**Foothills Unitarian Church**

**Worship Service, November 17, 2013**

**Text: "To Live Deliberately" By Henry David Thoreau**

**Sermon: "Can I Have Your Attention, Please?" By Rev. Gretchen Haley**

I had planned on telling you, the world has changed. I wanted to say, we have become what one minister, Adam Stadtmiller, calls a "distracted people,"[[1]](#footnote-1) a people faced with so many things pulling on our attention and our resources, we can't possibly give adequate attention to any one thing.

We struggle to discern and appropriately tend to the "essential facts of life."

But then, as I was considering readings for today's service, I remembered the likely familiar words Marc shared. Henry David Thoreau is one of the few Unitarians most Americans have heard of. You may even know that Thoreau went to Harvard, though he didn't much care for the usual Harvard grad professions, and so he spent much of his early years wandering, trying to find his place.

It was March, 1845, when the man considered the founder of American Unitarianism,

William Ellery Channing, decided to intervene:

"Go out and build yourself a hut," Channing told Thoreau. "And there begin the grand process of devouring yourself alive. I see no other alternative," he said, "no other hope for you." Two months later, Thoreau began his great experiment in simple living along the shores of Walden Pond.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Thoreau, as he writes, went to the woods so that he could "live deliberately... drive life into a corner."

It was 1845, and apparently - even back then, life required simplifying. So much for my claim about the world changing! Apparently, regardless of the age you live in, it has always been a struggle to discover what it is that truly matters, and to hold your attention there.

And yet - think of all that has been added to human life in the last 150 years. In the last 15 alone, the internet has profoundly increased our access to information and opportunity. Add to that things like, automobiles, and airplanes, telescopes and microscopes.

I mean surely, if Thoreau struggled in 1845, before all of these things, to tend to the "essential facts of life," how in the world is there - as Channing said - any hope for us?

Of course, the idea is, that all these changes and their impact on society should actually make finding these answers easier, right?

I mean, part of Thoreau's problem was that his options were so narrow, and none felt right to him. But since then, we have removed many of these limitations, and most of us have many many choices for how we could make a good life today. So theoretically, today it should be easier to "live deep, and suck all the marrow out of life." We have so many choices, now we all should be able to discover and take the path that is truly and perfectly ours.

Psychologist Barry Schwartz, describes this positive take on our explosion of options as "the official dogma of all western industrial societies."[[3]](#footnote-3) He defines this dogma this way:

"If we are interested in maximizing the welfare of our citizens, the way to do this is to maximize individual freedom. The way to freedom is to maximize choice. The more choice we have, the more freedom we have, and the more freedom we have, the more welfare we have."

To me, this doesn't just sound like western society's dogma (which I agree it does), in many ways, non-dogmatic though we clam ourselves to be, this sounds like the implicit dogma of our own religious tradition:

Freedom is good. More freedom is better. The way to more freedom is more choice.

The path that will lead to the most good is the path with the greatest number of choices.

Right?

This is the philosophy at the roots of Unitarian Universalist religious education programs for the better part of the last 60 years. We have given our kids lots and lots of ways

to think about truth and religion and God (or no God), and then we've said - choose for yourself.

There's a lot of good about this philosophy, but as our kids have grown up, some have wondered if it is *only* for the good. Our young adults often tell stories of times they faced loss or disappointment, and rather than a religious anchor to turn to, they just had -a lot of options.

And all these extra options didn't help them hold fast to what was most ultimately worthy of their time, attention, devotion. It just left them afloat in a sea of possibilities.

These stories mirror what we're learning in social research. Which is, that infinite choice does not necessarily lead to infinite goodness. It turns out, we humans like a certain degree of limits.

This is exactly what Barry Schwartz discovered and reported in his work, *The Paradox of Choice.* First - he says - too much choice "produces paralysis." In his TED Talk, he descries how it feels to go into your local grocery store these days. Just as an example, just try to pick a salad dressing. 175 options for salad dressing, just on average, fill those shelves. And I don't know about you but mostly, I look at all those options and I go - I think what I have at home is probably fine!

This choice paralysis extends far beyond groceries, of course. As Adam Stadtmiller describes, faced with too many choices, "People [today] don't search for ways they can be involved; they focus on what they can avoid. The default answer is 'no' or at best, 'maybe.' [We're] looking for subtraction, not addition."

Second - Schwartz says, even when we do make a choice, "we end up less satisfied than we would've been if we would have had fewer options."[[4]](#footnote-4) With a lot of choices, if your pick isn't totally perfect -which it never will be - then it's easy to imagine that you could've made a better choice. So you regret it, and don't enjoy, because you're obsessed about what you might be missing. Even when what you have is terrific.

And ultimately, when you are dissatisfied, there's no one to blame but you. After all, you had a million choices, and you chose wrong. So the end result, is you are unhappy, and it's your own fault.

