

“How To Want What We Have”

Sermon preached by Rev. Melora Lynn Crooker
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Wanting more than what we have – it’s a human habit. Some say it’s human nature. We think things like:

“I wish I had a faster, newer, sleeker computer.”

“I wish this hall closet was bigger.”

“My life would be better if I got a little more recognition & affirmation at my job.”

“I wish I was just a little more attractive – just a little thinner here, more muscular there, better skin, different shaped nose, better hair...”

“I’d be so much happier if I had more money and didn’t have to worry so much about my finances.”

Maybe you have your own examples of this line of thinking. Can you mentally fill the blanks...

“My life would be better if...”

“I would be happier if...”

“I wish...”

No matter what you actually have, there is always a step up – something that would be just a little better.

Consider this sequence:

I wish I had my own apartment instead of having to share with these annoying roommates. I like having my own apartment, but I wish I had a house. I like this house I’m renting, but I wish it was my own. I like this house I own, but I wish my furniture was nicer; -or- I wish it was in a better neighborhood; -or- I wish it was closer to my work ... and you know, we really need a little more space – maybe we should move to a bigger house...

Wanting just a little bit more doesn’t just happen with material things. Consider this succession over time:

I’m so lonely being single; I wish I was dating someone.

I like dating this person, but I wish I was married.

I like being married, but I wish we had kids.

I like having kids, but I wish my spouse & I had more time to ourselves.

Now that the kids have grown up and moved away, I miss having the kids at home.

My spouse is driving me crazy – sometimes I wish I was single again and I could date that person at work that has that quality that is missing in my spouse.

It seems to be human nature to want more than we have, to think we'd be happier if only we had a little More. And yet, as it turns out, that's just not true.

The book upon which this sermon topic was based, *How to Want What You Have*, sites research that shows that lottery winners "end up slightly less happy on average, than they were before" (p.7). The author states that "Once life's basic needs are met, socioeconomic status is unrelated to happiness." He says the fact is, "People who live in big houses are no happier than people who live in small houses. Powerful, influential people are no more contented than ordinary citizens. Owners of Porsches and Aston Martins are no more at peace than owners of Toyotas and Chevrolets. Beautiful people are no happier than plain people. ..." [p.8-9]

We think that we'd be happier if we could change this one little thing (or this one big thing). But in most cases, getting what we want does not, in fact, produce the satisfaction we imagine it will.

There's was an article a while back in the New York Times Magazine entitled, "The Futile Pursuit of Happiness." It was about a field of study called "affective forecasting." A group of researchers have found that in general, things that people thought would make them happy, be it a new car or a new spouse actually made them less happy than they thought. Their happiness was less intense and lasted a shorter amount of time than they thought it would. [Jon Gertner, New York Times Magazine, p. 44, September 7, 2003]

A colleague of mine shared with me an insight he read about in some Buddhist writings. He talked about the cycle of striving – you strive for something, you achieve that thing you wanted, you pause and sit in the feeling of satisfaction, the satisfaction dissipates, you set a new goal, begin to strive for something else, and the cycle repeats. What he said is that in our society, the pause – the period during which we sit in that sense of satisfaction -- gets shorter and shorter. We strive, we achieve, we pause and sit in the sense of satisfaction; we strive again, we achieve again, we pause – more briefly this time; we strive, we achieve, we pause even *more* briefly; and so on, until we just about skip over the pause entirely, and find ourselves swirling in a frenetic circle of striving, achieving, striving, achieving -- without experiencing much satisfaction at all. [conversation, Rev. Doug Kraft]

There's a special version of wanting more than we have that I think affects many of us today. When asked, "what do you want more of," I would bet that a lot of us would answer, "more time." It's less true for me this year while I'm on sabbatical, but I used to say it on a regular basis ... "I wish had more time." But what do I mean by that? – "I wish I had more time?" I have a *lifetime* of time – to the best of my knowledge, I have days, weeks, months, years of time ahead of me. Why do we feel we don't have enough time?

Maybe it's another way of saying that we are wanting to *do* more than we can possibly *do* in our given allotment of time. We pack our schedules with stuff – all good stuff, but a lot of stuff. We try to fit in: time with friends and family, fulfilling work, creative endeavors, educational and learning opportunities for ourselves and our children, exercise, time in nature, volunteer work, cultural

experiences, and so on. We believe, with good reason, that this is the stuff that improves our quality of life.

