

Not Getting What You Truly Want

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Probably my favorite quote of all time is from Oscar Wilde. “There are two great tragedies in life. One is not getting what you truly want. The other is getting it.” I love the irony of this observation because it rings true for so many of us. How often have we been disappointed that we lost out on the big promotion, lost that scholarship we hoped for, or even just lost the big game playing sports either as a kid or as an adult? A loss like that can leave a bitter taste in one’s mouth. Yet as Wilde suggests, winning isn’t all it’s cracked up to be either. How many of you have won the big promotion, only to find that the extra responsibility brought with it added stress and less time with the family? Who among us won the prestigious scholarship to the school of your choice and found the ongoing pressure to live up to past achievement next to unbearable? Have you ever seen or been a part of a sports team that won the championship, only to grow complacent the following year; unmotivated to keep building on their success? This is fate deftly avoided by my Detroit Tigers last month, when they lost all four games of the World Series!

Loss is tragic, as we are exploring this month of November through our program theme. Yet the only thing more tragic than not getting what you truly want, is getting it and finding out that it is less than you expected. So often our imagination and fantasy about how great it would be if only I had or did X is far more satisfying than actually getting or accomplishing X.

Our story this morning resonated with me on many levels. I too had a Star Wars toy that I received one Christmas that was probably the best gift I got in childhood. But actually the story made me remember, not the best gift I ever got, but rather the opposite. When I was about ten I asked for some toy trucks. I had seen them on TV they had hub caps that were cone-shaped so that you could tip them on their side at an angle and they would still go. It looked like something out of the Dukes of Hazard or something. The kids on TV did all kinds of stunts and tricks with these things—it looked awesome. So I asked for them for my birthday, and actually got them. But Mr. Wilde would have been proud, for the only thing worse than not getting those trucks turned out to be getting them.

The first thing I noticed was that they were really small. Two of them fit in the palm of my hand. And they didn't balance very well on those conical rims. They kept tipping over or wouldn't go very far. They certainly didn't do any tricks for me. In later years I would discover that I had fallen victim to deceitful advertisers. The cars looked

bigger due to forced perspective in how those commercials are shot, so that on TV it appeared that they were six inches tall. And the tricks probably didn't work any better for the kids on TV than they did for me, but with a skillful editor, all the footage of the trucks falling over was cut. All that remained looked like these kids were daredevils. Watch some of the commercials on Nickelodeon some time—advertisers still do this.

These toys, which were supposed to be the greatest things ever and I had been looking forward to for weeks, got played with for about a day and half. I blamed myself; my parents hadn't done anything wrong. But the trucks reminded me what a stupid kid I had been. They were a reminder that the only thing more tragic than not getting what you truly want, is getting it.

Gain and loss are two things that the Buddha discussed a great deal. In his first sermon after his enlightenment the Buddha talked about suffering. It was a rather philosophical sermon, actually. His style was closer to Socrates; preferring to debate and discuss with his students. Jesus was more of a story teller. The Buddha could tell stories too, but in the beginning he went right at what he saw to be the central existential problem we all face: suffering. Basically his point was that we all have two instincts; to be around things that are pleasant and to push away things that are unpleasant. In our time, we might lean on the language of behavioral psychology to say that the two basic impulses we all have are

toward pleasure and away from pain. Sometime this works out the way we like, and we are around pleasurable things and people. For a time we are happy. But life is constantly changing; the only thing permanent is impermanence. And those pleasurable conditions don't last. Inevitably we wind up being around people and things that make us unhappy. So we try to force the situation to make ourselves happy again; we try to get more money, find a new lover, we put extra pressure on ourselves or our kids to perform better, or root for a different baseball team. However, whatever happiness we may have derived from accomplishing these goals is short-lived. Life, once again, changes everything.

Suffering is the usual English translation of the Sanskrit word *dukkha*. Modern Buddhist writers are beginning to question the accuracy of that translation. As it turns out, a better word for *dukkha* may not be “suffering” but rather “dissatisfying.” So when the Buddha says “All life is suffering.” He is not being all depressing and emo about life. He is not being pessimistic but realistic, “All life is dissatisfying.” The trucks that brought happiness bring it for only a short time. Eventually they disappointed me.

There have been some interesting studies done recently on happiness. One study actually tried to measure how long we are happy after we get something new. They didn't phrase it this way, but one could think about a continuum of happiness with Josh being disappointed with his trucks on one end, and the poor kid getting an AT-

AT and being satisfied for the next three holidays on the other. Most experiences of happiness fall in between. They looked at people who had just gotten something big and shiny and new; a big HD TV for example. Most people are probably pretty happy with a gift like that. The researchers asked, for how long? So of course they did surveys asking people how long it was until the euphoria of getting that new TV lasted. How long until one returned to a new normal, we might say? The average time was 90 days; about three months. Three months of happiness is about what you can expect from that big gift this Christmas. It will last you until about the end of March. After that, it's back to the life in all its dissatisfaction.

The Buddha knew a lot about loss and dissatisfaction in life. He was raised a prince, by a king who never wanted his son to experience suffering. And so in his childhood, through young adulthood, everything the young prince could ever want was given to him. Every whim was catered to. But as we have seen, even the pleasurable parts of life are temporary and ultimately dissatisfying. Feeling a hunger for a something more meaningful, the young prince decides to abandon his life of decadence. He gives up everything to become a wandering ascetic who must beg for food and water. He studies under teacher after teacher, but quickly masters all of their techniques. Eventually he and five of his friends go off on their own. They decide to give up everything that could possibly cause suffering, everything that is

impermanent. This included food and water and basic creature comforts.

