

Hopedale Unitarian Universalist Community

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All that gold, all that gold!
I wonder if rich people know
what to do with their gold.
Do they know how a child could be fed?
Do rich people know?
Do they know that a house
can be kept warm all day
with burning logs?
Do rich people know?
Do they know how to roast
sweet corn by the fire?
Do they know? Do they know
how to fill a courtyard with doves?
Do they know? Do they know?
Do they know how to milk
a clover-fed goat?
Do they know? Do they know
how to spice hot wine
on cold winter nights?
Do they know? Do they know?

All that gold! All that gold!
Oh, what I could do for my child
with that gold!
Why should it go to a child
they don't even know?
They are asleep. Do I dare?
If I take some they'll never miss it

For my child. . . for my child . . .

From Amahl and the Night Visitors by Gian Carlo Menotti, played for the
offertory

The Theology of Housework

By now you are wondering what the Christian tradition of Epiphany has to do with housework. I am playing on the literal definition of the word: “a realization or comprehension of the essence or meaning of something or someone. An inspired

understanding arising from connecting with profound insight, awareness, or enlightened truth.” The inspired understanding I speak of is my own and came from the opera we just heard during the offertory. The opera is one I grew up with and performed, as a dancer, when a child. Like all children I loved Amahl himself, the boy dreamer, and the wonderful, kindly kings. The mother of the tale seemed, throughout my early experience with the opera, like the villain. She makes Amahl come in to bed when he would rather be outside watching a huge star, which turns out to be the one guiding the three kings to the baby Jesus; and of course she steals their gold. But about six months in to my first marriage to a widower with three children, in other words, after I had experienced an intense and overwhelming introduction to housework, I had an epiphany, a completely new understanding of the apparently simple child’s tale. I listened to the opera that Christmas with new insight; for the first time I found myself relating powerfully to the searing critique I heard voiced by the mother; why are you (kings) taking gifts to a child you don’t even know when there are real children (like my son) who need them? She voices her outrage not in terms of abstract social justice, but with everyday objects, the creation of home and family, of warmth and nurturance. Menotti’s beautiful music and lyric provide one of the only musical homages I have heard for these simple yet important values. And it is a succinct example of the differences between male-dominated versions of philosophy and spirituality and those derived from traditional feminine tasks.

The title of my talk is taken from a book entitled *The Sacred and the Feminine: Toward a Theology of Housework* by Kathryn Allen Rabuzzi (1982). She joins other feminist scholars who have posited the idea that women construct a sense of identity and connection to the cosmos in ways very different from those of men, but that these have been largely unexplored by mainstream philosophers. Not being a philosopher, I realize I tread on uneasy ground here. But it seems to me that this strain of connection, of “cosmization,” as Rabuzzi calls it, is everywhere around us even now, twenty-five years later. At this point, the gender difference is possibly not my main concern, because there are men who engage in these activities and more who would if they found better validation in the dominant culture. Traditionally, women were accused of having feet of

clay, of paying attention to the mundane and earthly rather than on focusing on the ideal, the abstract, the possible. But, what if the mundane activities of daily life provide an unexpected path to transcendence, to community, to individual fulfillment? Before we throw the baby out with the bathwater, we might want to look carefully at traditional women's work as a path to knowledge, i.e. truth, insight, even epiphany.

My new "Bible," Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, surprised me by voicing almost exactly this idea. She says:

I belong to a generation of women who took as our youthful rallying cry: Allow us a good education so we won't have to slave in the kitchen. We recoiled from the proposition that keeping a husband presentable and fed should be our highest intellectual aspiration. We went to school, sweated those exams, earned our professional stripes, and we beg therefore to be excused from manual labor. Or else our fulltime job is manual labor, we are carpenters or steelworkers, or we stand at a cash register all day. At the end of a shift we deserve to go home and put our feet up. Somehow, though, history came around and bit us in the backside: now most women have jobs *and* still find themselves largely in charge of the housework. . .

When we traded homemaking for careers, we were implicitly promised economic independence and worldly influence. But a devil of a bargain it has turned out to be in terms of daily life. We gave up the aroma of warm bread rising, the measured pace of nurturing routines, the creative task of molding our families' tastes and zest for life; we received in exchange the minivan and the Lunchable. (Or worse, convenience-mart hot dogs and latchkey kids.) I consider it the great hoodwink of my generation.

