

**“Abundance Without Attachment”**  
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When I was in middle school I really wanted a pair of Levi 501 straight legged jeans with the red tag on the back pocket. I am probably aging myself here but I bet a lot of you wore them and I know they are still pretty popular. My mom thought the Sears Plain Pocket jeans were just as good and at \$10 cheaper, a much better buy. I thought I would die if I had to wear Sears Plain pocket jeans. So we worked out a deal that I would pay the difference.

I saved up my babysitting money and soon I was the proud owner of those Levi 501's. The first day I wore them to school I felt great, I felt amazing. I wore them to death. Don't get me wrong, I loved those jeans but ultimately they did not change my life in any real way. I wasn't suddenly more intelligent or popular. I was still just me, just in a different wrapper, but for some reason that wrapper seemed important to me.

Our culture bombards us on a daily basis that we need the latest fashion, the latest electronics, you name it. More is better! New is better and we buy into it because we are always looking for things to help us feel better, to distract us, to make us feel like we belong.

The Buddhist word for attachment is “do shag” which literally translates to mean “sticky desire.” I love this translation! If you really think about how you feel when you are grasping for something that you really want, you can feel its sticky pull. And until you figure out a way to get it, you feel this longing and obsession. We have all been there with different things and at different times in our lives.

Many of us make regular trips to the mall or Amazon to somehow mollify this grasping, this wanting, of something, of anything to bring a feeling of comfort, peace, perhaps acceptance. And the things... the things are just things. They hold no real power over us. It is our desire and our attachment to them that causes us trouble.

My middle school self thought that 501 jeans would finally make me feel cool, accepted and okay. This made sense in my befuddled, young teenager mind and body. But ultimately we learn that gratifying our senses does not bring us long term happiness.

Arthur Brooks wrote an article for the New York Times a few years ago that tackled this conundrum. He was in the throes of the holiday season. He found himself running around the city trying to find last minute presents for those he loved. Instead of feeling happy and celebrating the season, he felt stressed and abused by our societies' desire for things. He began to wonder about our relationship to things and how often they lift us up but then fail us in our pursuit of happiness.

Later, during a trip to India, he met a penniless Hindu Swami named Gnanmunidas and spent time with him pondering this attachment to things that we have. Gnanmunidas had actually been born to an Indian petroleum engineer in Houston TX. He graduated with an MBA and was very successful

financially and professionally. But after a time, even with all his success, he felt an emptiness. He began to wonder if this was all there was. He renounced everything and began at a Hindu Seminary. Six years later he emerged as a monk. Today his worldly possessions consist of two robes, prayer beads and a wooden bowl.

Brooks and Gnanmunidas spent time talking about consumerism, capitalism and our sticky desires. Gnanmunidas felt there was nothing wrong with wealth, or things in general, they could be very good and useful. In fact he feels that those of us who are blessed with wealth are held responsible to share it and use it for good.

But the challenge for most of us was our attachment to money and possessions and our expectations of these things. "If I only had this house or that car. If I wear this designer or carry that purse, then, then I will be okay. Then I will be happy." And this longing, this sticky desire continues to be fueled by the Internet, television, radio and print ads. Soon it becomes the drum beat of our lives and our motivations.

There are even evangelical preachers who teach us to believe in an abundance theology. God wants you to have what you dream for. If you work hard, serve God and believe in yourself, God will answer your prayers and you will have that BMW one day. And maybe so...but Gnanmunidas feels that this attachment to abundance can be misleading and unfulfilling.

Instead he invites us to have abundance without attachment. And to do this he shares three simple rules.

**Rule number 1: Instead of collecting things, collect experiences.**

Now I have to preface this rule a bit. I think that this comes from a place of privilege. If you have what you need, food, shelter and clothing, yes, then go and collect experiences. But if you are struggling to collect things that provide you with basic needs then you must do that. You simply must collect things if you are in that place in your life.

But I might guess that many of us here have enough, perhaps even some of us have too much. Brooks says that material things appear to be permanent while experiences seem impermanent. But it is actually quite the opposite when it comes to memories. Think about it, how many of you can recall the presents you got for Christmas just last year? I bet not many. And yet I bet you could sit and talk about a favorite time with friends, or a vacation you had with family for quite awhile and with great detail. It is those memories that last a lifetime. They are there for us to enjoy again and again.

When my patients reach the final days of their lives and they are no longer responsive and family has come and is sitting vigil, I like to get them talking about memories that they have of their dying loved one. This time is often full of laughter about silly antics or hilarious events that occurred during their years together.

And guess what? It is never about the couch they bought, or the outfits they wore. It is about their interaction with one another, the love, the struggles, the goofy memories. These are the things they hold tight in their minds. Sometimes tears flow as they share the sacrifices they know their loved one made for them as they cared for one another.

These are the memories that we hold, these are the stories that matter. It is never about what kind of car they drove or the house or the clothes or their electronics. Never. And if this is so, then why is it that we seem to spend most of our time and money on things that ultimately do not matter? Something to

think about.

**The second rule is to steer clear of excessive usefulness.**

I had to stop and think hard about this one. I come from a Swedish/German heritage. I was taught to work hard, that idle hands were the tools of the devil. I struggle with sitting around and doing nothing. I struggle with sitting still for meditation. In fact, to be honest, the phrase “excessive usefulness” well, it sounds kind of okay to me. Usefulness is a good thing, right? Lots of it sounds even better! Sadly this is my heritage.

