

Collectors: Collecting Beauty Instead of Injuries

Sermon Preached by Rev. Donna Schaper
Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church, September 4, 2016

Text: How it makes meaning instead of the injury of meaninglessness. Bring your own God. Be your own Geek.

Luke 6: "For what good does it you to love those who love you in return? Even sinners can do that. You are called to something a little more. But I say to you who hear: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you. To him who strikes you on the one cheek, offer the other also. And from him who takes away your cloak, do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who asks of you. And from him who takes away your goods do not ask them back. And just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them likewise. But if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive back, what credit is that to you? For even sinners lend to sinners to receive as much back. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is kind to the unthankful and evil. Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful."

This text is asking us to be different kinds of people. Instead of collecting love, we are to give love. Instead of collecting things that identify us as interesting people, we are to collect difficulties. And instead of collecting injuries, we are to collect their beauty.

I was once asked, "What is your super power? Mine is creating educational spaces where people can go to learn. I like to hope I am the Olympic coach behind the Olympic star. Currently I am teaching in five programs and wish I had the time to introduce you to each of my heroes. I mean my students. One is a Roman Catholic nun, who was a medical missionary. The order where she lived in 1925 learned how to do medicine in the Mideast so that Muslim women could see a doctor. They weren't able to be seen by a man so the nuns learned how to do babies and birthing, even learned how to do abortions. My Korean dean at Hartford Seminary tells me that before he came to the States and learned Hebrew – which he now teaches – he thought Mohammed Ali was the only kind of American there was. The big fights were streamed to Korea. He also learned to love boxing. At Etsy.org in the spiritual entrepreneurship fellowship I meant 28-year-old Henry. He now provides yoga teachers to the New York City school system at a cost less than that of dancers. He employs 300 people, most of whom he picked up off the street, trained them in yoga and now they have a part-time job working in schools with rough kids. By the way they are rough kids themselves.

Goethe said, "a person can stand anything except a succession of ordinary days". I can stand anything but the succession of ordinary thoughts. And surely one of those thoughts is the thoughts around exchange. I love you. You love me. It might be easier to see the world of exchange through the ideas of the common hobby of collecting things.

“The Keeper,” at The New Museum until 25 September, curates a series of collections for its exhibition. There is Zofia Rydet’s Sociological Record, a project where she photographed the interior of nearly 20,000 homes in Poland. The whole show has more than two dozen collectors and over 4,000 objects. There is a collection of teddy bears, street trash, rare rocks, butterflies, photos of snowflakes. The keepers are considered an artistic meditation on values. Each collection is an activity that exposes, even as it deflects, our fears that the universe couldn’t care less about our hankering selves, as the *New Yorker* puts its summary.

Even what we choose not to keep defines us. The declutter gurus, yard sales and online exchanges, the arcades of unwanted waste are powerful cultural forces too. Keeping, these artists argue, is an act of self-preservation. I know that is true. My mother’s Boyd’s teddy bear collection grounds her. She is proud that she has 248 bears and wouldn’t pass a yard sale or a thrift store without looking for another one. My husband has over 300 snow globes, representing most states and cities in the U.S. and a large number of European places too. My favorite is his Mormon Tabernacle Temple snow globe.

The oil billionaire J. Paul Getty was famously miserly. He installed a pay phone in his mansion in Surrey, England, to stop visitors from making long-distance calls. He refused to pay ransom for a kidnapped grandson for so long that the frustrated kidnappers sent Getty his grandson’s ear in the mail. Yet he spent millions of dollars on art, and millions more to build the Getty Museum in Los Angeles. He called himself “an apparently incurable art-collecting addict”, and noted that he had vowed to stop collecting several times, only to suffer “massive relapses”. Fearful of airplanes and too busy to take the time to sail to California from his adopted hometown of London, he never even visited the museum his money had filled.

Getty is only one of the many people through history who have gone to great lengths to collect art – searching, spending, and even stealing to satisfy their cravings. But what motivates these collectors?

