

## “Precious Trash”

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull  
First Parish Unitarian Universalist  
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Sustainability, it's a long word with a learning curve to match. It's not easy being green. Then there's Oscar the Grouch. In those jarring words of poet George Ella Lyon, would Oscar “cast his trash upon the waters?” Not a chance!

“Anything dirty or dingy or dusty  
Anything ragged or rotten or rusty  
Yes, I love trash.”

Oscar takes a stand.

How about us? What defines the stuff that we love? When are we willing to part with it and how? Into a blue bag to cart off to the last stop at our transfer stations? Holding on and letting go and all the options in between are choices of body and soul.

Consider the Russian folktale of Joseph and his coat – not to be confused with the biblical Joseph and his coat of many colors or the musical rendition of the biblical Joseph and his amazing technicolor dream coat! This Joseph of Russian folklore was the son of a tailor. Joseph worked in the family business, designing and cutting and sewing custom suits and more for the wealthy residents of their Russian village. So many elegant garments they made for the townspeople, Joseph began to dream of making something for himself – a warm coat in rich colors.

Joseph dreamed and began to work harder than ever, saving the roubles and kopecks he earned in his father's shop for the fine cloth he had chosen for his dream coat. Now you might wonder: what's the difference between this Joseph and the Joseph who sported another amazing dream coat. The Joseph of Genesis received his coat as a gift from his father. The Joseph of our story knew that his father could not afford such a gift. Only through diligent saving, would our Joseph earn the money to purchase the cloth himself. Day after day he worked in his father's shop. At night, he dropped into an old jar next to his bed the coins that would one day be enough.

Spring came. Summer passed. Fall arrived. Winter returned. At long last, Joseph had enough. Off he went to buy the cloth, a soft gray wool shimmering with threads of silver and gold and rich with touches of deep ruby. Late at night, long after he had supper with his family, long after his mother and father and sister went to bed, Joseph returned to his father's shop and went to work crafting his coat. Night after night he worked, cutting the cloth, laying it out in carefully measured pieces, stitching it together. After many weeks, it was done. He tried it on; it fit perfectly. When his father came in the next morning, he found Joseph fast asleep wrapped in his dream coat. With a warm smile, his father roused Joseph from his slumber and pronounced him a “tailor in his own right.” Joseph felt a glow of pride. He wore his coat everywhere, knowing that it was as beautiful as it was warm. Year after year, whenever the seasons were chill, Joseph wore

his coat. To and from his father's shop and through the streets of their village, Joseph wore his coat.

One afternoon in deep winter, Joseph had been to the marketplace to purchase cloth for their shop, for it was now a business of father and son. On his way back, he noticed a young woman shivering in the cold. He thought once, but not twice. "Here," he said, "take this and wear it home." He placed his coat around her shoulders and walked her home.

After many months of many walks and many conversations, Joseph and Anna were married. On the ground floor of their modest home, Joseph opened his own shop, where he continued as a tailor, a fine tailor whose garments were much sought after. As he worked and kept house with Anna, he also wore his coat, his beloved dream coat. He wore it until the coat became worn, almost threadbare. Much as he loved that coat, and Anna knew it, she said to him one day, "Joseph, enough. Your coat has given you so many years of wear, it's completely worn out." Joseph looked at her sadly. "How can I give up this coat that reminds me of my long years working with my father? How can I give up this coat that led me to you? I know it's thread bare, but there are still a few threads."

Then he realized what he was saying. "There are still a few threads." There were just enough for Joseph to take his coat to his tailor's bench and begin to measure. "Yes, there's just enough!" And he set to work making a jacket.

Of course, Joseph wore the jacket everywhere. Sprinkled as it was with a dash of silver and gold and ruby red and careful use of the cloth that was intact, his jacket was warm and elegant. As the seasons passed, Joseph and Anna became parents. Twin girls were born to them. One winter evening, when his two little ones could barely walk, the snow began to fall. Joseph's eyes twinkled as he turned to his girls and said, "Come on, darlings, let's go for a walk." He tucked one into one side of his jacket and the other into the other side, and off they went, all of them warmed by Joseph's jacket, as they laughed and sang their way through the village streets.

