been stored too long. They were recycled or given away. It was amazing to realize how much stuff was jammed in the crawl spaces and left there for a rainy day. After perhaps as much as a couple

of decades of waiting for that rainy day, it was obvious that we could live quite easily without those items. The resulting crawl space emptiness was very satisfying. I'm pleased to say that we have not just refilled it with more stuff. I suspect that with further inspection more things will go as well.

The final nudge came when a bit over three years ago, I sold my rental business. Over the years, many things had accumulated in our basement, the garage, the crawl spaces, and at some of my rental properties. Suddenly I was confronted with the fact that I'd never use any of these things which I had so diligently preserved for the day when they might be of use. There was no longer any pretense for keeping it. So huge mounds of stuff were gathered in the basement--on and around the ping-pong table. I was good at storing the stuff but was somewhat baffled about how to unload it. I started with talking to my neighbor who ran a camp for the underprivileged. He took a huge pile. Next I arranged a visit from the Appleton Housing Partnership and then came the Habitat for Humanity people. Though they also took stacks of stuff, still there were piles of items left. So I placed an ad in the Post-Crescent offering it to whomever would come and take it. After three different people in pickup trucks collected what they could use, there were still things left over. That is when I turned to the Internet for help.

There is a website called Freecycle where a person can advertise to give things away. A person interested in the item or items will then contact you and arrange for pick up. The whole idea behind Freecycle is to keep material that is still useful from going into the landfill. The beauty of it is that if there is something you really do need, you might just find it on that site as well. Even as nice as it is to give items to Goodwill or the thrift stores, what is special about Freecycle is that you actually meet the person who gets the article, and you get to hand it over lovingly into their hands. There is something particularly satisfying in the person-to-person exchange. In addition to items relating to the rental properties, we have given away things such as golf clubs, contact paper, crib bumpers, car parts, a TV, paint, canning jars, tools, and a computer to name just a few and show the variety of items that are out there. The smile and thanks you get are so rewarding. However the ultimate reward for doing this sort of personal purging is that you begin to feel unburdened. This lightness carries over into feeling happier. There is no more worry about what to do with this item or that. I recall how aware Thoreau was of the burden placed upon a person by ownership. You may remember the scene of a young man running up to Thoreau to tell him that he had just bought a farm. Thoreau responded, "Not so, the farm just bought you." There really is a burden impressed upon us by our belongings. That is why a person feels so much lighter when relieved of the excess. But there is another feeling that helps me to declutter the house. I feel grateful that I'll not be leaving behind my mess for my son to deal with.

Naturally such an unloading is not a do-once-and-you're-done event, one must be constantly vigilant to keep the things from creeping back in. To keep it from

coming back, it is helpful to do a spiritual inventory, to sort out and live out the values that make life worth living, and so to resist the temptation to succumb to the impulse which has us mindlessly spending money for a quick moment of fleeting happiness. One approach to fill the void is to find ways to make one's life pertinent and meaningful. Another way is to focus upon and accentuate the blessings of good friends and family. When living in joy surrounded by good folks and a deep sense of purpose, that feeling of emptiness leading to mindless spending is much less likely to take hold.

Fortunately for me, I do have a good model for how it is possible to rid a life of excess possessions. A few short years ago, my mother-in-law, who like my mother had way too much stuff, went from living in a house full of things to living in a small two-bedroom apartment. There was a lifetime of belongings to be sold. And just this month she reduced her belongings even further as she moved into a one-bedroom apartment. Can you imagine living in a small, one bedroom apartment? How much of your things would fit? What things would you keep-- and what would you eliminate? What values would come into play in the decision-making process? Something to ponder.

I have noticed that there does seem to be a natural progression of accumulation over time. As a young person leaves home, he/she generally takes very little along. When we're in our twenties, we Americans tend to start gathering some of the comforts of what was left behind in our parents' homes. But after a child is born, there seems to be an exponential growth in our possessions. The days of using a little pick-up truck to move our belongings from one abode to a new one are long gone. The growth continues as our incomes start picking up over the next couple of decades until our kids leave home. When they leave, we may be shocked to look about us to see all the clutter that has gathered. So to the young adults out there, I suggest that you consider carefully your wants and needs as you progress through the different stages of life with your eye on minimizing your consumerism as much as possible. And to those of us towards the other end of the life cycle, I suggest that we look around and see what we can give away to the younger folks who maybe could make some use of the things.

