

GOD IS A VERB

Given 7/18/2010 by John Atcheson

The title for today's sermon: *God Is a Verb*, comes from a poem by R. Buckminster Fuller – the grandson of a Unitarian Minister, and a Unitarian himself.

Let me read you a bit of it:

Here is God's purpose-
for God, to me, it seems,
is a verb
not a noun,
proper or improper;
is the articulation
not the art, objective or subjective;
is loving,
not the abstraction "love" commanded or entreated;
is knowledge dynamic,
not legislative code,
not proclamation law.
not academic dogma, not ecclesiastic canon.
Yes, God is a verb,
the most active,
Let it burn swiftly.

I believe Bucky had a very specific idea in mind – that we are defined by what we do, not what we have; that we are most fulfilled by what we make, not what we take; that we are most Godlike when we produce, not when we consume.

God is a verb.

And for most of our 50,000 years on this planet as homo sapiens sapiens – man the double wise – we humans have defined ourselves as producers and doers.

But within the last 100 years, we've come to define ***and to value*** ourselves by what we consume and what we have, not by what we produce.

In economics, there is a concept called externalities – the things that have costs but aren't embedded in the price of goods – things like pollution or health effects.

Well, a life focused on consumption also has hidden costs we don't pay at the cash register – such as the erosion of community; the exploitation of our fellow humans; the exploitation of our environment; the theft of our children's future; the starvation of our values and the impoverishment of our souls ...

But before I venture to discuss these with you – I have a confession – I stand before you a hypocrite. Because as I lay out these ideas for us to consider and perhaps even act on, I have to admit that what I desire more than anything in the world – with the exception of world peace and the company of my future wife, Linda – is a 65 inch 3D flat screen, Panasonic plasma TV, model number TH-65Vx100.

...
And maybe a Home Theatre with those cool seats that recline and rock back and forth...equipped with a theatre-grade popcorn maker -- Yeah.

...
Oh, and maybe two more houses, one in the White Mountains of NH, the other in Mendocino facing the ocean. Yeah. That would do it.

...
Oh, and of course, a Porsche Cayman 987c. And maybe an island in the Caribbean – but just a small one ... and ...

You get the idea ... As a society, we spend more than a quarter trillion dollars a year creating wants, then turning those wants into needs, then creating new wants

But God is a verb.

Buckminster Fuller published that poem in the Whole Earth Catalogue, a kind of bible of doing from the tune-in, turn-on, drop out 60's.

Looking around, I can see some of you remember it – although if you were too enthusiastic about the tune in, turn on part, you may not remember it well.

If you don't know about the Whole Earth Catalogue, here's all you need to know: It was a compendium of tools designed to deliver us from slavery to all that was "plastic" by which we meant the the sliceomatic; diceomatic; automatic everything, whose sole purpose was to make money by making life easy

Many hoped to find within the covers of the Whole Earth catalogue, a life of meaning, purpose, self-reliance, and independence. The catch phrase was "Appropriate technologies" – technologies that were soft, accessible, Earth-friendly, and human-scaled.

Some of the technologies were absurd – there was the chicken manure engine – an actual internal combustion engine that ran on methane derived from

chicken poop. It worked, but it got very poor mileage – less than a mile per chicken.

Some were sublime – simple solar hot water devices made from black plastic bags, for example. They also worked. As a young man, I took hot showers in the snows of January using one I'd made for free.

But absurd or sublime, the Whole Earth catalogue was a kind of bible – a bible of doing. A trip ticket to a world centered around the nobility of being a producer – not a consumer.

I was reminded how far we've traveled from that time when I attended a "60's Party" a couple of years ago.

Come the magic night, the music was right – Jimi Hendrix, The Beatles, The Grateful Dead.

I showed up with a t-shirt emblazoned with a peace sign. As I strolled through the crowd, a young neighbor stopped me – – and after studying it a moment, she said, "Why do you have a Mercedes sign on your T-shirt?"

