

**“All I Want”**  
Rev. Sara E. Ascher  
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“All I want for Christmas is my two front teeth...” so the familiar seasonal song goes. And want we do; not just at that holidays, but for birthdays, anniversaries, just cause and...because we need things. It seems wanting, desiring that which we do not have is part of what it means to be human. Are there really any of us who want nothing, long for nothing at any time? Of course not. Some of us may want more than others, some of us may resist wanting and others desire with wild abandon, but we all want – we all long for something more.

When I was a teenager in the Central Massachusetts Unitarian Universalist district youth group, I was pretty good at getting what I wanted. I was short and blonde and awfully cute and hard to resist, just ask my husband David, from whom I got an earring by the end of the weekend long conference where we met. By the time I left the group around my sophomore year in college I had acquired no less than 6 shirts, 2 pairs of trousers and several pieces of jewelry. You may wonder how I managed this without threat to my integrity or innocence? Tenacity. I would spot an article of clothing or jewelry I really liked and would boldly go to the person, usually a boy but not always, and mention again and again and again how much I liked whatever it was of theirs I was coveting. I then would suggest that what would make *them* happiest in that moment was to give me this article. I often got a look of bemused confusion, but they soon learned that I was serious and that I would not give up. I suspect that much of what I ‘got’ was given with the hope I would just go away if they gave me what I asked for...but the truth was that many of my benefactors became great friends.

“Is there anything better than to be longing for something when you know it is within reach?” asks Greta Garbo. Wanting has gotten a bad rap of late. The bookstores are filled with texts that share with us the ‘how to’ of wanting less. We hear report after report of how as citizens of the United States, we consume more than most of the developing world altogether. We are told that wanting is wrong, needing is a sign of weakness, and abundance points to selfishness and greed. We’re not supposed to want the luxurious life and all the trappings of the rich and famous images of which we are bombarded with over and over in the media. We are meant to look down on those who, like Brittany Spears, had a craving for lunch from a specific restaurant several states over from where she was and sent her private jet to fetch her take out. We are meant to be witness to the excessive spending and outrageous behavior of those with more than we, but we should not want to be like them. Or at least that is the myth.

Granted I think it ridiculous to send an airplane for take out, I think owning more than say five vehicles is excessive, and paying more than \$200 for a pair of jeans is stupid. But all that aside, I still want things, maybe not what celebrities and the well-to-do want, but I want nonetheless. You want too. We may want new shoes or a new car; the latest high-tech toy or a better job; a nicer home or less stress; and I think all of us long for more time to spend with family and friends and maybe even a spiritual life that involves doing more on a Sunday than reading the Sunday comic strips or doing the crossword puzzle.

Is *wanting* really such a bad thing? Of course, it can get out of hand. We can get stuck in only longing for the next item and once acquired, simply moving on to desiring

the next thing. It matters not whether what we yearn for is materialistic or an accomplishment when all it is that we do is want. Constant longing for that which we do not have can be destructive and dangerous, causing us to seek only tomorrow and enjoy nothing of today, leaving us with no sense of fulfillment or satisfaction. But the wanting itself, is that wrong? Can it be wrong to yearn for something more, something better, something different than what is today?

“Yearning for the seemingly impossible is the path to human progress.” States Bryant McGill. Our desiring ignites our creativity. If our forbearers did not long for a better life then most of us would not be here. If there were not those who wished to contribute to society we would not have the modern conveniences and social systems that often make life just a little easier. If there were not those who yearned to express what were in their hearts we would not have music or art or literature. What is it that you long for? What do you yearn for? What and how is your deepest self seeking?

There is a role for wanting. Maybe it is not the *desiring* that is the problem, but *what* we desire that can cause us trouble? Many of us do long for material wealth and possessions, seeing them as symbols representative of our value and worth, or what we’ve accomplished and how successful we have been thus far or as a way to ensure our future and security. But are we just seeking those *material* belongings, are we only seeking the newest gadgets or gizmos, the latest thing that proves that we are part of the ‘haves’ instead of the ‘have nots’? Or are we struggling to make reality the dreams we have long held? Is our nature only to want what we don’t have or could it be that in the

wanting we *are* looking for something more, something to satisfy a deep longing, a yearning to be contented by more than books, or clothing or bank accounts.

“I wish I were like rock,” begins a poem by Polly Laughland.

“I wish I were like rock –  
sturdy and strong, enduring;  
polished smooth by the forces that beat against me;  
a safe resting place for the storm tossed souls.  
Sometimes I am.

I wish I were like the waters of the sea –  
flowing and yielding;  
perfectly fitting the space that I’m in;  
reflecting the changing sky,  
but deep and still within with depths that nurture myriad of forms of life.  
Sometimes I am.

I wish I were like the sun –  
bright and warm and life-giving;  
shining even when the clouds hide me;  
ever faithful, rising and setting in predictable ways.  
Sometimes I am.

I wish I were like clouds –  
lighthearted, wispy, multi-shaped in a blue, clear sky;  
or soft grey with balm for a parched earth;  
occasionally dramatic, rolling and angry,  
demanding attention.  
Sometimes I am.

