

August 3, 2025

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“Wind Chasing and the Thing with Things”

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; Luke 12:13-21

If you could have a sit-down dinner with anyone from history, who would you choose and why? Some popular answers would be: Albert Einstein, Leonardo da Vinci, Gandhi, Mother Theresa. King Solomon would be a wise choice. Scholars believe Solomon wrote the wisdom book of Ecclesiastes late in his old age. The wisest person to have ever lived! He would have some insightful things to say, no doubt. But you'd have to know that he is quite the Debbie Downer. That conversation might go a little something like this: “I’ve been all over this known world, gained everything in life, and acquired all the riches a person can amass, and it’s about as satisfying as chasing after wind. Solomon famously concludes: “Meaningless, meaningless. Everything is meaningless.” [wah, wah] And while that kind of talk might ruin your dinner it could possibly save your soul.

What is the thing with things that they promise so much yet do little, if nothing, for the soul? And how do we keep from chasing the wind? In our gospel lesson from Luke chapter 12, Jesus tells a parable about a rich man who gains an abundance through his land. We might assume he is the young entrepreneurial type. He’s had some good years in the business, but this was a jackpot kind of year. And in a litany of “I” and “me” statements, this rich man determines he will tear down his barns and build larger ones to hold his wealth of grain and goods. He says: “And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.” I assume that rich people talk to themselves in the third person a lot.

In the parable, God responds by saying: “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be? So it is for those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.” There is so much to unpack in those couple of sentences, but two things really stick out:

1. The point of this parable seems to be about the storing up of treasures... not necessarily in whether or not you have treasures. This human tendency to build bigger barns, Jesus gives it a name, "greed." I've known rich people who use their resources to help so many others who do not have. And I've seen how one can live a life of greed even possessing very little. There's something about how we hoard our resources—whether great or small—instead of holding them loosely.

2. There's a difference to me in saying we should be "rich in God" and "rich toward God". This passage says the latter. Living in a way that is "toward God" suggests a movement, an intention. God is the recipient of our riches when we lose that twinkle in our eye for bigger barns.

Father Richard Rohr wrote a wonderful and helpful book called *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. That life can be understood as two great movements—two acts of a play—isn't a novel idea but one that continues to challenge those who wish to find deeper meaning and purpose. Father Rohr says the first half of life are those early years given to building a sense of security and identity. This is a necessary season of "ego structuring" for any individual and it is this kind of construction that has helped tribes survive. In these early formative years, it is essential to establish a degree of order, safety, and boundaries. Even Robert Frost said, "Good fences make good neighbors." This early formation is like building a strong container into which the substance of living is later poured. So, Rohr says, once the ego is constructed, and you receive your "narcissistic fix, you have no real need to protect your identity, defend it, prove it, or assert it. It just is, and is more than enough."

Waking up to this, is a move into a second half of life—a move that has little to do with one's physical age. The ego still has a place and purpose, it is just now at the service of the True Self—or what some call, your Soul. It is in this half when you understand your inherent identity. You can deal with a degree of complexity. You understand that failure and defeat can also be your victory and your strength. Your True Self knows that it isn't enough just to be successful or even merely safe or healthy. That though they are important, those aren't the reasons WHY you exist.

I find deep meaning and calling in understanding this second-half move. Father Rohr makes the point that sadly many never move out of the first half of life. The "ego structuring" of their earlier years, continues to be the sole

WHY of their existence, even to the bitter end of life—Always looking to build up the ego, the continuous construction of boundaries, the craving for more security, more things. For some, it will take a lifetime to finally step into a season when ego doesn't drive all you do. Was this the case for King Solomon? We crown him the wisest person to ever have lived and yet he spent a life of chasing the wind, according to his own account. For some, they learn this wisdom at an early age and spend most of their life living with a second-half mentality. Can you imagine what *richness toward God* their life can be?

According to ancient Chinese philosophy, first-half-of-life people are very *useful*, and that is their problem. In the Taoist tradition, a parable is told of the useless tree. One day a master carpenter and his apprentice were walking through the village when they come up to a massive tree with branches all gnarled and twisted. The tree towers high over the hillside, giving shade to so many oxen. A number of its branches are large enough that each could be made into a boat. It's impressive structure draws quite a crowd. As the two continued walking on, the apprentice said to the master carpenter: "What a useless tree. Its trunk and branches were so crooked and distorted, full of knots. Its wood is so beautiful, but it could not be cut up because it won't give us straight planks. The tree serves no purpose at all."

The master carpenter responds, "The other trees high on the mountain are their own enemy: The cinnamon tree is edible, so it is cut down. Cherry, apple, pear, orange, and other fruit trees are stripped and abused as soon as the fruit is ripe. Their large branches are split and the smaller ones torn off. Because they are so useful, they don't get to live out their natural lives but are cut off in their prime. That large tree is useless: a boat made from it would sink, a coffin fashioned from its wood would quickly rot, a tool would split, a door would ooze sap. And that uselessness has allowed it to grow big and tall and full. People who stop under its shade have idle intentions but just to enjoy it. The master carpenter says: Everyone knows how useful it is to be useful. No one seems to know how useful it is to be useless.

This parable, to me, illustrates two halves of living. When we are rich in things, we are slave to the system that makes us useful in this world. When we are rich toward God, there is a depth of peace at the level of the soul. Jesus asked in Mark chapter 8: "What is it to gain the whole world and forfeit your soul." In this, he gives ultimate primacy to matters of the soul. Today, we are still trying to understand what the soul of a person is.

Perhaps it's something felt more than understood. I believe it belongs more to the realm of art than science. For me, the kryptonite to a soulless, first-half-of-life venture, is wonder. It's cultivating moments of awe. Spend time holding a loved one, or watching vivid colors paint the sky just before the sun disappears. Volunteer in just two weeks to help place boxes of food in cars of the needy, or spend time after church today going with others on a butterfly walk. When we cultivate moments of awe and wonder, we lose interest in bigger barns. *Things* lose their shiny outward appearance.

Moments such as these bespeak that wisdom of the 14th-Century mystic, Julian of Norwich, who affirmed: "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." This is not commentary on the state of the world as much as it is an affirmation of what it means to be alive.

I want to close with one last image I find helpful. After WWII, some Japanese communities understood that many soldiers who had returned from war were not fit to reenter civilized society. All they knew was how to be a loyal soldier for their country. Their whole identity was bound up in living that out on the battlefield. These Japanese communities recognized this and created a ritual to assist in transitioning to a new purpose. In this, they publicly praised the soldier for their loyalty and service. Then a leader would announce boldly: "The war is now over! The community needs you to let go of what has served you and served us well up to now. The community needs you to return as a person, a citizen, and something beyond a soldier." In military speak, this was a way of "discharging a loyal soldier."

For me, that illustration preaches itself. For those seeking the way of Christ, we need a daily ritual of "discharging our loyal soldier." Jesus said, "Whoever wants to come after me must take up their cross daily and follow me." I think this is what he meant by this daily dying. Everyday, that old soldier seeks to strap on their fatigues, lace up her boots, ready to be useful. We each must find our own ritual of discharging our loyal soldier so that we might attend that day to matters of the soul.

There are so many images in all of this to bring this home for each of us. When it comes to our resources, are we drawing blueprints for bigger barns or finding ways to be rich toward God? At the deepest level of our existence, are we still letting ego have the run of the house? How useful have you been in the ways of this world? Are we letting moments of awe and wonder help "discharge our loyal soldier"? Questions like these are the way of wisdom.