Years passed. The girls grew up and the jacket wore out. It was time again for Anna to remind him, "Joseph, dear, it's time to let go of it. There's nothing much left." Joseph was sad once again. The jacket held such memories for him, the silver threads recalling the light from his father's shop, the winter's night when he bundled his little ones and went out for a walk. ...but wait, wait, there's enough, just enough.

Once again he started to measure and cut and stitch. The night grew late, but by morning, Joseph had made a cap. What an uncommon cap it was, with a strand each of silver and gold and ruby red and threads woven together and lined for warmth on the coldest of Russian nights.

Joseph was known by his cap. Everywhere he went, he leaned forward just enough so that neighbors saw his cap before his face. Life was good for many years. Then life was not so good. There was barely a sprinkle of rain all summer long. The crops withered; food was scarce. No one, not even the once wealthy, were placing orders for suits or coats or jackets or caps. Joseph and Anna struggled to put food on the table for themselves and their now teenage girls. They were among the fortunate, for Anna had collected rainwater in a barrel and planted a garden out back. With its harvest of potatoes, carrots, parsnips, and cabbage, they had enough, just enough, to survive. But they never had any treats; they had nothing sweet.

One sunny day, Joseph and Anna and the girls went out to gather firewood from the town forest. Suddenly Anna shouted, "Look, look what I've found." A berry patch spread like a brilliant blue comforter on the otherwise dry ground at their feet. They ate their fill and there were still more. What to do? They had brought only carriers for firewood, nothing suitable for blackberries.

Then Joseph scratched his head. It was easy to do, since his cap was so worn, it was a short path through his cap to the top of his head, which was exactly what he needed to think: "Of course, a capful of berries will be just enough!" Joseph's cap became the family's berry bowl and continued, as you might imagine, as Joseph's cap, with some serious washings in between usages.

With so much wear and so much berry carrying, the threads that remained were permanently stained the deep blue-back of the berries. By then, good fortune had returned in the form of rain. Crops thrived and so did the family. They were not rich, but they had enough.

Joseph's and Anna's daughters were now young women. Soon there were weddings to plan. Joseph knew that his cap was just too raggedy for a wedding. Then he thought to himself: "Wait, I have enough, just enough." So back to his shop he went and cut and stitched and turned his beloved cap into a snappy bowtie. At his daughters' weddings, Joseph sported his bowtie!

He wore the bowtie every time he and Anna went to visit their daughters and their growing families. When their first grandchild grew old enough to speak, she sat astride her grandpa's lap and began playing with his bowtie. "Grandpa, how come you have a butterfly on your neck?" Joseph's bowtie became the center of butterfly stories as he took it off and whirled it through the air to his grandchildren's delight.

One day Joseph came home from work, reached for his cap, suddenly remembered his cap was a bowtie, and with a customary pat of affection in the direction of his bowtie, discovered it wasn't there. "Anna, Anna, my bowtie is gone!" He knew it must have dropped onto the ground, for the threads of the little bowtie were tired and worn. Off he dashed, retracing his steps through town, through the market, everywhere that he could possibly imagine having been that day. It was nowhere to be found. Joseph dragged himself home and slumped into bed without supper, grieving the loss of an old friend.

In the morning, he could barely get out of bed after a night of dreams about a dream coat, a beloved jacket, a spiffy cap, an elegant bowtie, and a whimsical butterfly. Anna knew just what to do. Off she went to their daughters' homes. "Bring your children," she summoned them. "Bring your children. Their grandpa needs them, for he has lost his bowtie!"

As young children will, they plopped themselves onto their grandfather's bed, ready to play. In words heavy with sadness, Joseph explained, "I can't play, dear ones. I've lost an old friend. How can I play on a day like today?" At this, one of his daughters piped up. "Tell us the stories, Papa. Tell us the stories of the bowtie and how it began."

