



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Greed Gets You Nothing”

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A brief reflection delivered on November 19, 2017

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts:

One head cannot hold all wisdom. Maasai Proverb

It does seem as if the more one gets the more one wants. Louisa May Alcott

Greed is a bottomless pit which exhausts the person in an endless effort to satisfy the need without ever reaching satisfaction. Erich Fromm

There must be more to life than having everything! Maurice Sendak

Sermon: (preceded by a telling of “Anansi and the Pot of Wisdom” West African folktale)

Have you ever gone to a store with a parent or grandparent and asked them to buy you something?

I certainly did. No matter how many toys, candy, or clothes I had, there was always something in the store I had to have, something I thought I couldn’t live without. Probably as payback for my own behavior, my own children told me this over and over again. Sometimes they threw tantrums in the store to make sure they were communicating how desperate they were for this or that. But I expect you’ve never thrown tantrums, right?

What is it that makes us want more than we have? Why is it difficult to know when we have enough? Whether it’s shopping or sitting at the Thanksgiving table, I think we fear scarcity. We talked last Sunday about how scarcity makes us hold onto what we have. But I think it also makes us *want* more than we have. And even though food at Thanksgiving is usually not scarce, we may be fixing foods we only have once a year. And that makes us want more because we know it won’t come around for awhile. As a result, many of us walk away overstuffed at Thanksgiving. We can’t get enough, even when it makes us feel sick.

Anansi realized he couldn’t get enough wisdom because there would always exist more than he could collect. He also realized wisdom is best when shared. He needed the wisdom his daughter

gave him, without which he wouldn't have been able to accomplish his tree climb. In that moment, Anansi actually became wise.

But Anansi wasn't just seeking wisdom and bragging rights for being wise. I think his search for wisdom was symbolic of our very human search for the meaning of our lives and for being happy or satisfied with our lives. Through our connections with others, our experiences, and the wisdom we gain in the course of our lives, we give life meaning. And that meaning usually gives us happiness and acceptance for who we are.

Sadly for some, meaning is found in the accumulation of things. They fill the existential hole in their souls with things outside themselves. But shiny objects don't really satisfy, so they need more, each time believing if they could only have that next thing, they'd be happy and fulfilled. That hole is a bottomless pit they can never fill.

Anansi wanted all the wisdom he could find because he wanted others to think more highly of him. He wanted to be the best, the brightest, the one whom others came to. The hole he tried to fill was self-esteem. If he had it all, then he'd feel good about himself. He needed the title to mask what was lacking in himself.

Don't many of us feel inadequate in some way? Don't we sometimes buy or eat our way out of such feelings? Comfort food isn't called that without reason. We may buy new clothes to hide the old self. Advertisements aim to convince us we'll be more beautiful and happier only if we buy their latest product. Consumerism depends on convincing us we don't have enough.

Greed not only consists of an insatiable need for shiny, valuable objects like money, gems, or luxuries. We can be greedy with immaterial things, too. Not wanting to share one's time for some good beyond oneself. Not sharing a friendship for fear of losing it (which could actually increase the chances of losing it). Not sharing our wisdom, our love, our skills, these are all greedy acts of holding tight to what we have and wanting more.

But greed gets us nothing. Anansi's greed for wisdom prevented him from climbing up the tree until one more piece of shared wisdom showed him how. Similarly, the more we hold tight to what we have, the more likely we are to be unhappy.

Unitarian songwriter, Malvina Reynolds wrote in her song "Magic Penny," that love is like a magic penny. "Hold it tight and you won't have any. Lend it, spend it, and you'll have so many, they'll roll all over the floor." Like love, when we share our treasure, whatever it may be, we get more in the giving than in the keeping of it. Anansi learned this truth.

Among many reasons, you tell me you spend time in the Fellowship to give and receive wisdom for life. When one shares, another learns. Together, we reflect on our lives and how to live better, more meaningful lives. And that reduces our existential emptiness.

Actor Denzel Washington once said, "At the end of the day it's not about what you have or even what you've accomplished. It's about who you've lifted up, who you've made better. It's about what you've given back." When you come here, you give back. You lift yourself up as you lift

others up. And we learn the wisdom that meaning is found in what we give of ourselves, not what we keep for ourselves.

Anansi learned the foolishness of trying to have everything. Although his basket was empty, he would forever have the wisdom to share with others.

May we know that wisdom, too.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. What feels essential to your happiness—is there something more than having everything?
2. What things would you most regret losing in a home disaster? What items hold the most meaning for your life?
3. What wisdom most guides your living? How do you or might you share this wisdom?