To paraphrase the Grateful Dead, "What a long, strange trip it's been, indeed."

I left that party a little disillusioned. It didn't help when I reached the parking lot and saw a bumper sticker on an immense Hummer that said: *He who dies with the most toys wins.*

And it's here I have to ask you to forget that you're hearing this from a man who is drooling for a 65 inch 3D flat screen, Panasonic plasma TV, model number TH-65Vx100 ... and a few more houses. And a popcorn maker.

Something happened. Somehow, the notion that we were most divine when we were creating shifted, and we began to judge our worth not by what we could produce, but by what we were able to consume. By *things*.

We got the Mercedes, but we lost some vital connections.

I believe this focus on consumption is at the core of much of what ails us in the 21st Century. And I believe we know it. There is within each of us that still small voice that tells us we've lost our way – that this isn't working. That in our quest for stuff, we haven't become happier. We should listen to that voice. There's wisdom in it.

In fact, the apogee of happiness in the US according to the National Opinion Research Center, was in 1957, when the average American family had one car; one TV; a house less than half as big as today's homes with one

bathroom, no air conditioning, no clothes dryer, no stereo - we had less than half the stuff we have now. Since then, as psychologist David G. Myers points out, we've gotten less happy, but astronomically richer.

At the end of the day, here is the problem with a consumer based economy: It is amoral. Not immoral, but amoral – it operates outside of any moral framework. What **gets more** is good; what allows us to have bigger, better, faster, fatter, flashier, fluffier stuff **is good**.

We become liquidators instead of investors; we become debtors rather than donors; we become exploiters rather than stewards. Let's look at the hidden costs of a consumption-based life ...

For starters, it discourages right relationships between people.

Consumption is narcissistic. It's about me, not us. If more stuff is the answer, then what is good is defined by what I *get*, rather than what *we make or what we give*. A civil society becomes secondary. For example, Government ceases to be the way **we** come together to *DO* great things, and becomes, instead an agent that keeps **me** from getting what's mine.

Consumption makes us exploit people. If we can get folks in China or Vietnam or Mexico to do our bidding for less, we can get more. So why not? If we can buy cheap stuff from Wal-Mart, does it matter if their employees need food stamps to survive?

Consumption also discourages right relationships with the natural world. When *getting* and *taking* replace *giving* and *making*, we lose something of the divine within us. If we have to liquidate a rainforest – or destroy a climate – or acidify the seas, or eliminate species and eco-systems to get more for less then we will, for **the getting** is what it is all about.

Producers must be stewards of the raw materials they use to produce – consumers simply want more. A family farmer **nurtured** the soil – a factory farm **consumes** it. On average, the Earth is covered with about 3 feet of top soil. In the US, soil is eroding ten times faster than it takes to build it up. We're not **farming** soils, we're **liquidating** them.

We don't just exploit people, we exploit species and ecosystems -- Giant feedlots in which cattle can't move; pigs that never see daylight; chickens with their beaks cut off, living on antibiotics and factory-farmed frankinfood; turkeys bred to be too fat to stand, consumed by people who almost can't.

All for the getting – the cheaper the better, the more the better.

A consumer based economy destroys communities We watch giant box stores and malls go up – temples to the **getting** but we fail to see that we're cashing in the life and vitality of our local communities for a 10% off sale on the latest gizmo made in China.

We move to chase jobs to make more money so that we can afford more stuff, and the family and community that defined human culture for eons is weakened. In 1950 30% of us lived in urban settings. In 2008, for the first time,

more than half of us did. And by 2050, more than 70% of us will. Nature, for many of us, is becoming an alien place. We know the aisles of Abercrombie better than the canyons of San Dieguito. And you can't love what you don't know, and you won't protect what you don't love.

We get the McMansion, but the rooms are empty, our neighbors are strangers, and our connection with the world that sustains us all but severed.

