

# This Constant Yearning

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Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church

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**Reading** is from a poem by Sufi poet Kabir, in Robert Bly's translation (The Kabir Book, Beacon Press, 1971)

“I said to the wanting creature inside me, what is this river you want to cross?

There is no river at all and no boatman and no boat.

There is no towrope either and no one to pull it...

Do you believe there is some place that will make the soul less thirsty?

In that great absence you will find nothing.

Be strong then and enter into your own body;

there you have a solid place for your feet.

Think about it carefully! Don't go off someplace else!

Kabir says this: just throw away all thoughts of imaginary things, and stand firm in that which you are.”

## Sermon

In my twenties I was a walking bundle of desires. I was longing for love, career, meaning, hope. One day I wandered into the Minneapolis Zen Center and later started to attend. I found value in the dharma talks, but when it came time for chanting, I was very discouraged by these words: “Desires are endless, I vow to end them”. What the heck did that mean? I was not in the right place at the right time.

They say, “be careful what you wish for, because you might get it”.

This must be because what we wish for is not necessarily what we need.

This sermon is about desires, yearning, wanting, the most basic of human traits. As Kabir says in the reading, we all have a wanting creature inside. It is part of being human. The wanting creature drives

the world economy. It makes babies and motivates education and science. Inquiring minds want to know! As I began to write this sermon I realized what a huge topic this is. We are talking about nothing less than the life force. It is a lifelong task to learn to befriend and tame the wanting creature. To teach it the difference between healthy and unhealthy wants. To distinguish wants from true needs.

The biblical image that comes to mind for me is the wanting of a whole people. Led out of Egypt by Moses, the people of Israel wandered in the desert wilderness of Sinai for forty years. Moses himself never even reached the promised land. This is a story of longing for a home and a place, one that continues from the experience of slavery, down to this very day to another time of war in the Middle East. We all have our own version of the promised land. It always seems to elude us, and the longing for the fulfillment of the promise has great power to drive us. Is that fulfillment ever finally attainable? Or is it really the journey itself that is our home?

The inspiration for this sermon came to me through a poem by Hafiz, another of the Eastern mystical poets. It is short and goes like this: “We are like lutes once held by God. Being away from his warm body fully explains this constant yearning”. We come from a primary oneness, become separate from it at birth and then long continually for some kind of reunion. This yearning flows through all our experience and we tend to find a million idols, worldly substitutes, until we learn to go deeper for the spiritual nourishment we are really looking for. What we really need cannot be found at the mall. But we have a great deal of trouble letting go of what we think we want.

Since my long ago Zen experience, I have become much better acquainted with Buddhist teachings. Attachment to what we want, to our desires, is a term associated with Buddhism and I'd like to talk a little about that because I think there is misunderstanding about what is meant in the Buddhist tradition by attachment. In our society we associate attachment with something positive, emotional bonding. The Buddhist term “attachment” is different. It is about cravings and addictions.

Gautama, who became the enlightened Buddha, lived around 500 BC in India. Buddha's basic teachings are the four noble truths: First, that all life is suffering. Here, many westerners get lost because we are also aware of the great joys of life. Buddha too was joyful, but he was referring to the struggle and loss of ordinary life, to the inevitability of suffering and death. The second noble truth is that suffering is caused by attachment. The third noble truth is that the way to end suffering is to end attachment to what we desire. This takes a lifetime or many lifetimes. Few reach the stage of enlightenment such that they have no more cravings or attachments. The fourth noble truth is the eightfold path of instruction for gradually ridding oneself of attachments which get in the way of wisdom. The final result may be enlightenment, but seekers are cautioned not to become attached to the goal of enlightenment!

Buddhism teaches the difference between the material cravings of our unawakened selves and the serenity and peace that are available once we have learned to loosen our hold on attachments. These attachments are to things such as wealth, status, ego, power, violence, drugs and alcohol. They are the things we may crave but which offer no real fulfillment. They do not lead us back to God's warm body, but only distract us. They are the wants that lead only to more wanting.. Filling our houses and lives with stuff only acts as a kind of temporary comfort but does not bring us closer to the serenity and peace that come with a commitment to lifelong spiritual practice.

