

OCTOBER Finding Buddha in Target: The Tyranny of Choice
Rev. Mary Ann Macklin

Our country is at war. And I wanted to have this statue present (face cupped in two hands) to remind us of the grief and tragedy of war. At the same time, we have this beautiful August day, and our own daily life occurrences and challenges here in Bloomington, Indiana. I believe we must keep these two aspects of our lives in a dialectic tension. From this tension, I believe, if we are willing to sit with it and listen, comes questions of the soul. The two I present today are: What do I long for? What haunts me?

Personally, what haunts me are two things at present: One, I recently watched the documentary “The Fog of War” which features the reflections of Robert McNamara regarding the Viet Nam War. Some of his comments are refreshing, insightful and others are very disturbing. The phrase “the fog of war” originally came from 18th Century battlefields, where the smoke from the guns caused such a fog that chaos resulted from the lack of visual reality. The term now refers to the overall lack of reality (and gathered intelligence) in times of war for leaders, soldiers, and the public as well. We exist in a fog. The term “war” itself comes from the Middle English “were” which means “confusion.” War is confusion.

As to what I long for....courage, truth, love, content, peace, joy. Yet, I find these sometimes elusive in the face of tragedy so it is here that I turn to the poets. The following poem comes from the Viet Nameese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh. He writes, “This [poem] was written after I heard about the bombing of Ben Tre and the comment by an American military man, ‘We had to destroy the town in order to save it.’”

For Warmth

I hold my face in my two hands.

No I am not crying.

I hold my face in my two hands

to keep the loneliness warm—

two hands protecting

two hands nourishing

two hands preventing

my soul from leaving me

in anger.

(*Call Me By My True Names*, Collection of Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh, Parallax Press, Berkeley, CA, 1999, pg 15.) (pause, music)

As I now to turn to address some of the everyday challenges and issues in our daily lives here in Bloomington, Indiana, I ask you to keep these words and this statue in your awareness. And allow the questions of the soul to sit with you: What do I long for? What haunts me?...as I continue this sermon...

Last spring I stopped by Target to pick up a few items. Upon entering I began to realize that I hadn't been in a large department store in a long time. My "shopping" is done primarily at the local food co-op Bloomingfoods. My choice to shop at Bloomingfoods is based primarily on the availability of organic products and the overall co-op philosophy. However, a benefit I had not realized until I walked into Target, is Bloomingfoods simply has a lot fewer choices of a lot fewer products. So when I entered Target I felt as if I was slowly crossing a threshold

into some type of trance state; I walked around mesmerized by all that was available.

I remember standing in front of the camping equipment, and looking at about 10 different kinds of flashlights and thinking in an almost drug-induced state, “Wow, maybe I need one of these.” I’d be a better camper. The thing is I don’t even like camping that much. But there I was fiddling around with items like the Durabeam Compact Light, the Maxstar 6V Lantern, and the B&D Flexible Snake Light. I finally came out of this flashlight fog and got my list out. Toothpaste. I needed toothpaste. Have you been to the toothpaste aisle in Target recently? This is what I looked like (blank stare). There are enamel saving toothpastes, baking soda, peroxide whitening, tartar control, herbal fluoride, and several brands for sensitive teeth containing potassium nitrate. After standing there for far too long trying to decide what would be best, I made the choice of no choice and “backed away from the oral hygiene aisle.” (Later I would stop at Bloomingfoods and pick up some toothpaste. Good ol’ Tom’s.)

But there in Target I decided I had to get seriously on target about my shopping, so head down, I went directly after a few items in that would not be available at my local co-op. Sheets. Lincoln Logs for my nephew. And...and then I felt my resolve begin to weaken as I passed through the candle aisle.

As a ministerial type, I have a certain fascination with candles, and their possible uses in ceremony and ritual. Hey maybe one of these candles would make me a better minister! But I hadn’t been around such variety in years. There were candles as big as wastepaper baskets. Candles within candles. Candles with fruit in them. Tree candles. Balloon candles. Aromatherapy. No Scent. A Bunch of candles making up one candle. And then I found this (Buddha Candle). It was like someone hitting me over the head with a two-by-four. Right there in Target. Wake-up Macklin. It seemed to say with a slight smile. And the fog began to lift.

A clarity of reflections followed. First, my guess is that those who live a monastic life probably don't have a myriad of candle choices. Second, in his book *The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living* (Cutler, Howard MD and HH The Dalai Lama, Penguin Putman, 1998) the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism, suggests that our sense of being happy or content is determined more by our state of mind than external events. He posits that we can slowly train our mind to stop determining our sense of self-worth by constantly comparing ourselves to others. Although, of course, that is exactly what we are persistently invited to do in a consumer culture. Compare ourselves.

Which brings me to this point, which I have touched on before from this pulpit,...that much of product advertising and packaging is made to cause discontent within the consumer. To make each person see "what they are not" (or at least create that illusion). Advertisers often bank on our vulnerability to feel inadequate. And then their product can be seen as the "salvation" for our inadequacies. And the more product choices, of course, the more chance for comparison and inadequacies. Our Campus Ministry Assistant recently provided me with the Maori proverb, "To compare is to believe that you are not original medicine."

