

Stuff

**Ecclesiastes 1:12-14, 2:18-23; Psalm 49:1-11, Colossians 3:1-11;
Luke 12:13-21**

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As we were preparing to leave for an errand, I opened the trunk of my old Buick and one of my sons looked in. Shaking his head he asked, “Dad, does the landfill company pay you rent to keep their stuff in your car?” Or my wife might query, “Does the landfill company pay you to store their stuff in your office?”

Yes, we have a well-expressed wiseguy gene in the Forney family. We also have a very prominent packrat gene in the family.

I remember one breakfast when my wife Jai shared a dream she had had that evening. She was defrosting the refrigerator and opened the freezer. It was full of books in her dream. After she finished recounting her dream, or was it a nightmare, I flippantly remarked that she was very fortunate to be married to a biblical scholar who could interpret her dream.

The meaning? She needed to buy another refrigerator – so there’d be room for the food. She had another solution in mind.

Stuff! I do have a lot of it. Now, I would not subscribe to the bumper sticker that proclaims: “He who dies with the most toys wins.” I do know that accumulations can become all consuming. It comes down to the question, Roberta Flack poses in her song, “What’s it all about, Alfie?”

That is the question about a good life posed by the writer of Ecclesiastes. The book speaks of a life of vain toil coming to the point of futility. “I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me; and who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool?” In our reading from Luke we are again confronted with the question of acquisitiveness in the story of a rich man and abundance. So much abundance that he is forced to keep pulling down his barns to build larger. So much stuff! And, after a life of laying up ample goods, after a life of ease and making merry, God confronts him late in the evening, “Fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”

St. Paul provides another alternative to a life of stuff. If one is wont to accumulate, try accumulating such as “compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience.” Is not that where true happiness lies? Try “forgiveness and love.” How about the “peace of Christ?”

David Brooks in his new book, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life*¹, arrives at a similar place. He identifies the “first mountain” as that effort to establish oneself. It’s about acquiring the stuff of accomplishment: a good education, a family, material possessions, the right circle of friends, respect of colleagues. And let’s not discount these. In some measure, all have their place. As someone once said, “Poverty is not a disgrace. Just damned inconvenient. We all need certain things to live. Basic stuff. The psychologist Robert Maslow talks about the “hierarchy of needs” – usually portrayed as a pyramid. The basic needs form the base while the “nice-to-haves” are towards the top. If one doesn’t have a roof over one’s head, you’re probably not worrying about buying the latest SUV you spied out on the dealer’s lot. You’re probably not worrying about violin lessons for your kid. Yes, we all need some basic stuff just to live. And in our greed, we’re not very good at making sure everyone has a chance at the brass ring. Most end up being thrown off the merry-go-round.

A recent Christian Century commentary on today’s lessons pokes fun at excessive stuff, car-trunk-filled stuff, through a monologue of the stand-up

¹ David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life* (New York: Random House, 2019)

comedian George Carlin. One of his few routines suitable for a “G-rated” audience:

You got your stuff with you? I’ll bet you do. Guys have stuff in their pockets; women have stuff in their purses...Stuff is important. You gotta take care of your stuff. You gotta have a place for your stuff. That’s what life is all about, tryin’ to find a place for your stuff! That’s all your house is: a place to keep your stuff. If you didn’t have so much stuff, you wouldn’t need a house. You could just walk around all the time.

A house is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it. You can see that when you’re taking off in an airplane. You look down and see all the little piles of stuff. Everybody’s got his own little pile of stuff.²

David Brooks says that there’s a second mountain, and between the two is often a devastating valley. That valley might be an illness, a divorce or unemployment. It may be a child addicted to drugs or one who has committed suicide. It might be the subtle feeling of malaise. I made it to the top and it’s not what it was cracked up to be. Most of my associates were only fair-weather friends. Let a slight bit of difficulty come up, and, poof! they’re gone. No wonder President Truman was famously quoted as saying, “If you want a friend in Washington, get a dog.”

At some point of disenchantment, we begin to approach that second mountain, the mountain of generativity. This is the ascent towards a greater fulfillment. Those on that journey up the second mountain begin to learn the joy of being part of something greater than one’s self. It is about riches gained from giving stuff away. It is about the meaning of it all. Indeed, “What’s it all about, Alfie?” Certainly, not the biggest pile of toys at the end.

Phillips Brooks, that famous Episcopal priest and bishop of the late 1800s, the lyricist of “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” said something to the effect that the greatest tragedy in life is to have missed the opportunity to have been a

² Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, “Living the Word,” *The Christian Century*, July 17, 2019.

part of something greater than one's self. To have missed that higher cause to which one has been called. That higher cause is the second mountain.

Sometimes a greater cause finds you. No need to seek it out. A while back, when I was up in Portland visiting our oldest son, an article on the front page of ***The Oregonian*** had caught my eye. It was about what is happening to our wounded veterans upon their return from combat. Being a Vietnam era veteran who served as an Army medic, I have very sensitive antennae when it comes to how our vets are treated. Now, mind you, I'm not an enthusiast about these wars, or war in general. In fact, I'm already against the next one. I do belong to a veteran's group, Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Our motto is, "Honor the warrior, not the war."

