

Don't Feed the Plant

A sermon by Rev. Roberta Finkelstein

South Church, Portsmouth NH

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Earlier this fall, my husband Barry and I had the pleasure of seeing a very well done version of "Little Shop of Horrors" at the Seacoast Rep. For those of you not familiar with this play, it is a Faustian allegory that takes place in a small, struggling flower shop in an economically challenged neighborhood. The shop assistant, who likes to tinker with plants in his free time, develops a stupendous looking new species of plant. When it goes on display in the shop, people come from all over to see it. Of course they also spend lots of money in the store, saving the owner and his employees from economic ruin. The plant is the proverbial savior. With just a little catch. It only thrives when fed human blood and flesh. At first, the poor shop assistant keeps his plant happy by pricking his fingers and dripping his own blood into his invention. But as the plant grows, it demand more and more, and the stakes for refusing it's insatiable needs get higher and higher as the fame and fortune follow the owners of the plant everywhere. The unthinkable becomes routine as the first victim is fed to the plant and the plant grows even bigger and more spectacular. It was easy to justify the first murder; the man was evil, he abused his girl friend and treated people with disdain. Then the owner of the shop goes down the hatch, followed by the lovely heroine of the tale, who gives herself willingly to the plant. No greater love than to give up one's life for . . . THE PLANT? And finally the poor shop assistant himself is devoured, although it is clear that emotionally and spiritually he has already died. In order to feed the plant, he compromised all his core values, little by little, until he was a lost soul. By the time he became plant food, the person he had been was dead, caught in the devil's bargain. As the play ends, cuttings from the plant are being disseminated to florists all over the country, while the victims, now spectral, sing a ghastly final warning. Over and over again they intone, "Don't feed the plant."

A fable for our times. Global economic turbulence means that we are all working in struggling little flower shops in struggling little neighborhoods. And if we are honest, we will admit that we are all hoping for a miracle, for the appearance of a quick-fix savior that will end the frightening slide and make everything right again. That means that we too are vulnerable to making a Faustian bargain, trading our core values for a simplistic solution to a complex problem. Just the sort of time when one of the cuttings from THE PLANT might appear, demanding just a little drop of blood in exchange for economic security.

I believe THE PLANT has already appeared in our midst, and its botanical name is *anxietus free floatingus*. Or, to translate from the Latin, free floating anxiety. Anxiety is a relentless, hungry beast that has to be constantly fed. It does a great deal of damage; as much

damage as an unregulated free market, or corporate greed, or whatever else may be to blame for the current economic mess. At this point anxiety may be doing more damage than all of those other factors. It eats away at us, turns us against each other, makes us do things we would never have done if we were not working from a fear-based perspective. John Kenneth Galbraith once said, “All of the great leaders have had one characteristic in common: it was the willingness to confront unequivocally the major anxiety of their people in their time. This, and not much else, is the essence of leadership.” Surely what made Franklin Delano Roosevelt such a great leader was his ability to confront the major anxiety of depression era America. Admittedly, he had a good detailed plan for leading the country out of the depression. But in order for that plan to succeed, he had to get a majority of Americans to turn away from despair and hopelessness, to come together willing to try a bold, new approach, to reject anxiety in favor of tenacity and persistence. In his first Inaugural Address he uttered the words for which he is most famous. “So, first of all let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself – nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.” That bold assertion the tone for all that followed. He was right about that. And he still is. The only thing we have to fear is fear itself. That is what will consume us if we let it.

In this sanctuary, this home built on the theology of shared leadership, I want to invite all of you to join with me in taking a stand against fear, against anxious free floatingus. Let’s be great leaders together, the kind of leaders that Galbraith would approve of. I want us to acknowledge that this is a hard time, that we are sacred for our future and for our children, that we worry about sending our kids to college, about being able to ever retire, about having our savings eroded to the point where we won’t be able to live out our lives as we had planned. I also want us to acknowledge that close by us, there are people who are even more scared. People who in just a few months may have to choose between heat and food. People who will lose their homes to foreclosure, people who will have to surrender beloved pets to the shelter because their care has become an unaffordable luxury. We will be matter of fact together about the nature of the times we live in. We will not live in an unrealistic fantasy world.

Then I want us to covenant together to resist the temptation to feed THE ANXIETY PLANT. There is a difference between making careful financial decisions and unnecessary hoarding. There is a difference between taking care of your own necessities and closing your fists around your money, refusing to help a neighbor in need.