It gets tricky, though, when we feel that our lives would be better if we could do More of all these things than we are managing to do – it's a version of wanting more than what we have. Like I said, it's all good stuff, but somehow, in trying to pack it all in, we end up frantic – frustrated that we don't seem to be able to do *enough* of *any* of these things. It seems like all the energy we spend running around, planning, worrying, and feeling frustrated about all we are *not* doing can easily obstruct our ability to sit with and appreciate the good stuff we *are* managing to do.

If perpetually wanting more than what we have – or wanting to do more than we are doing -- just produces frustration & dissatisfaction, **what is the solution?** It's not a secret. The answer has been preached by philosophers, leaders of world religions, even pop song singers. Perhaps you know Sheryl Crow's song called "soak up the sun" – in it she sings, "It's not getting what you want. It's wanting what you've got." Wanting what you have. It's in Buddhism, the Talmud, the works of Albert Camus, Marcus Aurelius – even our own Unitarian Henry David Thoreau says it, "That man is the richest whose pleasures are the cheapest." [preface, p.xiiv].

The key to contentment is **wanting what you have**. We *know* it, but it's hard to *do* it.

Which is why I was intrigued when I heard about this book called *How to Want What You Have* by Timothy Miller.

Though the book is written by a psychologist and based on psychological principles, it turns out that the 'how to' -- the method it proposes -- is also a **spiritual path** of sorts. Miller says, "To want what you have it is to think, act, and feel as if ordinary existence is sacred." [p.48]

The spiritual principles that ground this method are encapsulated in something called the "perennial philosophy," a set of basic principles shared by many world religions throughout the ages. Miller outlines the three main elements:

"First, ordinary things, ordinary lives, and ordinary minds are made of divine stuff. Second, a chunk of the divine Reality lies at the core of every living thing. Third, a person's single most important task is to discover the divinity of ordinary things, ordinary lives, and ordinary minds, and to discover her[or his] identity with the divine reality." [p.49]

Miller notes, by the way, that it doesn't matter whether or not you believe that this thing that makes all things sacred is mystical in origin. What matters is that you treat everything as sacred – that you regard all life with reverence. [p.48]

This perennial philosophy that under-girds how to want what we have is very much in line with our own Unitarian Universalist thinking, particularly when you focus on our first and seventh principles. No theological adjustment necessary: we are all a part of something larger than us, call it the Divine reality,

call it the interdependent web of life. And just as the whole is worthy of reverence, so are each of its parts -- all life has inherent worth; it is sacred, and worthy of being treated as such.

Timothy Miller's book gives us **three specific techniques** – three spiritual practices -- to help us want what we have: attention, gratitude, and compassion.

We begin with attention. Miller says, “Practicing Attention means avoiding unnecessary value judgments about your circumstances or experiences. Practicing Attention means doing one thing at a time whenever possible. [It] means performing every action as if that action is very important, treating every sensation as if that sensation is unique and precious, talking with every person as if that person were president of the United States [I'm assuming he means a president you like and respect]. [He continues...]... Practicing Attention means always treating the present moment as if it were precious. An Attention bumper sticker would say, ‘I would rather be – right here, right now.’”

Miller suggests several ways of engaging your attentiveness. For example, he suggests that when you do the dishes you do it with the same attention you would give to disarming a bomb. He points out that if you had a bomb to disarm, you would not likely bring out your portable TV so you could simultaneously watch Headline News or reruns of Cheers. [p.149]

Here are some other tricks he suggests, “When you wash the dog, try pretending it is the only surviving member of an otherwise extinct species. When you watch TV, pretend you have recently arrived from another planet where nothing like TV exists. When you eat Cornflakes, imagine that you have just emerged from a dungeon where you spent twenty years with nothing to eat but maggoty gruel and muddy water..” [p.150] You can also use the more standard techniques of breath awareness and meditation.

Exercises like these – be they traditional or the more creative variety – help you focus on what *is* & pull you into the *present*. Which is a neat trick because wanting what you *don't* have focuses on what *isn't*, and either happens in the *future* tense (as in, “I really want to get a better house”) or the *past* tense (as in “I wish I had the figure I had when I was younger.”).

I'm a big fan of attention exercises because I need help focusing on the present moment. I tend to spend most of my time focused on the past or the future.