I don't know about you, but this totally rings true for me. So many choices, so many things vying for my attention....however to choose? However to not be disappointed?

As a religious community, one of our most critical tasks is to be the "hut" where the Thoreaus of today can devour themselves alive, and to help one another name and claim what really matters, and to act in response.

A generation ago, the best way to do this *was* to offer our community lots and lots of choices - in theology, spiritual practice, in programming and ways to connect and grow and serve. But today, and in light of Barry Schwartz' research, our task has changed.

We still must help each other discern and live meaningful lives, but we need to do this without compounding the problem of too many choices and information overload.

We need to help each other subtract, not add. We need to offer focus, not be another distraction. We need to give up some of our desires to go wide, and instead help each other go deep.

But how?

I have four proposals for you, none of them original.[[5]](#footnote-5)

I already confessed, these are my questions too, so I've been doing a lot of reading and research on the subject. We'll need your ideas as well. We need to discover this path with all of our wisdom and ideas and partnership. It's that big of a change - for it challenges some of our most basic assumptions about what leads to a better life.

So here, for your consideration, are four ideas for how to begin.

Number one, margin. Now we like to say that our worth is inherent, but the way most of us act, you'd think we believe we are made worthy by way of how busy we are. What if, instead, we helped each other embody this alternative value system we claim, and live our message that we are already worthy, already loved? Even at rest.

As a congregation, this practice might inspire us to create more intentional childcare swaps, or errand sharing, or some other ideas to help each other find greater margin in our lives. It definitely asks us to look at our church calendar as a whole, to leave our silos behind and instead coordinate and integrate our ministries. It asks us to assess how many hours we expect folks to show up in a given week and how we can combine meetings or programs, for all our sake.

Which brings us to practice number two, focus. What are those things that we, and only we, are meant to do - in our own lives, and as a religious community? What are our essential tasks? We need to focus on and put our resources towards these things. Inevitably, this will mean that there's going to be stuff you love, but that isn't uniquely ours. These things can still happen. They just don't get featured as centrally important.

Not everything can be important- or nothing is. Too many choices leads to no choice at all.

Third, vision. I know some among us have been clamoring for a new strategic plan. We are in year 7 of a 5 year plan, after all. This is one of the great opportunities of our upcoming interim period. It will be a time of deep discernment, where we consider, where have we been, where are we going, and what are the steps for arriving there as a religious community? This practice can also be applied individually. Where have you been, and where are you going? And what 3 or 5 successive and simple steps can this religious community offer to help you weave together a life of meaning, and purpose? These next few years invite us to cultivate this common vision- and then align all of our ministries- across the lifespan - with these ideas.

And finally, number four. This is one that this community, probably because of Marc's leadership, already gets and is teaching me - and that is, joy. As in, joy is primary, central, and laughter, critical. More important than any particular task, finding joy along the way keeps busy-ness from being too alluring. In our individual lives, this means play, and sense of humor - taking our commitments but not ourselves too seriously.

We're all doing the best we can, afterall, and sometimes our attempts fall short, and we say or do dumb things. In light of this, what can we do but laugh together? Forgive. Enjoy.

As a community in the coming years, I promise to help us hold fast to this most important practice Marc has clearly instilled here.

My hunch is it will require we get more intentional about rotating leadership and roles to prevent cynicism or burnout. And it will mean noticing, even as we are growing and changing, when our to-do lists get so big we forget why we're doing this at all. Which is something like - to bring more love, and goodness to this overly busy, distracted and often overwhelming world.

These are *my* suggestions of 4 ways to begin - margin, focus, vision, and joy. Practicing these, we'll surely discover others. And through our practice and discovery, we will bring into being a new vision for ourselves and for our faith. A vision where setting limits means everything is actually *more* possible, and where setting clearer boundaries translates into greater abundance for us all. This is mostly uncharted territory, and the only thing I know for sure is I'm glad we get to walk this path together.

And so I say - Blessed be, and amen.

1. From his article, "Leading Distracted People," in *Christianity Today*, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2013/winter/leading-distracted-people.html>. This article informed much of this sermon as well as my ideas about ministry today. Also highly influential to this sermon and my thoughts about how to do church well - but not referenced directly in this text, are the book *Simple Church* by Eric Geigerer and Thom Ranier, as well as *Deep and Wide* by Andy Stanley. And then of course, Barry Schwartz' research, which I cite later. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_David_Thoreau> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. These quotes are nearly directly from Schwartz' TED Talk, which you can find here: <http://www.ted.com/talks/barry_schwartz_on_the_paradox_of_choice.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The rest of this paragraph is a paraphrase of Schwartz' research as he shares in his TED Talk. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The first three ideas are influenced by Adam Stadtmiller's article (the first one is his exact suggestion), and the fourth is my observation as a relative newcomer to Foothills, for what already lives at its positive core and can help us anchor ourselves as we move into our new future. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)