What are the ways that we might be feeding the plant, encouraging the anxiety beast to grow bigger and stronger? First and foremost, watching too much television. Turn off that TV; the talking heads nattering on 24 hours a day have very little to offer you in the way of real financial advice or even accurate information. Furthermore, put your computer into hibernate mode. If you have a portfolio, stop checking it every couple of hours. It will go down; eventually it will go up again. There are only a few people in the world who have the expertise and the positions to benefit from a steady stream of financial news. If any of you are here, you know who you are and can exempt yourself from this advice. But the rest of you: get off the internet and get

outside into this glorious fall. The leaves turn their spectacular colors for free. The sunlight gleams on the chrysanthemums without cost. Go to the beach and walk along the shore; the tourists are gone, the salt air will revive your spirits. Let the liturgical calendar of the earth ground you.

Another way we feed the anxiety beast is by turning inward, turning our backs on our neighbors and our communities. The unfortunate default in this nation is hearty individualism; to be honest that seems more true in New England than it did in the South. As people of faith, we must resist the impulse to turn away from each other when times are tough. It is an act of faith to ask for help. Let me say that again. It is an act of faith to ask for help. I want you to know that I have many referral resources at my disposal. I also have several small discretionary funds from which I can make emergency loans or grants to members in need. Please, please, ask. It is also an act of faith to believe that you can continue to help your neighbors when money gets tight. I think it would be a splendid act of faith on our part to have a canned food drive on the Sunday of our annual meeting. So far it is just my idea. What I need is a couple of people willing to take on the task of identifying a deserving food pantry and delivering the food. Anybody want to volunteer?

Being together in community is about more than just asking for or giving help. It is about worshipping together, learning together, and coming together for fellowship. There are lots of events on our calendar this fall; by your presence you can ground yourself in the reassuring company of the faithful. By celebrating the Thanksgiving Seder, or sharing pancakes with the Peace Pilgrimage, or bringing comfort food to the post-election day pot-luck, you will find the reassurance that comes from being part of a community of hope and care. As Rev. Jane Rzepka wrote, "When all is quiet and we are small and the night is dark, may we hear the tender breathing of all who lie awake with us in fear, that together we may gather strength to live with love, and kindness, and confidence."

I want to talk about one more anxiety buster. Autumn is the time in the Jewish liturgical calendar when people are reminded to turn. The High Holy Days from Rosh Hashanah (the New Year) to Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) are set apart for observant Jews to turn back to the ideals that make them a people of faith. We are so blessed to have Cantor Donna Goldfarb with us this morning to share the prayerful music of the Days of Awe. This fall is also the time of Ramadan; a time set apart for observant Muslims to turn back to the ideals that make them a people of faith. We who have no liturgical calendar also need to set apart a time for turning, for a spiritual self-assessment, for atoning and forgiving. In the reliable rituals of spiritual discipline, we can find ways to tap into sources of hope and stability that are far stronger than the forces of anxiety and despair.

The need for a regular practice of atonement comes from our sure knowledge of our human imperfection. We know that we will fall short of our own ideals, even in the best of times. To regularly acknowledge this is to give ourselves permission to live as real people, unburdened

by guilt and shame. We all yearn for forgiveness, for a clean slate, for another chance. We all recognize the need to forgive - to let go of our old hurts and resentments.

Atonement does not come about through some magical or mystical process. You don't just show up once a year, mumble the right prayers, have a holy person pronounce you cured, and go home. During the Days of Awe, there is serious spiritual work to be done. The regular routine is put aside to make room for fasting and prayer. Then, acting on the insights gained from this time of focused reflection, forgiveness is asked, amends are made, debts are repaid. To atone is to seek wholeness, to seek mental and spiritual health. Atonement. At One Ment. To emulate our Jewish neighbors would be to take the opportunity to make ourselves right in our relationships - with God or the universe, with other people, and with ourselves. To share in this time of turning is to ground ourselves in the universality of human imperfection and human renewal. This too can be a powerful way to inoculate ourselves against anxietus free floatingus.

There is bad news all around us, made worse by the spin machines. But there is also good news all around us. The good news of the reliable cycle of the seasons; the circle of life itself. The good news of the power of friendship and compassion and fellowship; the circle of human community. The good news of rituals of reconciliation; the ongoing circle of spiritual renewal. We don't need to make any deals with the devil in order to survive this time of turbulence. All we have to do is hold onto our values and live them out even more fiercely. All we have to do is hold onto each other and remind each other of who we are when we are at our best, and what we are capable of when we walk together.

What is the faithful response to economic turmoil, to talking heads who make their living off our fear, to the impulse to selfishness, to hardness of heart? We can just say no. No to the television, no to the stock ticker, no to isolation, no to despair. And we can just say yes. Yes to beauty, yes to companions on the journey, yes to spiritual discipline. And whatever else happens, remember, "Don't feed the plant!"