One day, on the brink of starvation, the soon-to-be-Buddha passes out. He knows he is on the brink of death, and yet is as far away from accomplishing his goal as he has ever been in his life. He had everything and lost it. He gave up the worldly life of extreme comfort for the complete opposite, the life of extreme denial. Neither worked. Talk about the only thing more tragic than not getting what you truly want is getting it! So he decides to eat and drink. He feels his strength return to both his mind and body. His friends abandon him, judging him to be too weak to sustain their practice. But refreshed and reinvigorated, he decides that neither denial nor comfort work in the extremes. Perhaps the answer lies in a balance between the two; the “middle way” as it came to be known. And so he began to meditate and eventually attained enlightenment by following this middle way.

If we only look at one side of the equation, then the Buddha’s teaching about loss seems very pessimistic. This is often a critique leveled at Buddhism, but it forgets the other side of the equation, or the ledger if you will. For you see after the Buddha attained enlightenment, he sought out those five friends of his and preached the first sermon about *dukkha*. But he didn’t just give an analysis—he provided hope too. This suffering, this dissatisfaction, comes about because we are attached to external things in life. Those external things are always changing,

and we get caught up in the melodrama of it all. We get more money, we lose money. Our best friend does us a favor, then our best friend betrays us. These are situations that we have some control over, but not much; not as much as we like to fool ourselves into thinking. But we care a lot, and that caring can be a hook that pulls us into that melodrama and eventually to suffering.

The Buddha's advice is to let go of that hook, that attachment to things that change. He doesn't mean to go to the extreme of giving everything away—that is a hook in its own right. While the whole world is constantly changing, and most of it is outside of what we have any ability to control, there is one little corner of the world where we have a chance, one piece of it where we can find some peace from the melodrama of life: our mind. We can control that, if we develop it enough.

The Buddha is not exhorting us to not love other, to be stoic, or deny our emotions. He is simply urging us to adapt to an ever-changing world. For people who are co-dependent on other people's behavior and neglect their own emotional selves, he would counsel paying more attention to your emotions. However to the narcissist he would suggest caring for others more. The point is balance; not one universally applied medicine for all diseases.

Let us return to some of the examples we have considered. Take for example, the boy who got the AT-AT for Christmas and was satisfied with that one present for his next birthday and into the next Christmas. Here is a child who experienced pure joy. It was a joy so pure that it couldn't even be tainted by the revelation that his parents sort of conned him out of potential presents. The Buddha would say that this is a good thing. He was able to experience joy, right here and now and even into the future, without expectation or trying to force his circumstances to give him nothing but AT-ATs for the rest of his life. He just enjoyed it; no strings attached.

We can too. Gain and loss will happen in this life; it's part of the ever-changing world in which we live. Most of the time we have no say in this, and letting go of our desire to control what we can't control is a huge spiritual obstacle for most people. This is why 12 Step Programs pray for the serenity to give up the things outside of their control. It will drive you mad if you cling to that attachment.

What we can control is our level of expectation. Those studies I mentioned earlier that measure happiness looked at the levels of happiness reported in various countries. Inevitably nations like Bangladesh wind up at the top, and America and other economic super powers are at the bottom. Most commentators are puzzled by this. Why is it that the countries with the most money are the least happy? The unspoken assumption is that money brings happiness. But the reason is

not affluence, but expectation. I suspect those economic powerhouse nations got that way because we are always wanting more, buying more, and consuming more. From an economist's perspective that means the GDP is growing, and it is a good thing. From the Buddha's perspective it's also a bit foolish. Perhaps the happiness people experience comes from their expectations of their lives. If you do not have shiny baubles forced in front of you all the time, and told "You must buy this in order to be happy!" then you don't suffer when they aren't under the Christmas tree. You just experience the joy and happiness of life as it is with minimal expectation that you deserve more and should have it.

My friend and colleague Rev. Howard Dana calls this "Better living through lowered expectations!" If the list of external things you need to have in your life in order to be happy is long and expensive, then you will be pretty dissatisfied a lot of the time. But if you can shorten that list to some simple and basic things, food, friends, air to breath, then the easier it will be to be happy. The good news is that we have some control here. We can't control the universe but we can adapt to it. We can experience joy in the present and then let it go. External things will come and go, they may give us pleasure or pain. How you and I react to them, is up to us, the Buddha says. We can grasp after them and chase that good feeling like an addict. Or we can behave like a mature adult and understand that it all boils down to our expectations. As we head into the holiday season, I urge you to heed my colleague's advice: Better

living through lowered expectations. You will find life to be far more joy-filled and joyful as a result.

I wonder what my reaction to getting those trucks would have been if I had not seen the commercial for them. After all, it was that stupid commercial that had set my expectation of how those trucks should work. They were pretty high expectations that were not met, and as a result I was dissatisfied, disappointed, and in a mild sense I suppose, I experienced suffering. But without that commercial to set my expectations way up there, I could have enjoyed that gift for what it was. I might have even derived some pleasure from playing with them a little longer rather than hastily setting them aside. I am sure I would not have experienced the loss of having the fantasy of my “favorite” toy dispelled.

In this season of celebration and being with family, may we work on our ability to let go our opinions and desires on the way we think things ought to be. So often they are outside our control anyway. Let us simply derive joy and pleasure from the here and now, from being among those we love one more time, since none of us know how many more opportunities we will have. And if we do wind up getting what we truly want, let us savor that happiness for as long as possible. Amen
Blessed Be.