Now what? Most of us, male or female, work at full-time jobs that seem organized around a presumption that some wifely person is at home picking up the slack—filling the gap between school and workday's end, doing errands only possible during business hours, meeting the expectation that we are *hungry* when we get home—but in fact June Cleaver has left the premises. Her income was needed to cover the mortgage and health insurance. Didn't the workplace

organizers notice? In fact that gal Friday is *us*, both moms and dads running on overdrive, smashing the caretaking duties into small spaces between job and carpool and bedtime. Eating preprocessed or fast food can look like salvation in the short run, until we start losing what real mealtimes give to a family: civility, economy and health. A lot of us are wishing for a way back home, to the place where care-and-feeding isn't zookeeper's duty but something happier and more creative . . .

Full-time homemaking may not be an option for those of us delivered without trust funds into the modern era. But approaching mealtimes as a creative opportunity, rather than a chore, *is* an option. Required participation from spouse and kids is an element of the equation. An obsession with spotless collars, ironing, and kitchen floors you can eat off of—not so much. We've earned the right to forget about stupefying household busywork. But kitchens where food is cooked and eaten, those were really a good idea. (126-28)

Here Kingsolver is talking about many homemaking tasks, but her primary concern is cooking, perhaps the easiest to understand as a spiritual endeavor. Not only does cooking meals from scratch save money, it keeps unwanted ingredients, like corn syrup and salt as well as preservatives, out of your food. Buying locally produced food makes possible an ethics of good citizenship and community by way of the almighty market, voting for good practices with the wallet. By preparing food and eating together the threads of family life become more tightly woven. Kingsolver quotes a study of successful high school students: "A survey of National Merit scholars turned up a common thread in their lives: the habit of sitting down to a family dinner table. It's not just the food making them brilliant. It's probably the parents—their care, priorities, and culture of support. The words: 'I'll expect you home for dinner'" (125-26). Eating together is the core of broader social discourse too, of course. And who among us has not experienced the transporting joy of preparing the food, if not the kneading of bread, then the satisfying gathering of ingredients into a soup or stew? It is our first form of magic, no doubt. If you add gardening to the list of things to do at home you start to develop a control of an entire process of manufacture, what Marx called the antidote to alienation.

OK, there are lots of great cooks and great gardeners here, so I know you are with me so far. Gardening is so rich with sensory, aesthetic, and spiritual pleasures it is practically a religion all to itself. But, what about the other household chores? Decorating, or more broadly, ordering a space is another creative endeavor that men have taken up with success. Rabuzzi describes the process of shopping, selecting, and placing objects in a home as one that should be viewed as a creative process on a par with other fine art. Twenty-five years after her book I think we are actually closer to that conclusion than we were in 1982. From Martha Stewart to the interest in Feng Shui to the celebrity status of designers and decorators the lines between art, fashion and home decor are more blurred than ever. But at the mention of the word “shopping” we inch into what Rabuzzi describes as the demonic, rather than the divine, dimension of homemaking. As consumer interest in the home has increased, so has the stuff that we have all collected. Some huge percentage of Americans now own storage lockers in order to store the furniture and objects that will no longer fit in their houses. And, if you have ever watched “Mission Organization” on HGTV you know that lots of people can barely walk in to certain areas since they are filled floor to ceiling with things they have forgotten they own.

This has been one of my challenges lately. When we moved here to Oxford we rented a house for a year before buying the one we currently own. That meant that we packed up or unloaded all of our belongings a total of four times in a twelve-month period. Since we had lived in two different houses, each with a full basement we had duplicates of many, many items. Paring down and getting rid of them was much harder than expected. To my chagrin, I discovered that my husband, whom I had always accused of being the pack rat of the family, could not be blamed for all the boxes filling our lives. We both own boxes of old photographs, but I probably have twice as many as he does. In reading Marilyn Paul’s book I learned that clutter comes not just from the beloved memories attached to objects but from outdated or unrealistic ideas about ourselves. There is a book case in our house which holds musical instruments and sheet music neither of us has touched in years, but we can’t bear to admit that we won’t play them again. So, there

they sit. We both have piles of books that can't be put away, because we are going to read them any minute now. The papers on my desk get sorted and put right back where they were because I cannot admit that some of them will never be attended to: I will go through that catalog and mark orders for the library, one of these days; I will answer that letter from a friend, I will file that article once I make the proper file, etc., etc. Really getting a grip on paperwork is my own personal weakness, both at home and at the office, but it is worse at home. I can be more cold-heartedly realistic about my work time. My home time, not so easy.