There in Target, the little Buddha candle reminded me of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism: All life is suffering. The origin of suffering is attachment (private fulfillment). The cessation of suffering is attainable. The eight-fold path leads to the cessation of suffering. My colleague in Madison, WI, Reverend Michael Schuler, points out that Buddhism is often perceived as a pessimistic religion because of the first noble truth. All life is suffering. He explained to me that the word "suffering" is a bit of a western mis-translation of the word *sukkhā*, which might be better understood as discontent or a feeling that things just are not right, "out of joint" mainly due to the limits of our existence. Interesting, that our

consumer culture seems intent on exacerbating this first truth, heightening our sense of discontent with increasing numbers of consumer choices and demands.

And the Buddha would teach that all of this (these distractions) keep us on a superficial level “leaving deep areas of our psyches empty and wanting (Smith, Huston *The World’s Religions*, Harper San Francisco, 1991, pg 100).”

I invite you to probe these deeper areas of our psyches with the following two questions: One, what do you long for (not in terms of short term gain but in terms of long term)? Two, what haunts you? Be with these questions for a moment.

I will return to these two questions, but first let’s return to our world of many choices.

In a recent *Scientific American* article (April 2004, Vol. 290 Issue 4) entitled “The Tyranny of Choice,” author Barry Schwartz states that “[U.S. citizens] today choose among more options in more parts of life than has ever been possible before:

To an extent, the opportunity to choose enhances our lives. It is only logical [for some] to think that if some choice is good, more is better. Yet recent research strongly suggests that, psychologically, this assumption is wrong. Although some choice is undoubtedly better than none, more is not always better (Schwartz, Barry, *Scientific American*, April 2004, pg 70).

Choice is one of our greatest freedoms in this world. In fact, our society punishes people by taking away their choices. Yet, paradoxically, there are those who choose to have less choice and therein find a sacred independence. As Kathleen Norris so eloquently observed as she watched a monastic sister who, “next to a shelf that held socks, underwear and a sweater, had all the clothing she owned hung on several pegs. It took my breath away. I could suddenly grasp that not ever having to think about what to wear was freedom, that a drastic stripping down to

essentials in one's dress might also be a drastic enrichment of one's ability to focus on more important things (Norris, Kathleen *The Cloister Walk*, 1996, pg 328)."

The gist of the Barry Schwartz's article "The Tyranny of Choice" comes down to this. "Being able to choose has enormous, positive effects, but only up to a point. [Research shows that as] the number of choices we face increases, the psychological benefits begin to level off... (Schwartz, pg 75)" and can become detrimental to certain types of people. Schwartz, a Professor of Social Theory and Action at Swarthmore College, created a choice spectrum which flows between two types of people:

"Maximizers" (those who always aim to make the best possible choice) and "Satisficers" (those who aim for good enough whether or not better selections are out there) (Schwartz, pg 71).

Maximizers tend to "suffer" as the number of choices increase because decisions "to make the best choice" becomes more daunting, and these maximizers tend to be "nagged by the alternatives they did not have time to investigate (*ibid.*, pg 71)." The article provides a Maximization Scale to help folks see where they may fit on the spectrum. The results seem to be a nice bell curve, with 10% being extreme maximizers and 10% being extreme satisficers, and the rest being in the popular muddle in the middle. The following are a few statements from the Maximization Scale. The more strongly you agree, the more tendency you have towards being a maximizer.

1. Whenever faced with a choice, I try to imagine what the other possibilities are, even ones that are not present at the moment.
2. No matter how satisfied I am with my job, it's only right to be on the lookout for better opportunities.
3. When I am in the car listening to the radio, I often check other stations to see if something better is playing.

4. When I watch TV I often channel surf.
5. Renting videos is difficult; I'm always struggling to pick the best one.
6. I never settle for second best.
7. I treat relationships like clothing: I expect to try a lot on before finding the perfect fit. (examples, Schwartz, Maximization Scale, pg 76)

How can those who may have a tendency towards maximization learn to cope with a world of increasing choices? Last Sunday I met with some of our UU Middle Schoolers regarding this topic. They had some comments (which they gave me permission to share) which actually echo some of the following suggestions which Schwartz offers: 1) Choose when to choose. This is what our monastic brothers and sisters exemplify. Basically restrict ones shopping options when choices are not crucial. Just pick one store and get what you need. "You really have to focus!" one middle schooler told me. 2) Learn to accept "good enough." "Settle for a choice that meets your core requirements rather than searching for the elusive 'best.'" 3) Don't worry about what you're missing. When I described the toothpaste aisle in Target, another Middle Schooler responded, "Just go in and buy Colgate; then don't worry about the others." 4) Control Expectations. Or as the Buddha would say, "Do not expect and ye shall have all things." A 1999 *New York Times* article reported that teenagers felt increased expectations on them due to "too muchness, too many activities, too many consumer choices, and too much to learn." Some of our UU Middle Schoolers resonated a little with this and others did not. This may become a more definitive issue for some in high school and young adulthood.

For all of us gathered here, I believe how we psychologically engage choices in our lives impacts our spiritual journey as liberal religious seekers. As Schwartz points out, our society needs to rethink "its worship of choice" and realize that more is not always better (Schwartz, pg 74). Too many choices become merely

distractions, keeping us on a superficial level “leaving deep areas of our psyches empty and wanting (Smith, Huston *The World’s Religions*, Harper San Francisco, 1991, pg 100).”

Which brings me back to our two questions again. One, What do you long for? Two, What haunts you? These are questions beyond distraction. Questions of the soul. Souls longing for Love. Hope. Peace. Joy. May we all continue to tend to these questions of the soul. May we hold our face in our two hands. May we hold the world in our two hands. To keep the loneliness warm—two hands protecting. Two hands nourishing. Two hands preventing our soul from leaving us.

Amen.