The great patriot Thomas Paine understood the tragedy of war when he warned his countrymen: "He who is the author of a war lets loose the whole contagion of hell and opens a vein that bleeds a nation to death."

Yes, we do not honor the war, we honor those who have served. And take care of them upon their return. I believe that. If someone goes off to risk life and limb for our nation, we have a binding obligation to do whatever it takes to make that person whole if they return to us wounded.

But I digress.

Anyway, right there in the ***Oregonian*** was a story about a soldier, Mayer, who was serving in the Oregon National Guard and had returned home from Iraq suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and depression. The article talked of how Meyer tires easily, how his short-term memory problems make it nearly impossible for him to remember even the simplest tasks. He cries easily as he struggles to get words out. A grey confusion clouds his mind with the result that he cannot drive over 20 miles from home without getting lost. Returning to his civilian job is not in the realm of possibility. He could not hold down any job.

Mayer and his wife, Jeannette, know their life together will never be the same again. They have a strong faith and they are committed to each other. They

are a couple that truly meant it when they promised, “in sickness and in health...”

But what they have found most distressing has been the treatment Mayer has received. They have had to fight the Army every step of the way for the little care he did receive, and for his paltry disability payments. The Army seemed much more interested in getting him off the payroll than in doing what is right. He was prevented from getting into a specialized brain injury program through bureaucratic intransigence. This was not bungling. It was premeditated callousness.

Now I can see how one unfortunate soldier could become the victim of Army red tape. I was in the Army. I know red tape.

But it turns out, as I read further, that this is not about just one or two isolated cases. It is about thousands who have been victimized by an adversarial system of rating disability. How can anyone in such a mental fog negotiate this system, I ask you? Mayer and his wife have tumbled into some Hieronymus Bosch version of hell. Some demonic hall of mirrors where up is down and down is up.

As I continued to read, my blood was at a furious boil. Prayer unbidden rose up within my breast. My God, is there no justice? No sense of decency? What do these hypocrites, these cheapskate patriots, mean when they urge us, “Support the troops?” And then they behave like this? What could “support the troops” and a yellow ribbon bumper sticker possibly mean to Mayer and Jeanette with all they’ve been through?

My fervent prayers, and maybe even a few obscenities – yes, that also is unbidden prayer – the unspoken petitions of heart and soul shortly transformed themselves into action. I wrote e-mails. I sent in my donation for my veterans’ organization that they might continue to be a forceful advocate for our Vietnam vets. I hectored my political representatives.

But we can do more. Much more. That’s where my friend Scott comes into the picture.

Scott, also a vet, also believes with all his heart that we need to care for those who served. Scott is a colleague already up that second mountain, the

mountain of service beyond self. When he called one evening three years ago to ask about hosting a Wounded Warrior event on our farm outside of Bethany, West Virginia, I was all ears.

After telling me what he had in mind, of course I wished him all the best. “See what you can do,” I responded. I had no idea that he was a crackerjack community organizer, so I was absolutely amazed when he later sent me back some pictures of his event. Incredible! I definitely vowed not to miss the second, and I didn’t.

We’re now heading into the third this August 10th. I’ll be there along with our son Christopher. We will also have the founder of Wounded Warriors, Brace, coming out again from Detroit. Brace says that Scott’s weekend is one of the best run events for Wounded Warriors in the whole country.

Parenthetically, it should not surprise anyone to discover that Scott is also our West Virginia point man for House of Hope – Ohio Valley.

We are indeed proud to be holding our third annual Wounded Warrior event this August on the Forney Farm. Scott tells me this one will be bigger yet, with three bands playing. We call our weekend “Mudding with the Warriors.” It’s a thrill ride through one hundred eighty acres of abandoned back woods logging trails in off-road vehicles. It’s definitely an “E” coupon ride. Any of you old enough to have been at Disneyland in its early days knows that the “E” coupon rides were the fastest and the scariest.

Once again, Scott has pulled together a good chunk of Bethany and Brooke County to give back to our vets -- Brooke County’s finest to show a little love. And I can absolutely bet that Dagmar will be bringing my favorite – hot German potato salad. Scott and his gang are definitely well up that second mountain of giving back. Scott, I thank you, and I know these vets thank you. America, at its best pays it forward.

Right now, every day, an active duty service member takes his or her own life. What is wrong with us that we have pushed them to such desperation? We can do better.

The ascent up that second mountain may drain the soul and tire the body, but for many of us nearing the end of our journeys, it's the only trip worth taking. It is, in Somerset Maugham's words, "A summing up."

Try the stuff of eternity – "compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness and patience, forbearing one another..." For this one needs no larger barns, no bigger car trunk. Or even an extra bookcase.

As St. Paul would further exhort us this morning: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts." This is the climb towards eternity. God in us and we in God. And sing! For God's sake and ours, SING!

Phillips Brooks preached a most joyful gospel. He would remind us, it's about the happiness and blessedness that second mountain. "Distrust your religion unless it is cheerful, unless it turns every act and deed to music and exults in attempts to catch the harmony of the new life. Yes, indeed: SING! Don't mumble. SING!

Speaking of blessedness, this week around the campfire at our farm, with good friends and food, I'll be joining our vets and others

in sweet harmony – in a spiritual song. "Country roads, take me home/To the place I belong/West Virginia, mountain mama/Take me home, country roads." Amen.