I am sucked into past tense by regret. When I walk my dog in the evening, for example, my mind has a habit of reviewing my day and focusing in on all the less than perfect parts of it. In particular, I replay in my head all the things I messed up on or could have done better. I'll remember awkward interactions I had with people and think about what I should have done or said differently. I'll obsess over all the things on my list of things to do that I haven't gotten to yet. I'll critique a sermon I preached or wedding I officiated, skipping over the good parts in my mental review and dwelling on any of its imperfections. Regret. Past Tense.

I spend an equal amount of time in the *future* tense, which I am pulled into by *worry*. I am an expert worrier. Even when things are going relatively well in my life, I can always find something to worry about. For instance, while planning my recent wedding, I worried that hardly any of our friends & family (most of whom were long distance) would be able to attend. And then when the rsvp's started piling up, I worried that we had too many people to fit in the space we had rented. When I can't find anything plausible to worry about in our every day life, I jump to the catastrophic worries. That is, even when I have what I want, I worry about losing what I have. Recognizing that my parents are getting old, I worry that they may not be around much longer. I worry that my melanoma might recur, or that something awful will happen to my partner, Shana.

Shana and I joke that I'm like one of those drug sniffing dogs, intensely focused on rooting out the next stash, following the command they use, "Seek, seek, seek." I seek a worry out unceasing until I find it, at which point, I sink my teeth into it and won't let go. "Grrrr." It's become code between Shana and me. When everything is really fine in a given situation and I leap ahead to sniffing out the next set of worries, my partner teasingly looks at me and says, "Seek, seek, seek."

So, I worry, which pulls me into future tense thinking, and I feel regret, which pulls me into past tense thinking. I have even been known to do both at once. I remember walking my dog around my neighborhood in Sacramento, in those last days before I moved out here. I was getting all sad, thinking about how much I would miss the beautiful weather, my great little neighborhood, the palm trees, and so on. See what I did there? Instead of appreciating those lovely things right there, right then, I was anticipating how sad I would be in the future, about something I would be missing from the past. I completely skipped over the present. I tell you, I am highly skilled at this.

Anyway, what I've learned is that those attentiveness exercises help me with both regret and worry; practicing attention helps pull me out of the past and the future and puts me back into the present. So, sometimes now, on dog walks, when I feel the worries or regrets nibbling at the edges of my brain, I will make an effort to pay attention to the sky, the trees, the flowers... I often think about how I would paint what I see – which gets me to be attentive to color, shape, and line... It helps me be in the present. It shifts my thinking from wanting or worrying about what is not, to appreciating what is.

Which brings us to the **second technique that Miller proposes, gratitude**. As we highlighted in the children's story, you can't make yourself feel gratitude. You can, however, pave the way for it by intentional thinking and paying attention. Paying attention is especially important with gratitude, because gratitude is often subtle and mixed in with other emotions. Miller gives this example:

"There was a time in my life when I felt that if I could only have a child I would always feel grateful. Now I have two. I could say something similar about having a wife, a home, and a career. I could say the same thing about finishing this book. A few minutes ago I sat at the kitchen table sipping lukewarm coffee,

wishing I could have slept more, frustrated because I was watching the kids instead of working on the book. Now, both children are screeching. The older is asking to watch cartoons on TV for the 13th time in the last ten minutes. The younger one seems to have a bloody lip, probably because the older one knocked him down. One child comes to sit in my lap, restless, demanding. My nose tells me he needs a bath. For an instant, I touch my face to the top of his head, and I feel something small, quiet, and ordinary stir deep inside of me. It is Gratitude. It is not alone. It is mixed with restlessness, irritation, and tension, but it is Gratitude nonetheless. The other feelings present simultaneously do not dilute it or diminish it. If Gratitude were not welcome and watched for, I never would have noticed it.” [p.169-170]

Being attentive and open helps us notice and feel gratitude when it emerges on its own. Miller also offers some questions and thoughts that we can use to coax gratitude into being.

“Would it hurt me or help me to practice Gratitude right now?” “For now, [can] I ... identify one thing, no matter how small or insignificant, for which I can be grateful?” “Is what I have right now something I once wished to have? If so, can I now open my heart to the Gratitude I once anticipated?” [p.178]

The questions are all variants on this one general invitation to gratitude: “If I wanted to, I could find something to be grateful for, right here, right now. I don’t have to, but I can if I want to. It might make me feel better, and it wouldn’t do me any harm.” [p.179]

It’s a way to ease yourself into the gratitude game Auntie Belle talked about in the kids’ story. You look around and ask yourself, “Is there anything here right now for which I can be grateful?” Miller gives an example of appreciating a chair in which he is sitting. He appreciates being able to sit down instead of having to stand up. He appreciates the sturdiness of the chair, how it holds him off the ground and gives his back something to lean against. He appreciates the warm tone of the wood, and looks fondly at the nicks and worn places in the chair that remind him that the chair once belonged to his father. He notices all these things, and then he thanks the chair for being itself. That’s practicing gratitude.

