

## “*The Baby and the Bath Water*”

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Last Tuesday evening I drove to the post office in North City in order to do my duty and mail my 2007 tax returns to the IRS. The place was crowded with other procrastinators, all demanding that their fat envelopes be personally postmarked by the agents. Just to make sure that they would not be sent to jail.

The hours preceding my post office experience were, as you might imagine, frantic. As always, I had waited till the last possible moment to perform the annual ritual of preparing my returns. There are several important pitfalls in putting this thing off. For me, the most dangerous is going through all the year’s collected receipts and bills and much, much paper work—piles of it all, quite disorganized and out of order.

So I have to organize all the stuff (and I am a poor organizer). I keep getting side-tracked by finding snippets of paper which are actually snippets of memories. So I stop the process and think about that moment represented by the note and end up losing an hour or so toward my goal of completion.

Also impeding my progress is the minute-by-minute decisions to keep this piece or throw it away. What is really important in all this pile of yesterdays? What should I hang onto and what should I cast away?

Which brings us, of course, to the title of this sermon: “The Baby and the Bath Water”, which comes from the old saying, “Don’t throw the baby out with the bath water!”

I’ve always been disturbed by that adage. The picture of it in my mind is horrific. Do you mean it is even possible to accidentally throw away the baby? That’s just not possible!

And yet...

And yet, whenever I take on the task of going through all the stuff I carry around with me throughout my life and trying to put it in order and to clean it out, the great big question rises: Exactly which of these things is the *baby* and which are the junk?

As always for me, it becomes a religious question. “What is of value in my life and what is the stuff I really do need to get rid of?” That’s what we do each week in these worship services: we seek to discover the worth and to shape it so that our lives have worth. “Worth-shaping”—the origin of the word “worship”.

So let’s look closer at the old saying about the baby and the bath water. For instance, **Why do we bathe the baby** in the first place? If the baby is so important why do we want to make alterations in it? Well, of course, anybody knows the answer to that. We want to get rid of the dirt and the stink and the germs in order to make the baby healthy and happy and *clean*. The whole idea of the bath comes from our concern for the baby’s welfare, physical and psychological.

The next question is determining **the identity of the baby**. Most parents would say the baby is whatever is the most important thing in the world. The “apple of my eye”. The reason for living. The thing without which my life has no ultimate meaning.

Of course, I know that the baby is not a thing, for things cannot give meaning to one’s life. (Or can they? When they say, “You can’t take it with you when you die,” is that really true?)

We certainly do know the baby is *not* composed of material things like houses and cars, stereos (including iPods), photographs, books, old love letters, old bank records and receipts.

Is the baby made of *immaterial* things, such as memories (good and bad ones), abstract ideas and philosophies, maybe something about a satisfied mind, a sense of accomplishment/fulfillment, a sense of worth?

And what about the bath water—what is in that? What is the debris we want to rinse off the baby and get rid of? For me it could be something about addictions, regrets, anger, depression, judgmentalism, grumpiness, frowns. The bath water contains everything that gets in the way of the baby’s health and welfare.

I did this very baby-bathing exercise when I left the religion of my upbringing. But it was 15 years later that I realized I threw the baby out, right long with the water.

“Something’s missing” I said to myself as I entered the new world of Unitarian Universalism. I spent a long time attempting to discover that missing baby. At first I thought it was music, the music of my childhood Pentecostal church—energetic, heart-felt, gospel.

And music was part of the baby, maybe the soul of it. The baby I threw out was a grounded sense of divinity, perhaps what I would come to name as God. And in that case, yes, music is God’s soul.

Mary Oliver’s poem comes in handy here:

*To live in this world  
you must be able to do three things:  
to love what is mortal;  
to hold it  
against your bones knowing your own life depends on it;  
and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.*

The line that jumps out at me is: “knowing your own life depends on it.” That’s the baby. That the thing you cannot do without.

In this poem from farmer/poet Wendell Berry, we are presented with the dilemma of deciding of what to keep and what to rid ourselves of, as we rummage through the stuff of our lives. Berry’s suggestion:

*At the start of spring I open a trench  
in the ground. I put into it  
the winter’s accumulation of paper,  
pages I do not want to read  
again, useless words, fragments,  
error. And I put into it  
the contents of the outhouse:  
light of the sun, growth of the ground,  
finished with one of their journeys.  
To the sky, to the wind, then,  
and to the faithful trees, I confess  
my sins: that I have not been happy  
enough, considering my good luck,  
have listened to too much noise,  
have been inattentive to wonders,  
have lusted after praise.  
And then upon the gathered refuse  
of mind and body, I close the trench,  
folding shut again the dark,  
the deathless earth. Beneath that seal  
the old escapes into the new.*

(—Wendell Berry, as printed in *Earth Prayers*, page 384)

The hard part is not so much the decision of what to throw in the trench, but actual act. At this time of year when spring cleaning occupies us, Wendell Berry’s words of are great value.

For me this is a religious issue in another way. My reading of so many of the great spiritual literature from the great religions speak directly to these ideas. In particular, Christianity and Buddhism have much to say, especially about possessions. Remember the Sermon on the Mount phrase, “For is it to gain the whole world and to lose the soul”? Jesus spoke often about these things; in fact, the central idea of his prophetic message to the world might be stated that the true value of one’s life cannot be found in *things* but in *spirit*.