So is it ever OK to have things, to love our possessions? I am happy to say that the Buddha taught moderation in all things as a guideline for right living. For me, beauty is a guideline for our need and desire for possessions. Here I think of Anne Morrow Lindbergh's wonderful book, "Gift From the Sea". She speaks of collecting shells on the beach. At first it may be tempting to bring home lots of shells. But, Lindbergh says, a sample of each remarkable shell is enough in its beauty—is really more powerful in its beauty; picking one or a few to be contemplated and appreciated. I learned while living in France that French women do not have closets full of clothes, but have a few outfits that are beautifully made and last a long time. True beauty does bring joy. Owning a few things that bring us joy contributes to our wholeness. Beauty is like the lute leading to transcendence, born of creation.

The Sufi mystics and Buddha have taught me about desire. So has Christianity. I am a life long Unitarian Universalist and I know that we tend to be uncritical toward all the great world religions except those we know best, especially Christianity. We may be too close to Christianity and therefore more aware of its flaws. Many people have had some kind of bad experience with it. Fortunately, I have not. Rather, I have been greatly enriched by my training at a liberal Christian seminary and by my studies at the Shalem Institute in spiritual direction.

On the subject of wants and desires, let's see what we might learn from Christianity. Christianity seems to hold us to an unusually high standard when it comes to controlling our natural human desires, particularly sexual desires.

Yet Christianity's core message is love and forgiveness. It is too bad when misinterpretations lead to distortions of this basic message. I have learned from my study of contemplative Christianity that, understood a certain way, God as Love is all there is and is all that matters.

What I want to talk about this morning in relation to desire is the tradition of Lent, of giving something up for the six weeks prior to Easter every year. There is such a beauty to having a liturgical calendar, a series of lessons and rituals which are meant to lead us back to that sense of reunion that we all long for. The point of Lent is that we should examine our lives closely enough to try to eliminate, or at least minimize, a bad habit: something I may enjoy, but that is not so good for me because it works against my wholeness. It is a way to loosen an addiction's hold. So this year, I decided to give Lent a try. I decided to give up television for six weeks.

I must say it was a very interesting experience. I don't really watch much T.V., but the things I do watch I am quite devoted to, especially the British soap opera *East Enders*. I also like a number of other PBS shows, and usually watch *Seinfeld* after doing the dishes. I occasionally watch movies. These shows do bring me a wonderful feeling of escape and fun. So, you may be thinking, for heavens sake, why deny yourself a little escape and fun? Well, I wanted to see what it was like because I felt just a bit too attached to those shows and thought the time might be better used some other way.

The first two weeks were easy. Easy to read, or talk with my husband or play with my son. Easy. Suddenly, surprisingly, the second two weeks were hard. It was then I heard those words in my head, “Oh for heavens’ sake, why deny yourself a little pleasure?” But I stuck it out on principle. By the third two weeks I found something very interesting. I simply cared less about T.V. Aha! The pay off. There really is something to this, I thought to myself. I have to tell you, my sense of craving for these shows has significantly diminished. My T.V. habits have changed. Now it’s really just *East Enders*. Considering how much I feel dominated by media, next year I think I will try giving up the *The Washington Post* for six weeks!

What is true of Lent and most religious rituals, I think, is that the value of them is discovered when there is a conscious choice to engage in them fully. Rituals are meant to call us to a higher value, a relationship with the holy. They must be authentic to have an impact on our lives.

I’d like to now continue our interfaith reflection on desire with my favorites, the mystical poets. Hafez, Kabir and Rumi and the woman poet, Mirabai, all lived around 1400 AD in the middle east, the area once known as Persia, and wrote in the ecstatic tradition. They had ties to Sufism and also the Bhakti path of Hinduism. They were radicals in their time, as they truly are today. Their poems are full of the most passionate desire, full of sexual imagery, and full of God. Ecstatic union, which we know in the practice of Sufi dancing, was the way they blended joy with worship. Such a joy and passion was and is so much more satisfying than a trip to the mall, that one becomes converted to a more spiritual sort of wanting and fulfillment: mystical union. You’ve heard the Hafiz poem about the lute...Here are a couple other brief examples. First from Kabir:

“The Guest is inside you and also inside me; you know the sprout is hidden in the seed...The blue sky opens out farther and farther, the daily sense of failure goes away; the damage I have done to myself fades, a million suns come forward with light when I sit firmly in that world. I hear bells ringing that no one has shaken. Inside ‘love’ there is more joy than we know of, there are whole rivers of light. The universe is shot through in all parts by a single sort of love...How happy Kabir is in his own little boat surrounded by all this joy....”

And Rumi: “Ecstatic love is an ocean. And the Milky Way is a flake of foam floating on it”.

Only a shift in awareness is necessary to know and be part of this ecstatic ocean according to followers of the Bhakti path. Who needs the trivial possessions of the material world when such joy is possible?

