

A SERMON FOR OTHER PEOPLE

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2015 MISSION PEAK UU CONGREGATION SERMON CONTEST
WINNING SERMON

READING

In his recent biography of Steve Jobs, Walter Isaacson writes:

At one point as I was finishing this book, [Job's wife] told me that [his daughter] Erin wanted to give me an interview. It's not something that I would have requested, since she was then just turning sixteen, but I agreed. The point Erin emphasized was that she understood why her father was not always attentive, and she accepted that. "He does his best to be both a father and the CEO of Apple, and he juggles those pretty well," she said. "Sometimes I wish I had more of his attention, but I know the work he's doing is very important and I think it's really cool, so I'm fine. I don't really need more attention."

SERMON

Some Sundays, when you're at services, the sermon feels like it was written specifically for you. Maybe it's on a subject that has been on your mind, some issue that you've been struggling with — and when you hear the sermon, it hits you right between the eyes, or right in the heart. Or maybe the sermon is on a subject that you haven't been thinking about. . . but as soon as you hear it, you know: I've got to pay more attention to this.

But, for me at least, there are also times when parts of the sermon *don't* hit home. They *don't* feel like they were written for me, and sometimes I even find myself thinking "This. . . this is really a sermon for *other* people." The exact reasons can vary: I might think, "I don't have *that* problem," or "I've already *considered* that issue, and I know what I think about it," or "Those areas of *my* life are in harmony."

And sometimes these feelings culminate with the thought "I sure hope that the *other* people here take this message to heart."

There's actually a great temptation to think like this. . . Because if the sermon's not for me, then I don't have to do the hard work of thinking about it.

Delivered March 8, 2015 at Mission Peak UU Congregation. Earlier versions delivered at the UU Fellowship of San Diegito, at Throop UU Church (Pasadena), and at the First UU Church of San Diego. Copyright 2013 Everett W. Howe.

Now, maybe you've never had this experience — maybe you've never felt that you weren't connecting with a sermon. In that case, feel free to look around you, and hope that all these *other* people take this message to heart.

But just in case you *have* had this experience, I'd like to consider with you a part of a sermon that, at the time, felt like it wasn't for me; it felt like it was asking the wrong question for me. And I'd like to talk about how, with some reflection, the 'wrong' question led me to another question, one that is definitely relevant to my life and that demands my attention.

The theme of the sermon was materialism, and how our materialistic, consumeristic society distorts our perceptions of what is really valuable in life. The sermon included an image familiar from our culture at large: that of the person who spends too much time at a soul-crushing job in order to make money not for necessities but rather to pay for 'stuff' — sacrificing time with family and friends in order to buy things that aren't really needed. You know the idea: "No one ever wishes on their deathbed that they had spent more time at the office."

The sermon was very good. And I don't want to give the impression that I have no issues with materialism — because I do! But that *particular* image, that *particular* aspect of materialism — trying to make lots of money by working at a job you hate — doesn't resonate with me personally. To help explain why, let me mention a friend.

When I was in elementary school, there was a group of boys who liked to draw pictures of sports cars, and race cars, and motorcycles. They would come to school, and compare these beautiful, colorful, lovingly-made drawings of gleaming cars and motorcycles they had made the previous evening. One of this group was a boy named Doug, who I knew throughout elementary school.

Doug and I did not keep in touch after elementary school, but a few years ago he contacted me through Facebook. So now I know what became of him. He's living in Sacramento, our home town... and he makes his living... customizing motorcycles. His Facebook feed is filled with photographs of beautiful, colorful, lovingly customized motorcycles, gleaming just like the ones he drew in third grade. All that's missing is the fire coming from the wheels and exhaust pipes.

It's clear from these pictures — from the loving attention devoted to these beautiful machines — that Doug would want to be doing this work whether he was paid or not. He did not disagree with this assessment when I asked him whether I could mention him in this sermon.

In fact, not too long ago Doug posted a photo on Facebook showing the progress he is making on a customization project. The first comment was from a friend who knew that he had only started on the project a day or two earlier. "Wow, that was fast", he wrote. Doug responded, "Yeah, well, I worked on it after hours."