Let me share this story of how excessively useful I am. About 20 years ago I was visiting a friend in New Mexico. She was involved with a lot of holistic healing work at the time. She invited me to go to a drumming circle. I had never been to one before. We met in the large living room of one of her friends. People brought beautiful drums, carefully chosen by them, some even created by them. A few folks brought extra rattles, small drums or shakers for those of us without a drum. We began to drum and I think for the first half hour I was okay. I was intrigued how the rhythm changed and moved. Folks sat with eyes closed, clearly moved by the sounds and the beat.

Okay, so maybe it was because all I had was an egg shaker, but after awhile I was getting annoyed, for what purpose were we doing this? It seemed so useless to me and I couldn't enjoy it. And yet, for many who let themselves go and enjoyed it for what it was, it was a release, a joyful expression of rhythm and community. But I couldn't see it; I was too caught up in excessive usefulness.

And I think many of us fall into this. When we are raising families and building careers, our adult lives get filled with more responsibilities. Our home lives are bursting with getting kids to practices, events and doing schoolwork. Our chores around the house get put off again and again. Nagging us until there is no clean underwear or dishes in the house. Sound familiar?

So the idea of doing something that is just for fun seems like some sort of dream. And honestly, when you have young kids, it is often focused on what is fun for them. Doing something fun just for me? Who has time for this? Maybe you are good at this and if so I say good for you! I know that I am getting better now that my kids are grown and out of the house but ultimately we NEED to make space for this in our lives.

We all have things we do where time evaporates. Maybe it is reading a good book, or having dinner with friends, singing, drawing, hiking, anything that is done just for the sake of enjoyment is actually a necessity in our daily lives. When our lives get too full with the shoulds and the have tos, resentment begins to spread and suddenly we are cranky, impatient and short tempered. Countless studies show that doing things for their own sake as opposed to things that are merely a means to achieving something else, makes for mindfulness and joy.

Finding joy in little things can totally change how you see your day. My patients teach me profound things so often. Recently I learned a new and valuable lesson from one of my patients. This gentleman is 100 years old and sharp as a tack. During a recent visit he kept using the word privilege as we talked. He said “I have the privilege of visiting with my sister tomorrow.” Later he said that he had the privilege that his son called him twice a week. He said he had the privilege of listening to a musical performance at his facility a few days earlier.

I was curious about his use of this word and asked him more about it. I told him that it made me feel like he recognized each of these events or people as an important or sacred gift. His eyes lit up and he

smiled “Yes!” he exclaimed, “I am so fortunate to be able to share in all that life offers me, it is all a gift.” I thought a lot about our conversation for the rest of the day. As I heard a beloved song on my car radio, I thought how privileged I was to hear this work of art that this artist had created and now shared with me.

We have all heard about counting our blessings or practicing gratitude, but his use of the word privilege lifted these events up in a more sacred and holy way. It helped me to shift and see how privileged I am to receive and experience things in my life. Instead of having attachments to events that I expect to happen, I want to remember his lesson. I now want to frame those events with the word “privilege” and see it as the sacred gift that it is. I hope you will too.

**The last rule to a happy life is to get to the center of the wheel.**

Brooks shares that in the center of many stain glassed windows in medieval churches; one sees the wheel of fortune. Following the wheel's rim around, one sees the cycle of victory and defeat that every one of us suffers throughout life. Chaucer wrote stories about this struggle in his famous Canterbury Tales and he states “And does Fortunes wheel turn treacherously, out of happiness brings men to sorrow.”

We are called to remember that each of us may find ourselves at the top of the wheel one day and perhaps fallen to the bottom of the wheel the next. Seeking satisfaction from material things keeps us rolling around on the edges of that wheel. Instead, we should seek the center of the wheel.

Catholic theologian Robert Barron writes that the early church answered this existential puzzle by putting God at the center of the wheel and worldly objects occupied the rim. We are encouraged to place our focus on the center to help us determine the importance and necessities of the things in life that swirl outside of that center.

But even if you are not religious, says Brooks, there is an important lesson for us embedded in this ancient theology. Make sure you know what is the transcendental truth at the center of your wheel and make it your focus. Perhaps for you it is God, the Universe, something bigger than yourself like love or family, or Mother Earth. If we keep our focus on what centers us, that desire, that stickiness falls away and it is easier to let go of things that do not really serve us or bring us satisfaction.

So yes, three “simple” lessons for living a life of abundance without attachment. It is not so easy as it takes great intention. To be honest, it is easier to be numbed by things, television, the Internet and Amazon but like Gnanmunidas asked, “Is that all there is?”

The Tao Te Ching reminds us, “When I let go of what I am, I become what I might be. When I let go of what I have, I receive what I need.”

The next time you feel this sticky desire of attachment, I would invite you to consider this a sign of a yearning for seeking non attachment. Pause and instead of collecting things, shift your desires by collecting experiences. Perhaps instead of gifts, give your loved ones time together. Go see a play, take a bike ride, play a game or bake cookies. These experiences will create memories that you will cherish.

I know that I will be more intentional on avoiding excessive usefulness especially when I am feeling resentment and stress in my life. When we feel stressed it is a signal from our body to stop, to really pause and do something you enjoy just for the sake of doing it. And then get at the center of your wheel. Stop letting the meaningless, commercial things in your life roll you around. Center your life on

what you really value and find meaning in. Then center yourself there instead of on the commercialism and materialism of the outside of the wheel.

In a world that entices us with constant cravings and sticky desires, we can slow ourselves down and let go of attachment to that desire for more. And surprisingly, without fail, if we let go we will receive.

May it be so.

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