

What you do with what you've got
Sept 6, 2009
Labor Day
Ellsworth, Maine
Rev. Leela Sinha

I saw three cars with Massachusetts plates the other day. They were pulled over on a small road. They were consulting one another. They looked like tourists. They looked lost. The friend I was with works in tourism...and she said, "if they would just turn around and go back to Massachusetts, they wouldn't be lost anymore."

Summer is finally, finally winding down. We like our guests, but the tide is turning, the fatigue is rising, and the guest room needs a whole week to itself.

Labor Day is here. We're a little confused about Labor Day here in the US. Around the world it's celebrated on or around the first of May, but our Mayday looks much more like Beltane, and our Labor Day is uncomplicated by pagan rituals of fertility and spring. Instead, we have this day at the end of summer which here in Maine is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, our children go back to school; our teachers go back to work, our churches and other volunteer organizations shift into high gear--another year has begun. On the other hand, the high season is over and our farmers and B&B owners and shopkeepers can relax. On yet another hand, the high season is over, and whatever happened is mostly done; the money for the year is made; from now until next spring we have to fend for ourselves.

And what matters from here on out is what we do with what we've got.

Take the golden mouse. The rich merchant was kidding. But what Soma Datta made of the joke is the heart of the story. He didn't forge of it discouragement; he didn't build an empire of despair. He instead found himself one mouse richer than before, and got creative.

There's a guy in the UK who's been doing the same thing for a while now. His goal is to trade up from nothing to a Bentley or Rolls Royce. <http://www.tradingnothing.com/blog.html> On his blog you can find all kinds of things that are available for trade, and he's willing to travel for the right swap. He calls it a hobby; it is probably not profitable, but it's an interesting quest: something broadly accepted as valuable from nothing, nothing at all. There's another couple that started with a red paperclip and traded up to a house--and now they're trading the house.

It can be done.

What we have matters relatively little: it's a question of luck, of chance, of accident, of inspiration. What matters is what we do with it. We can make money good or evil; we can make love good or bad; everything in itself is neutral and what we do with it carries with it the morality and judgments. But it also carries with it the impact, impact which comes from motion, momentum, mass, action, velocity. Impact which makes change, like balls hitting balls on a pool table, one thing unrolling from the last, and what you're left with is an empty space where the

ball was before you hit it, space for possibility, space for change--and the whole game can change with one little tap.

And what do we do when we're injured, when we're hurt, when what we have is fear or pain from someone or something that came before? We can make of it more pain, or we can choose differently. It is that choice that moves us from subject to agent, from victim to actor. That's what often happens here with religion--people come here bearing pain, and it is our call as a community to help find a better option for that energy. It also happens with bad childhoods and untreated trauma--it's an energy drain, and we can let that happen, or we can decide to make something good of something bad; we can force a change in direction without stopping the motion.

It happens here more than anywhere else I've lived: a driver comes to a short stop on a narrow road. The next car in line swerves to avoid a collision, drives onto the shoulder, and keeps going. That's just a redirect of the energy, not stopping it, just changing it. Same principle as Aikido--pull the fist past you, don't try to stop it. Waste of energy, stopping it. Pull on the fist *in the direction it's already going* and just get out of the way. Use the energy for your own ends. That's what matters, whether it's people or things or motion. Change where it's going, and the whole story changes.

What matters isn't that someone's hand is moving very fast toward you; what matters is that you move your body out of harm's way and redirect the force. There are some similar moves in Tai Chi Chuan; sometimes I think everyone should study it, because it would teach us how to be less threatened in community, and more able to stand our ground. If you know you can handle what happens--whatever you're handed--there's no need for the kick of adrenaline or the panicked rush to defense. Just take what's coming and use it.

What you do with what you've got.

What if you have a shortage of money? You can decide to cut things--or you can decide that you must be able to trade up from the nothing you think you have to something better. Trading up is all in the eye of the beholder, after all. If you're thirsty in the desert, a glass of water is worth a lot. If you're stranded, you might give anything for a ride. One of the best selling items at the auction last year was being driven to and from the location of your choice, up to a certain number of miles. Maybe you have computer skills or maybe you can read to someone out loud. Find the skill; find the need; you have something you can trade, and what you need is money.

...or maybe it isn't money. A barter economy means you might get bread in exchange, if bread is what you really want. Cut as many steps as possible out without losing value for what you have.

After all, if Soma Datta could start with a dead mouse and a firewood shortage...

And that's the morality question, which never really goes away. Is it right to sell your firewood at a premium simply because there's a shortage and the market will bear it? We here are all acutely aware of what happens when there's nothing to burn. One could argue that Soma Datta

was not in the same position--his firewood was in India, where people get chilled but rarely freeze to death. That would sidestep the real question, though, which is about benefiting from someone's desperation.

Look at health care. How is it right to deny anyone coverage? We already know that no one can be denied treatment, but we can lose everything that we own in trying to pay for it later.

There is something profoundly immoral about that--about any system where someone in grave need can have to choose between survival now and survival later. There's a song by John McCutcheon called Dearest Martha, about a farmer who kills himself so his wife and family will get the insurance money so they can survive. It's heartbreaking, and it has happened, more than once. People don't always choose survival now; they don't see a way out, so they don't wait around to see what happens later. Creating that kind of desperation is unconscionable; fostering it is unjustifiable. But it is possible to make a living even without that. The question is what you want out of it.

The title of this sermon is from Si Kahn's song of the same name:

The chorus is:

It's not just what you're born with; it's what you choose to bear. Not how large your share is, but how much you can share and it's not the fights you dream of but those you've really fought; it's not just what you're given it's what you do with what you've got.