This reminds me of something I read in a biography of the artist Willem de Kooning. Early in his career, de Kooning's studio was in a commercial building in New York City.

Because it was a commercial building, the heat was turned off at five o'clock. A friend of de Kooning's recalls that she would sometimes walk by, late at night, and see the lights on. Heading up to the studio to say hello, she would find de Kooning, wrapped up in his hat and coat, in the freezing cold studio, painting... and whistling. It didn't matter that it was cold — he wanted to work.

In some ways I feel like my friend Doug, or de Kooning. Now, I don't make beautiful motorcycles, or paint pictures — I do mathematical research, and write papers about the things that I discover. For most people, it's a little harder to see the attraction in what I do... But the best parts of my job are things that I would want to do whether I got paid for them or not.

So. When I'm presented with the image of materialism making a person work long hours at an unpleasant job and separating him or her from family and friends, I think:

That's not why I work. Materialism is *not* making me work long hours, and separating me from my family.

It's not *materialism* that makes me get up in the morning and head in to the office.

It's not *materialism* that lures me back to my desk after dinner to work on writing up that exciting new result, while my wife and children amuse themselves without me...

It's not *materialism* that leads me to take a completely optional week-long trip to Colorado, leaving my family behind, to work with a friend at Colorado State on his really interesting math problem....

No, it's not *materialism* that is making me work long hours and separating me from my family and friends; no, no — I'm working long hours and ignoring my family and friends for *completely different* reasons.

You remember the parable of the mote and the beam? It's hardly even a parable; it's more like an image that gets used for two sentences. Jesus says to his followers, "Why do you look at the mote of dust in your brother's eye, when you don't even notice the roof-beam that is in your own eye?"

Of course, it's a parable about hypocrisy, about criticizing others for faults that you have yourself. The problem I've always had with this parable, though, is that it seems like it would be easy to tell when you've got a roof-beam in your eye. But the funny thing is, whenever I've found a beam in my eye, it's always taken a whole lot of time and a whole lot of work for me to even realize that it's there.

When I was young, I learned a game that requires two people and a map. I think it must have been invented by a desperate parent on a long car trip with children. Here's the game. The first player chooses a word printed on the map — a place name, the name of a river, anything — and then challenges the second player to find that word.

It's easy to imagine being the second player, looking up and down the map at all of the tiny towns in obscure corners.

But there's a strategy for first player that works especially well against people new to the game: Instead of choosing a hard-to-find word printed in small type, choose a word printed in large type, and spread across the map. The name of a mountain range, or of a county. When you're searching for something in small print, you miss the big things staring you in the face.

So for me, the question is not "How should I balance spending time with my family and friends against working to make money?"

Rather, the question is "How should I balance spending time with my family and friends against doing something I love, something where I can be creative, something that satisfies my soul?"

That's a much more difficult question. And it brings us back to Steve Jobs.

He was a very wealthy man, but it seems clear that what drove him was not money. Rather, it was a sense of design, of simplicity, of wanting to solve problems and create beautiful things. He worked very hard, driven (at least in part) by motives that we admire.

And his daughter goes out of her way to say: "Sometimes I wish I had more of his attention, but [. . .] I'm fine. I don't really need more attention."

Did Steve Jobs make this choice consciously? Did he ask himself "How should I balance spending time with my family against doing something I love?" Or did his balance of work and family happen thoughtlessly, by accident, slowly forming over the years and becoming habit?

I don't know. It's quite possible, maybe even probable, that this was his conscious choice. Walter Isaacson's biography portrays him as a not-very-pleasant man. But I know that I want my balance to be different from his, and I want to be aware of the trade-offs I make. I don't want *my* daughter or *my* son to tell my biographer, "I didn't really need more attention."

Maybe I did have something to learn from that sermon after all.

The idea must be this: If the sermon is asking a question that doesn't seem relevant to you, step back. Look at the bigger picture. Maybe that question is like the little towns in the corners of the map, when what you should be looking for is a mountain range; you're looking for a mote, when what you need to find is a beam.

May we all find a difficult question to consider. For when the choice is difficult, it means you're considering the right things.

Blessed be. Amen.

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