I wish I were like wind –  
fragrant, cool, gently caressing  
blowing soft and sweet over wild roses;  
or forceful and persistent holding high an aspiring kite;  
and filling the sails of those who travel life’s precarious ways.  
Sometimes I am.

We long for an easier life, a happier sense of being. We are haunted by the desire to feel satiated and fulfilled. We yearn to suffer less and live with more joy. We don’t want to be more miserable or discontented, even if we have personal demons or family

systems that indicate otherwise. We do long to be strong and yielding; dramatic and subtle; nurturing and life-giving.

“A poor man had come to the end of his rope. So he went to his rabbi for advice.

‘Holy Rabbi!’ he cried. ‘Things are in a bad way with me, and are getting worse all the time! We are poor, so poor that my wife, my six children, my in-laws, and I have to live in a one-room hut. We get in each other’s way all the time. Our nerves are frayed, and, because we have plenty of troubles, we quarrel. Believe me – my home is a hell and I’d sooner die than continue living this way!’

The rabbi pondered the matter gravely. ‘My son,’ he said, ‘promise to do as I tell you and your conditions will improve.’

‘I promise, Rabbi!’ answered the troubled man. ‘I’ll do anything you say.’

‘Tell me – what animals do you own?’

‘I have a cow, a goat and some chickens.’

‘Very well! Go home now and take all these animals into your house to live with you.’

The poor man was dumbfounded, but since he had promised the rabbi, he went home and brought all the animals into his house.

A few days later the man returned to the rabbi and cried, ‘Rabbi, what a misfortune have you brought upon me! I did as you told me and brought the animals into the house. And now what have I got? Things are worse than ever! My life is a perfect hell – the house is turned into a barn! Save me, Rabbi – help me!’

‘My son,’ replied the rabbi serenely, ‘go home and taken the chickens out of your house.’

And so the man returned home and removed the chickens from the house. But not long after this the man returned to the rabbi complaining that the goat was smashing everything in the house – turning his life into even more of nightmare.

‘Go home,’ the rabbi said gently, ‘and take the goat out of the house.’ And so the man did as he was told but it was again not long before he returned to the rabbi declaring what misfortune had been brought upon him.

‘The cow has turned my house upside down! How can you expect so many human beings to live side by side with an animal?’

‘You are right – a hundred times right!’ agreed the rabbi. ‘Go straight home and take the cow out of the house!’

And the poor man did as he was told once again. Not even a full day had passed when the man came running back to the rabbi.

‘Rabbi, you’ve made life sweet again for me. With all the animals out, the house is so quiet, so spacious, and so clean!’

Our wanting is not only for things and possessions but that which will bring us delight and contentment. “At the innermost core of all loneliness,” writes Brendan Francis, “is a deep and powerful yearning for union with one’s lost self.” Plato puts it this way, “the eternal soul, imprisoned in the perishable body, is yearning to return to its origin.”

In the midst of our desires for material possession and the meeting of our basic needs there is a deeper longing for connection to that which is unknown and beyond us. It is a yearning for knowledge, understanding, wholeness and for some it is a profound seeking of God. “We are like lutes once held by God. Being away from His warm body fully explains this constant yearning.” Writes Hafiz, a fourteenth century Persian mystic.

We yearn to live with meaning and purpose beyond the duties and necessities of our daily lives. We long to be “content with small means,” as William Henry Channing wrote, “to seek elegance, to be worthy, to study hard, think quietly, talking gently, act frankly – to listen...with open hearts, and to let the spiritual, unbidden and unconscious, grow up through the common.”

Ernesto Cardenal writes, “We have always wanted something beyond what we wanted.” “We begin with longing.” Writes Rabbi Marc Gafni. “Only when I feel the absence of God does God become fully present.” Longing is seen as essential in many religious traditions. For many yearning is central to the tenants of a spiritual path. Desire for that which is beyond is a never-ending discipline. It is by living with and in that yearning we come to understand moments of fulfillment. “Your whole life must be one of longing,” states *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a fourteenth century mystical text.

We must embrace the yearning for what we do not have. Not in the material sense, but in the soul searching for truth reality. “You have nothing infinite,” writes the Catholic mystic Catherine of Siena, “except your soul’s love and desire.” And it is in the attempt to fulfill that desire – that longing that Truth or God or Wisdom comes to us.

“To yearn for someone,” writes Rabbi Gafni, “...I am acknowledging that I am larger than I had at first thought. I realize my heart is wider and incorporates many other dimensions of reality, for which, if they were to disappear, I would yearn. When I miss someone, that melancholy tug at my heart indicates to me that I have incorporated this person’s presence to such an extent that I feel incomplete without them.”

That is the way of it with God or Truth or Meaning. Once integrated as a part of us, when not there we feel a lacking. And it is the hope of future reunification that pulls us to keep seeking. It is the promise of our yearnings fulfillment that keeps us wanting. It is as Greta Garbo said, “Is there anything better than to be longing for something when you know it is within reach?” For Rabbi Gafni reminds us, at some point if we can bear the longing we shall be filled with an ultimate embrace and thus, “the separation itself – in its very depths – is revealed as but another disguise for union. The alienation... gives way to total merging,” with, as Plato put it, our “origin.”

And so in our desire and yearning for greater meaning we must remember that like a cup of coffee Truth and God will come in many guises, but it shall always be Truth.