A consumer-based society discourages right relationships with future generations. We use the sophistry of cost-benefit calculations to justify destroying the life-giving climate we inherited, to permit the extinction of 70% of all living species, to leave behind seas that are oil-fouled, acidic crypts rather than bountiful sources of food, joy and wonder.

Depending on how you count it, each newborn child in America comes into the world owing between \$39,000 and \$200,000.

An amoral framework focused on consumption obliterates any sense of limits. Consider this: the global value of derivatives in July of 2008 was \$1.44 quadrillion – not trillion, but quadrillion – with 15 zeros. That's about 20 times the size of the entire global economy. And it's 95% speculative – there's nothing made, nothing tangible, nothing tying it to the earth or the air or the sea.

The upshot of all this? We are in effect conducting an open pit mining of our children's future, leaving behind the scarred remains of a once beautiful planet and a huge unpaid bill.

Ah, but here's the nub, the crux the core of the matter – we love this stuff – we know it's empty, but we love it anyway. I covet a huge monster screen TV; I want several houses, a cool car, and a nifty popcorn maker. We're hardwired to consume – the reward centers in our brains formed in a time of scarcity – whether it's high calorie sweet and salty foods or plasma TVs – the same pleasure-reward pathways that make people crack cocaine addicts make us crave stuff – think of it as psychic junk food.

More and more, if we want it, we simply put it on plastic – Plastic? Remember that 60's phrase, "that's so plastic, man?"

Well here we are in 2010, and we now have islands of floating plastic junk in the North Pacific Vortex – one of them larger than the state of Texas. That's so plastic, indeed.

God is a verb. But humanity is becoming a noun. A thing – a miasma of stuff, a vortex of consumption.

In the 40 years since the First Whole Earth Catalogue, we've traded in the idea of being producers for the joys of consuming, and for a while, it looked like it worked. Like water to wine, we turned the peace sign into a Mercedes Benz symbol, and it was good.

But in the last few years, the evidence is mounting that something is wrong -- most of us can feel that nagging doubt.

Here's what Bill McKibben says in his new book *Eaarth*, about a time when gasoline hit \$4.00 a gallon and it began to dawn on Americans that something was amiss:

Suddenly, in fact, you felt a little less confident that you were an Explorer, a Navigator, a Forrester, a Mountaineer, a Scout, a Tracker, a Trooper, a Wrangler, a Pathfinder, a Trailblazer. You all of a sudden were in Kansas or maybe in New Rochelle – not Durango, or Tahoe, or Denali, or the Yukon. Discovery and Escape and Excursion suddenly seemed less important than the buzz-killing fact that it took a hundred bucks to fill the tank.

OK – so what? We all know money can't buy happiness; it can't buy love; it can't make the world go round ... etc. etc. but where can we go with this? What does it mean for us in the second decade of the 21st Century – how do we make this common knowledge something more than a slogan or a poster?

God is a verb. A verb acts – it changes things, it is dynamic. We can, of course, demand and work for trade agreements that incorporate environmental safeguards and labor protections. We can vote for candidates who back aggressive action on climate, energy, and economic justice. We can work to put people and citizens – not corporations – in charge of the political process.

But we can start here and now, in this community, and as individuals, by recognizing that each purchase we make is a vote – we can vote for a fast-food world with supersized fries, a jumbo drink and spiritual obesity, or we can vote for a sustainable world that nurtures human dignity and spiritual health. And we get to make this vote several times each day.

There is a handout as you leave – and I will make it available on the UUFSD list-serve -- that contains resources to help you understand what kind of vote you're casting, and it has some suggestions for working as a community toward a more sustainable world. I invite you to take one and consider using it.

We can't change the world by ourselves, but we can be the spark and the spirit and the example of a world in which we value the worker and consume more wisely. A world in which we derive joy in the richness of our souls and in our community and in our fellowship, rather than by mining the wealth of our children and the world we leave them.

Let us begin.