The final practice that Miller suggests is compassion.

Wanting what we don’t have is, at base, an attitude of dissatisfaction. We are not only dissatisfied with the things we have, we are often dissatisfied with people around us. They don’t do things the way we want them to; they are irritating, disappointing, arrogant, or dumb. Feeling this way about the people around us is not only potentially harmful to the people themselves, it also doesn’t do *us* any good either. It makes us all cranky and upset. We can combat this dynamic by cultivating compassion.

Miller specifies that, just as you can’t make yourself feel gratitude, you can’t make yourself feel compassionate toward someone. You can’t control how you *feel*, but you *can* work at intentionally thinking compassionate *thoughts* about someone. The key is this: Instead of focusing on all the ways in which this

person is irritating to you, you focus on your shared humanity. You remind yourself that this person is just as human as you are – in particular, you remind yourself that they want the same things you want -- that they have the same basic desires for love, affirmation, a sense of security, and so on. This kind of thinking can open a door to more sympathetic, compassionate feelings.

Miller gives this example from his own life of practicing compassionate thinking.

“At the hardware store – one of those warehouse-sized ones – on a Sunday afternoon, ... I make an effort to be aware of all the hundreds of people in the store and my reactions to them. I realize that I have been quietly evaluating them, without even noticing what I was doing. Some seem unhealthy, some seem incompetent, some seem unattractive, some seem smug and self-important. I realize I set it up so that no one wins. The attractive ones are dumb, the smart ones are unattractive, and so on. I start to reflect on how *I* would appear to *them* if they thought the same about me. Not a very pleasant idea.

“To make things worse, I think of them as a group instead of as individuals. If someone were to ask me, ‘What was the crowd like at the hardware store?’ my first thought would be, ‘Oh, the usual group of unhealthy, incompetent, unattractive, smug people.’

“Now, lingering over the wood screws and mini-blinds, I try to focus on a few individual people. I try to imagine how their hopes, fears, and dreams led them to this hardware store this Sunday afternoon. I keep asking myself, “Could it be true that they want about the same things I do, for about the same reasons?” Over and over again, the answer comes back, “Yes.” I find myself smiling warmly and generously at the tired, tense cashier, something I don’t normally do in hardware stores. By the time I leave the store, the quality of my life has unquestionably improved.” [p.128]

Another way to practice compassion is to think of it as practicing gratitude about people. Instead of judging people negatively, you ask yourself: what can I appreciate about this person? A given person might have an irritating habit of talking too much, but you can appreciate that they are also genuine, open, and friendly. Another person might have a harsh manner about them, but you can appreciate that they are sincere and care deeply about doing the right thing.

All three of these ‘wanting what you have’ practices – attention, gratitude, and compassion – are grounded in the acknowledgement that all life has inherent worth. As we said in the beginning, these are all practices that ask you to act like every part of this interdependent web is sacred.

Black feminist bell hooks wrote, “When I was a girl, Mama’s father, Daddy Gus, taught me that everything in life was a dwelling place for spirits, that one only had to listen to hear their voices.” [Sisters of the Yam, p.8] *[Everything in life was a dwelling place for spirits,-- one only had to listen to hear their voices]* One way to practice these three techniques -- attention, gratitude, and compassion -- is to look for those spirits in everything and everyone around you.

You can do it here, now – imagine seeing those spirits -- in the person sitting nearest you in the pews, in the [colors/flowers] that decorate the altar, in

the hymnal by your side... Recognize each being or object, notice all its qualities... describe it to yourself in detail... Now, see if there is anything you can appreciate about it ... and whisper a mental thank you to the spirit that dwells within it. If you have a hard time imagining the spirits, just offer up a thanks to the universe for this thing being what it is.

Attention, Gratitude, and Compassion – all practices that support wanting what we have. They help us shift our attention away from past longings & regrets, away from future worries and wants, and into the precious present. With the practice of attention, gratitude, and compassion, we shift our focus from dissatisfaction to appreciation, and are better able to live our faith -- to reflect in our actions our belief that all life is sacred.

So may it be for all of us. Amen.