Joseph slowly sat up, gathered his grandchildren about him, with his daughters and Anna nearby. He told them about working in his father's shop. He told them about his dream of a coat warm and glistening with color. He told them how his coat had led him to their grandmother. He told them how the coat had grown tired, but not so tired that there wasn't enough for a jacket. He

told them about the jacket and the cap and the berries and bowtie and their mothers' weddings and reminded them of the butterfly games.

“That’s what happened, Grandpa! That’s what happened,” chimed in his grandson. “You turned your bowtie into a butterfly and it flew off.” Joseph smiled. “Thank you, thank you, little ones.” You’ve reminded me that somewhere a butterfly is dancing and that right here stories are dancing. You have reminded me that there is enough, just enough bowtie to make a butterfly and just enough butterfly to make stories, and just enough memory for the stories to last and last. Maybe you can share with your children and grandchildren the stories that I’ve shared with you, so that nothing, nothing will be lost. There will always be enough, just enough.”

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Lest you think such stories happen only in centuries past in faraway places like Russia, we have a just enough story right here in our own congregation.

Rod Hobson was for many years a commercial airline pilot and holds stories, countless stories of those years flying all over the world. But when he retired, there was enough, just enough energy and imagination to do other things. Rod is our resident historian. He knows more about the Meeting House and the Parish House than anyone I know, and he holds so many stories about these sacred spaces where we worship and gather season after season, year after year. Rod also became a carpenter, a carpenter with a special relationship to what is fondly known in this town as the “Cohasset Boutique,” prominently set amid the local Recycling and Transfer Station. It’s become a community center of sorts and a treasure chest of items that were not quite trashed.

One day Rod went shopping at this boutique and brought home in the back of his truck the remains of a bed frame, a solid maple bed frame. Into the cellar of Rod and Marilyn’s home it went ... for future reference.

Many years later, two years ago in fact, a need arose for a desk, a spacious desk for the office of our Religious Education Director. Some in the church began to shop at the likely places – furniture stores, office supply centers, but what they found was too expensive or poorly made. Rod caught wind of this search and thought to himself, “Why not?” So down to his cellar he went, rattled through whatever else was there, and resurrected the maple bed frame. He pondered and planned and trimmed the posts and recycled the pieces and fashioned a desk, all from that bed frame, with the exception of a single piece of plywood, itself found who knows where, which he added as the desktop. Rod sanded and varnished and fashioned a desk custom-made for a study with wide pine floors in a building that dates from the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. It’s a match made in recyclers’ heaven!

That’s not all. Cutting a piece of the old bed, a scrap fell to the floor. It was a scrap that Rod’s keen eyes recognized as a small whale. “So,” said Rod to himself, “we’ll use that as a ‘signature.’”

Take a field trip, won’t you? Ask Jim if you might check out the desk in his office. I’ll bet he says, “Yes.” Then bend down and look on the underside of this exquisitely crafted desk. There you’ll find a maple whale, perhaps 10” long, with a smile on his front end and a message on his broadside: “Built by Rod Hobson 2006.”

From dream coats to butterflies; from bed frames to smiling whales; from an offering dedicated to sustainability worldwide through the gifts of sheep, goats, llamas, chickens, trees, and seeds, we have enough, just enough. If only we reduce, re-use, recycle, and imagine. From such practices of body and spirit, we add a fourth R to this mantra of Earth Day and every day....*resurrect*. When we reduce what is our more than enough, when we re-use what we have and what we find, when we recycle the sparest of scraps, when we put our imagination and hands to work well beyond Earth Day Sunday, we discover the very stuff of resurrection. A coat becomes a butterfly becomes a story. A bed becomes a whale carrying a desk fit for generations. With the resurrection of enough, we will always have enough, just enough.

I don't know about you, but I'm with Oscar. I love trash, precious precious trash! Amen

**Sources:**

Rod Hobson, Conversation of April 18, 2008.

Jeffrey Moss, *I Love Trash*, from Sesame Street, 1967.

“Just Enough,” A Folktale from Russia, adapted by Elisa Pearmain, [further adapted by the author of this sermon], [http://www.healingstory.org/treasure/just\\_enough/just\\_enough.html](http://www.healingstory.org/treasure/just_enough/just_enough.html)