Debates about why people collect art date back at least to the first century CE. The Roman rhetorician Quintilian claimed that those who professed to admire what he considered to be the primitive works of the painter Polyglots were motivated by “an ostentatious desire to seem persons of superior taste”. Quintilian’s view still finds many supporters.

Another popular explanation for collecting – financial gain – cannot explain why collectors go to such lengths. But most collectors have little regard for profit. For them, art is important for other reasons. The best way to understand the underlying drive of art collecting is as a means to create and strengthen social bonds, and as a way for collectors to communicate information about themselves and the world within these new networks. Think about when you were a child, making friends with the new kid on the block by showing off your shoebox full of bird feathers or baseball cards. You were forming a new link in your social network and communicating some key pieces of information about yourself (I’m a fan of

orioles/the Orioles). The art collector conducting dinner party guests through her private art gallery has the same goals – telling new friends about herself.

Getty was not even from New York or Boston. He grew up in the scraped-together oil-boom towns of the Great Plains and the brand-new expanses of Los Angeles. But he made his first million by the time he was 24, prospecting for oil in Oklahoma in 1916. He promptly retired, declaring that he would henceforth live a life of enjoyment of beaches and fast cars. But Getty's California idyll proved to bore him, and he began to work again after little more than a year. He did so for the rest of his long life, traveling constantly, sleeping little, trusting few, and accumulating a vast fortune – at \$2 billion by the time of his death, thanks to Getty Oil's worldwide network of oil production and distribution.

When Getty started to collect art, his focus on buying Greek and Roman antiquities went against the American zeitgeist. The 19th-century traveller Ralph Izzard Middleton of South Carolina expressed a characteristic American perspective on ancient art. After seeing the Belvedere Torso in the Vatican Museum, he wrote in a letter to his family that artists should go to look at it, but for people “who could not model a dog out of a piece of wax” (among which I enroll myself) “to go and spend hours together in the middle of winter in the Vatican constantly exclaiming how beautiful, how beautiful, when they are all the while thinking how cold, how cold, this I think utterly absurd”. In the same letter, he huffs that “triumphal arches and old tottering columns, the dilapidated statues and smoked frescoes, all these are fudge”.

Getty's most important investment was in the identity-granting power of art. **So how do we find a way to collect beauty instead of identity markers? How do we aim for beauty?** How do you make a mission statement for your life that is hard enough to give you some oomph and intentional enough to comprehend a day? Or nurture a super power that you have? Mine is spiritual nurture for public capacity, meaning I don't want to just comfort you but also want to empower you. Especially for people who have lost their way or about to retire or graduate from college. What a mission statement gives you:

1. **Choosing your clients**
2. **Managing your Time**
3. **Choosing your measurable**
4. **Knowing what you can't do; knowing what to throw away.**
5. **Dealing with projections**
6. **Self-Differentiation**
7. **Consistency Overtime**
8. **Trailblazing**
9. **Importance of aim. With so many calling your name, focus is the most luxurious thing in the world.**
10. **Writing your own obit, resting easy in the end.**

And what does a church or congregation do as it diminishes? It collects beauty also. Art of Spiritual Tinkering; spiritual experimentation? When I travel these northern hills, I often think of Rip Van Winkle. I'd like to rename him Rip Van Twinkle. He was appalled to see what had changed in 20 years. Instead we might be glad - -and follow Henry's lead or the lead of the medical missionaries and provide what is missing.

We are beginners not experts in a new kind of religion, one beyond the faith of our fathers. What does it mean to be in a religious start-up? To be a spiritual entrepreneur. For one thing, it means experimentation. Twelve experiments are tinkered with here. First take out the pews. Second rethink Sunday morning. Third, recycle. Listen to the tinkle of the canners on a summer New York morning. They rise early and pick through the trash and pick up bottles and cans.....

Take out the pews – and not just in church. Making every space a flexible space. Vacation differently. Sacramentalize differently. Communion, confession, healing, marrying, burying confirming...healing? Why lose them if you're not religious or unhappy with religion?

Ironically, if you collect something that other people don't – like the beauty below injury – the beauty within injury – you let the injury go and stick with the beauty. You become a different kind of person.