As some of you know we spent many months in 2005 renovating our Oxford house. That meant going through much of our stuff yet again. We made one decision that has turned out to be challenging. We decided not to build in lots of storage. My thinking was, why store things you are not planning to use? So, now if we buy anything, something has to go. This is a process that requires self-recognition, discipline, and full attention. Much of what Feng Shui teaches is that clutter, objects in disrepair, and awkward layouts constitute a drain on your energy, a pull on your concentration. By bringing intentionality to the spaces you inhabit your life is more serene and balanced. Even if you don't buy in to any of the other beliefs about Feng Shui it seems clear that that is true. The activities involved in creating such an organized, energizing environment can themselves be a kind of meditation, what both Rabuzzi and Paul discuss in terms of self-care, self-awareness, and connection to both the past and the future.

So, things like cooking, gardening, decorating and organizing are activities that can be viewed as creative and spiritual. That brings us to the other work of the home which is much harder to construe in this way. Scrubbing, dusting, laundry, and (my own personal horror) ironing, however, are all activities that Rabuzzi claims can bring a sort of meditative awareness; a connection to the present moment and satisfaction with the transformation wrought: the formerly dirty floor made shiny and clean, the clothes folded in neat piles, the wrinkled made smooth. This, in my opinion, is the most difficult aspect of homemaking, at least for me, and the place where the demonic most likely emerges. Women who identify strongly with these tasks may also start to see their own

families as the enemies of their labor. These are the ones who put plastic around all the furniture, rope certain rooms off from general use, and spend their time worrying about the dust collecting behind the refrigerator. I myself start to get this way whenever I have spent extended time devoted solely to housekeeping. During one of these periods one of my neighbors told me that she took her stove apart to clean each burner every night after preparing a meal. I said, “You’re kidding me. That’s like hosing down your tires every time you drive.” But instead of laughing she acted like this was a new idea worth considering. This is the demonic side of housework, the part that becomes obsessive, which produces an extreme order which feels like disorder.

But the biggest challenge for full-time homemakers is the quality of time. Repetitive tasks which are done, only to be undone, create what Rabuzzi calls “waiting,” a quality of time that contrasts with “questing.” Most traditional male workers encounter this undifferentiated time once they retire. Rabuzzi thinks that this circular conception of time literally has no expression in either philosophy or literature. Fictional plots by definition suggest that something has happened. The essentially repetitive activities of caring for small children, cleaning, sorting laundry, etc. cannot be expressed in standard fiction. They can be described, but not really evoked as lived experience. Though she discusses postmodern fiction such as Beckett’s works, Rabuzzi concludes that the journal is the genre most suited to women’s sense of time; all can be included, nothing need happen.

Freud said that human beings need both love and work to be truly happy; and by work he meant something that is accomplished and not undone at the end of the day. Betty Friedan, in her famous, *The Feminine Mystique* suggested that living without that kind of work was crazy-making. In her study of housewives in the late 1950s she found that women at home experienced the “problem that had no name,” and that the women who expressed satisfaction at being at home were actually working there for pay, as artists, editors, writers, translators, etc. The women who tried to devote themselves fully to homemaking were quietly going nuts.

So, my generation ran screaming from that model. Now what? Just acknowledging that housework does have its joys is one step. As Barbara Kingsolver suggests, sharing some of the work is one solution: everyone has access to the joys of housework, but no one is trapped in “waiting” time, at least not for long, unless they choose. It seems healthy to me that men should become acquainted with the quality of waiting time before retirement, just to figure out how to cope; no one can do paid labor forever. If people share the everyday tasks no one can be taken over by the demonic side of the equation and everyone can have access to its connections to the divine. For we, both men and women, do invest our houses with the kind of love equated with our dearest desires: with the beloved, with the mother, with our dreams and aspirations. This is hardly new: think of Elizabeth Bennett’s laughing confession that she fell in love with Mr. Darcy after seeing his beautiful house, Pemberly. Pemberly mansion, one of the most famous dwellings in fiction, is made to reveal a truer sense of the hero’s noble and benevolent character than could be revealed any other way. Two centuries later we are hungry for houses that reflect our dreams, that provide the soul-satisfying sense of coming home. Buying a huge McMansion will not provide the comfortable, unique space which will make us feel nurtured, welcomed, fully present to ourselves. That will come only with time, attention and creative investment. If we credit this endeavor with the dignity of art, philosophy, and yes spiritual reflection we can give ourselves permission to put the effort into it; not just as women, but as human beings who crave its power to ground our other endeavors. Having a beautiful, ordered, satisfying home is not an end in itself, but just the beginning.

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