I learned two new words this week: *chrematistics* and *oikonomia*. They are ancient Greek words, and ancient Greek words are always juicy to say. Aristotle uses these words in his famous writings on politics. Lest you think that I spend all my time reading Aristotle in the original Greek, let me correct you of that notion. These words and their origin were referenced in a book I have been reading by the Unitarian Universalist minister Michael Schuler, a book about the good life, what it means and how to sustain it.¹

It’s a big topic, “The Good Life”. In many ways, that’s what we are all here every Sunday to figure out. What is this thing called “life”, this mystery and miracle, that we are a part of? What do we mean by good? How do we connect the fact of our living to the hope of our goodness? It is a quality that we hope to imbue into our life. This discernment has always been one of the fundamental tasks of religion.

In this day and age, it is clear that the Good Life, however you define it, cannot be good unless it is sustainable, both individually and collectively. A few Sundays back, I asked people to imagine paradise, to figure out what your personal sense of paradise is. And now I am asking you to layer on another criterion – a sustainable paradise, a good life that lasts.

But back to *chrematistics* and *oikonomia*. Both words refer to systems related to wealth. According to Michael Schuler’s book, Aristotle uses the word *chrematistics* to describe “the short term manipulation of property and wealth so as to maximize the short-term monetary exchange value to the original owner.” As you might guess, Aristotle takes a dim view of this manipulation of wealth. Aristotle did not think that having more coins in the bank ensured a happy life. For a better system, he turned to *oikonomia*, “management of the household so as to increase its value to all members over the long run.” It is from this term that we get our modern term “economics”. And the key difference was short term gain, versus long term value. This is a loose translation of Aristotle in modern language:

“…Some think that being rich means having a large quantity of coins. Others think that coins are mere conventional symbols, and serve no direct purpose in sustaining life (think of King Midas who starved because all he touched turned gold).

Thus riches and the art of wealth-getting are not both merely a matter of coin-acquisition. On the one hand, there is the art of producing wealth by means of trade. It is based on the exchange of coins. And it is believed that there is no limit to the amount of coin that can be acquired. On the other hand, wealth-getting in household-management does have a limit, and in fact, it is not

¹ “Making the Good Life Last: Four Keys to Sustainable Living” by Michael Schuler, p167
concerned with having unlimited money, but rather with sustaining the family, as coins cannot be eaten, no matter how many you have. “

I include Aristotle this morning because I always like to put things into perspective, and of course the choices we wrestle today with are not new. Human nature is not new. We have always wrestled with a choice between systems that only serve to maximize short term gains for the individual, and systems that take a longer view and include a social consciousness.

What is new, perhaps, is our understanding of the destruction that the wrong choices can wreak upon the world. Beyond just personal moral bankruptcy and being a bore at dinner parties, unbridled acquisition of coin is literally destroying our capacity to survive on earth. Coins cannot be eaten. And what is also new, in comparison to Aristotle at least, is our understanding that we are all, in fact, members of the same household on this planet. There is no division between my family and yours when it comes to the global effects of our lifestyle.

I’m going to make a big assumption at this point. I am going to assume that we are all on the same page about the basics of this argument, that is to say, we all agree that The Good Life must also be a sustainable life, more _oikonomia_ and less _chrematistics_.

So now we get down to the heart of the matter: what does that mean, sustainable? It’s a word that is all over the place these days.

Very often, it’s the precursor to trying to sell you something. Trying to sell us something that we need, that we can’t live without, and yet could be improved, or replaced with a newer, better technology. Adding “sustainable” means “new and improved” in a 21st century kind of way. A new lightbulb that uses less energy. A greener cleaning product. A reusable lunchbox instead of a single use plastic bag. These are all good things, welcome improvements. They are a piece of the sustainability puzzle. But these things, these improved things are not really about sustainability, in the religious sense of the word. They have a different goal – they are designed to maintain, not sustain. That is, they are designed to help us maintain our quality of life. I’m all for electric lights and nontoxic cleaners. But these things, these wonderful things in and of themselves, are not the answer to sustainability. They are welcome partners in the larger quest for a sustainable good life, but they are not the end goal.