Now I will say this is a particular taste. Not everyone is going to be drawn to these mystics. I love this poetry, and you may if you try it, but if you don’t, here is what anyone can learn: spiritual practices, such as mindfulness. Mindfulness is attending to the fullness of the present moment and it can lead to joy. Concentrate in life on what brings you joy in the moment. In the present moment. Wanting is about the future. Joy is in the present. Cultivate an attitude of openness to beauty. Pay attention to the miracle of life all around. Be awed. Be delighted. Your cravings will subside. .

I want to touch on our passion for a better world and how that relates to this subject of wanting. We don’t just want material things that are bad for us. We want lots of things that are good for us. It is not the really the wanting itself that is the problem so much as the attachment to specific results of the wanting: insisting on certain outcomes. We want wholeness for ourselves, our community and the world. Indeed, the enlightened Buddhist monk is not on the mountaintop meditating, but in the marketplace helping. Justice is a holy cause and of course we long for it. My suggestion is not to try to suppress a longing for justice, but to reduce our attachment to results of our actions. That is how we stay the course.

Let me echo the words of Kabir in the opening reading. Stand firm in who you are. Yes, we long for union with the holy. We long for the whole of life to be holy, for peace and justice. Like the Hebrews in the wilderness, we too long for the promised land. If we can let go of our attachment to specific results, even while working for those very results, and stand strong in our struggle for justice. Then we can be renewed by each other and our common prayers. This too can be a source of joy.

“We are like lutes once held by God. Being away from his warm body fully explains this constant yearning.” What does “God” mean to you?

What might it mean in this poetic expression, being an instrument of “God”, capable of making the most beautiful music? We are somehow here. We did not get here by ourselves. Whatever your understanding of life and how we came to be, it is surely miraculous that we are here. And once we are born, come into being here on this planet, we are all longing for connection with the whole. What is the spiritual quest but the quest for belonging, connection and wholeness? A return to the embrace of that which made us. We are made for music, for beauty, for dancing, for reunion with each other and the source of all. Spiritual nourishment is what we all want. Not only do we long and yearn for reunion with the whole, the whole of life longs for our wholeness, for us. Our very home and place is here, now, in the midst of this miracle.

Joy and pleasure give us nourishment, but are not necessarily within our control. They are gifts that come over a lifetime. While most children have the gift of joy and laughter, it is often lost through the struggles of life and we may lose our aptitude for simple pleasures. All journeys have their share, of grief and pain. Kahlil Gibran has written of the carving out of our souls by loss, which also makes us able to hold more joy.

Healing is a miracle of love. It is getting God’s lute back in tune. I’ll tell you a little story. In Wendell Berry’s novel *Hannah Coulter*, the heroine’s first husband Virgil is lost in the Battle of the Bulge. He is “missing in action”. The agonizing slow process of coming to believe that he is really lost creates a tunnel of sadness and grief in her life for a number of years. Yet it is the small pleasures of life that bring her back some fragments of joy. Here is a passage of the thoughts of Hannah, the widow:

“At first, as the months went by, it was shameful to me when I would realize that without my consent, almost without my knowledge, something would make me happy...No big happiness came to me yet, but the little happinesses did come and they came from ordinary pleasures in ordinary things: the baby, sunlight, breezes, animals and birds, daily work, rest when I was tired, food, strands of fog in the hollows early in the morning, butterflies, flowers...I began to trust the world again, not to give me what I wanted, for I saw that it could not be

trusted to do that, but to give unforeseen goods and pleasures that I had not thought to want.”

There is the message. We cannot trust the world to give us what we want. But we CAN trust the world to give us unforeseen pleasures that we had not thought to want. We can learn to notice gifts.

When my husband read this sermon, he thought of the same thing I did: the Rolling Stones song, “You can’t always get what you want....” How does it go?

You can’t always get what you want, but if you try, you might find you get what you need. What we can “try” is a spiritual discipline, a letting go of excess attachment to possessions and results, a discovery of joy in the moment, an ability to take a firm stand in who we are, here and now. We can all tame and befriend the wanting creature inside and know more joy. We can do this by recognizing our place in the miracle of life. By realizing that we truly belong. We are lutes once held by God. We are lutes STILL held by God. The reunion is as close as breath, as present as the heartbeat of life. So may it be, this day and every day. Amen.

#### **Closing Words** by Rumi:

Longing is all there is. Suffer the longing. The cure is in the longing.

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