The impulse to live more simply flows naturally from the impulse to live a life more aware of the environmental impacts of our choices on the earth and from the impulse to reduce the amount of waste that our living generates. We know that fulfilling our desires for products creates some really troubling wounds on the planet. All of us have seen the pictures of forests that have been clear cut. We have seen or read how the mining industry will remove mountaintops dumping their wastes into streams and valleys below. We are all too familiar with the smokestacks billowing black soot into the air to produce the products we buy. Right here in the Fox Valley we are still trying to cope with the devastating impact of PCBs and nasty eutrophication and turbidity of the Fox River. None of us, I'm sure, is happy about this, but we all do contribute to it directly or

indirectly by our consumption. So the drive for simplicity, when at its best, is an effort to slow down and begin to reverse these adverse afflictions.

It has taken our culture some decades to amass the over-abundance with which we now struggle. So as a culture, we'll not likely turn it around very quickly unless we are faced with a severe depression similar to the one with which our parents and grandparents had to deal. But we can make inroads here and there as individuals and by our example perhaps influence some of those around us. We could just individually choose to opt out of the rampant commercialization going on around us. In our Covenant Group we talked about how other cities have implemented barter systems. Such a system offers community members the opportunity to trade things back and forth without money. Plus in the community people offer to lend to each other those not-often-used items. That way every member doesn't have to own every widget that is out there. Perhaps you need to use a wheelbarrow only once very couple of years or so and don't want to buy one only to have it sit endlessly in your garage. Then you could go to a member of the barter community and barrow it for the job at hand. Besides bartering, there is another system called a "time bank." In this system the members offer to do a service for a set period of time. They then are allowed to draw from the bank an equal amount of time from another member who offers a service that they'd like to use. The possibilities are endless such as: handyman work, cake decorating, lawn work, accounting, computer help, child care, scrape booking, party planning, and electrical work as just a few examples. Our Covenant Group is considering checking into these services for implementation within the Fellowship as our service project. So look for that down the road. If we do launch it, we hope all of you will want to avail yourselves of the possibilities to make it a great success. It would be so wonderful to share things and services back and forth within our Fellowship family. This would be a great way to meet and get to know other Fellowship members. Plus it would be saying that our members are very committed to keeping the acquisition beast at bay as much as it is possible.

I want to draw my remarks to an end by sharing about a magazine article that really impressed me. It was sent to me by Fellowship member Bill Carlson. James Bull, the article's author, entitled the piece, "Saving Nature--In Praise of Frugality." In it, he points to a way out of our dilemma. He lifts up the now often-maligned value of frugality. It's a value to be resurrected in our current times and reclaimed from the past. He commented how so often frugality is associated with scarcity. But he says that this is not necessarily so and that frugality can actually be paired with abundance. He states, "Properly considered, frugality is simply the sensible management of limited resources. It is through frugality that we can achieve sustainable abundance. All freedoms exist within boundaries, and sensible abundance takes into account the natural limits of resources." Then he goes on to say, "Frugality has to do with filling our legitimate needs; the commercial world would have us not only indulge our wants as well as needs, but expand our wants and buy even more. The purpose of advertising, after all, is largely to persuade us to want things we do not need. This constant and unlimited

expansion of wants (and purchases) is the driving force of modern capitalism. There is no acceptance of limits in this way of thinking.” End of quote. I would invite you to reflect on the value of frugality and how it might work in your life to help make you a happier person, to release you from the rat race of wanting ever more, and to assuage the guilt of throwing away so much that holds only fleeting value. Frugality isn't an easy value to hold as it is set against many other competing values. But it is very beneficial to be conscience of our values as we go out there as consumers. Keeping the value of frugality held in the foremost of our minds can do a lot to quell the galloping impulse to buy. That value plus just living simply can really help to improve our lives, to make us feel happier, to free us from having to deal with excess, and to help us live lives in greater congruence with the UU seventh principle. May it be so.