What you do depends on what you're willing to do and where you want to end up. It's really important to have that vision, because otherwise how can we know what we should do? Choices are made by gut or by end result, but are best made by both, guided by that star in the East, whatever it is.

And what is it that we *do*?

What bridges the gap between dream and reality, what crosses the space between whatever you have and whatever you want to make of it? Work. Plain, old-fashioned work. The work that we have here in Maine, the work that gets us through the hard times: farming and fishing and hunting and logging and building and cooking and cleaning and knitting and sewing, the work that keeps us close to each other and close to the land on which we live. It may sound like I'm romanticizing it. I'm not. It's hard work, and we don't always make ends meet. Most of us have two or three jobs, many of us can only guess about making the rent every month. But there's a solidity in this work, there's a certainty about it. These are real tasks of living; there aren't a lot of steps between the labor of the day and the food in the evening. If the economy fails entirely tomorrow, a fisherman will still have something of value to trade and food on her table.

I've spent a lot of time traveling to New York this summer, and I can tell you, that's not everyone's experience. Most of my new friends in the city are three or four or seventeen steps removed from the basic stuff of survival; they rely on all the people in the chain before them to do their jobs. It's a blessing and a curse; they believe themselves fiercely independent, but in fact they are practicing interdependence far more deeply than we. Our fallback, failsafe is that we

can always do it all ourselves. It's a lie we tell ourselves, because we need each other deeply, but many of us could probably eat and drink unaided. There is panic--they don't honestly have a means of survival without others. It makes them a little more careful, I think, stepping a little more gingerly around one another. But it also means that they lose the satisfaction of self-nourishment. They don't really know what they are capable of on their own. We do. It makes it possible for us to believe in everyone, if we choose.

After all, anyone can learn a skill. Anyone can learn a trade. Anyone can learn to make things that need making. That's the principle behind guilds and trade unions. That's all we do--we pick things up and we make things of other things. It's a learnable, teachable skill. What sets us apart here is that we have an acute awareness of how important it is to know how. We do live close to the edge, many of us. It keeps us mindful of the value of skills in our own hands, in our own bodies, in our own minds. Those skills allow us to transform whatever we have before us into that which we need, with a minimum of waste. It pruned my mind open the day that I realized that I might not always need to buy lumber; that some of what I wanted to build could be sourced on my own land. What an idea, that all that lay between me and what I needed was time and energy.

Time and energy--our two most precious resources. Even here, I'd argue that it's harder to get time than money from people, that you know what really matters to someone by where they spend the things we spend: money, yes, and time. Our congregation has a passion for feeding hungry people, and the food pantry schedule for August is full. Our congregation is fired up about the No on 1 Marriage equality campaign, and the phone banking, the house parties, the fundraising are mostly headed up by our members and friends, because it matters, equality matters, and we know it in the bones of our bones, and this is an issue on which we know we can lead.

We only have so much of whatever we have...so what we are called to do is true stewardship--not hoarding, not wastefulness, but judicious and efficient use of resources for good ends.

For anyone who has spent time with not enough, in recession, famine, or just hard times--it's a tricky balance to strike. We can get so used to spending when we have it to make up for the times when we're desperate that spending according to non-crisis need and trusting that the rest won't vanish feels foreign, awkward, and strange. And with money it's one thing: the money just runs out if you overspend. But volunteers and people-energy are a different story. Once they're burned out, the scars can last for years, and we don't want to do that. We are a community that cares for one another. But that means we have to use our people well--time and energy and inspiration, all three.

It's not unlike a small business--the way to be efficient is not to do it all yourself. If someone else can do it with less overhead, they should. Proponents of the 4-hour-workweek model advocate hiring a VA--virtual assistant--probably overseas, definitely for cheap. But even without outsourcing it makes sense to find someone the most interesting, complex work they can do, and work that matters to them. Not only does it make efficient use of money and time, it keeps them from getting bored, it keeps them engaged, and it holds space for them to grow and deepen and develop and change.

Good use of what we have can be the pivot on which a whole life can turn.

a friend of mine is a defense attorney. She works on murder trials, rape trials, the tough stuff...because, as she says, everyone deserves a fair trial. Everyone. Recently she posted a [New Yorker article](#) to Facebook, a piece about a man who was tried and convicted for homicide by arson. He said he was innocent. He appealed all the way up, through the courts, all the way to the governor. There was new research and new analysis of the evidence that strongly indicated his innocence.

There was no evidence, however, that the governor looked at the new evaluations, the fresh analysis. Apparently no one took the time and effort to find out what all the fuss was about, why he thought he could be acquitted after all.

What on earth was the governor thinking? He had on his desk the new report regarding the evidence that the fire could have been accidental, along with trial data that discredited some of the testimony, and a request for a 30 day stay of execution. Execution is permanent. It's forever. You can't bring someone back if you figure it out later. *There is no remedy.*

And despite that, and reasonable doubt, he allowed the state to kill someone.

What you do with what you've got can change lives. People live and die on the work of our hands.

So we give time and energy, and that has power. That has transformative, world-changing power.

Which is what work is about, in the end. We honor work because it binds us together and it changes our lives. Whether we're baking bread or organizing volunteers or making art or making housing, work the way we do it makes us interdependent, even here, where we know everyone can do it all on their own. We learn to give; we learn to receive; we learn to ask for what we need. Work is not just a thing we do so we get money; work is a thing we do because the pitcher cries for water to carry, because our hands need work that is real.

May we find in our hearts the real work of our lives, and may we lean into it.