The other things that I am often sold under the title of sustainability are experiences. To sustain my wellbeing, I am told to get a massage, or a pedicure, or find some “me” time. This is particularly marketed toward women, with a sub-specialization for mothers, but no one is immune to the siren song of “me” time. We are asked to nourish our souls by going to the spa or buying an expensive juice. These experiences, while pleasurable and maybe even good for you, are still consumables. They are moments in time, single-serve meals. They can fill us up for a moment, but we will get hungry again. Although at the end of a long week a good spa day sounds great, the sustainable good life that we are seeking is not just a string of nice experiences.
The most clever of marketers sell us things by touching on something true, something deep in our psyche that resonates with their message. And so the word “sustainable” rings out from packaging and advertising because it is a worthy goal, it is something true that we long for, something that we urgently need. But we must tread carefully, because the combination of truth and urgency is powerful, and can be easily misdirected.

(bowl gong)

There is something about sustainability that has to do with time. In music, a sustain means to stretch out a sound over time, just as when this bowl gong rings out and the sound hangs in the air. The bowl is carefully constructed to make this sound sustain, it is constructed to strike a particular note and hold it over time.

(bowl gong)

It is a good sound.

When I add the concept of time to the idea of sustainability, something clicks. Something that Aristotle was getting at with his distinction between short-term gain and long-term value.

In Michael Schuler’s book on the Good Life, he says that “staying put” is one of the key practices of sustainable living. Staying put. Investing in a place, in a practice, in a relationship, in a religious tradition. Staying put and learning to love something that may be imperfect, despite our culture of immediate gratification and constant upgrades to the next best thing. Any long term sense of well-being is more likely to occur if we are grounded and connected, not just abstractly, but concretely.

As the novelist Wallace Stegner wrote, “We’ve got to stop raiding and running. We must learn to be quiet part of the time and acquire the sense not of ownership, but of belonging.”

Staying put. Physically, mentally, spiritually. It is a challenge in the swiftly moving waters of modern life to follow this particular practice. As the novelist Willa Cather said a hundred years ago, “Men travel faster now, but I do not know if they go to better things.”

I moved to Santa Barbara in 2011, and the past four years have been the first time I can claim to have physically stayed put in a while. In the nine years between 2002 and 2011, Adam and I lived in 11 different apartments across four states. Many of you may have had the same experiences, settling here after moving around for jobs or relationships or to take care of family or just because you fell in love with Santa Barbara and answered the call of this place. Every place has a call, and sometimes we walk into a town that calls us home even if we were born two thousand miles away. Maybe you have bounced back and forth, moving away and returning.
But for whatever reason, you are here, now. And no matter where your future may call you, you can cultivate a sense of place, a sense of belonging, a spiritual staying put, right here.

When I moved with my parents to New Orleans at the age of six, we began attending the Unitarian Universalist congregation there because they wanted to find that sense of place for themselves and their family. They were seekers, looking for something to hold on to in an unfamiliar city. It was just luck that brought them to New Orleans, but I am so grateful that we ended up in that town and at that church. It gave me the gift of place, the understanding of what it meant to be rooted, in body and spirit, in a way that sustains me to this very day. If you have been watching or reading any of the material about New Orleans ten years after the flood, you will hear how important that sense of place is.

But it wasn’t just growing up in New Orleans, it was also growing up in a religious community that cultivated roots. And now, wherever I have gone, I have carried that with me. I can walk into any Unitarian Universalist congregation and settle in during the chalice lighting and I am home. And that sense of home, it is not just because I agree intellectually with the principles and purposes, but because I have attached myself to this faith, not just consumed it.

The cultural geographer Yi Fu-Tuan, who has studied the ideas of space and place for over half a century, says that one of the greatest challenges to creating a sustainable life in the modern era is a sense of weakened attachment. Having a home base is important to having a good life, he believes. Fu-Tuan recognizes that not everything about attachment is always good. “Attachment is, however, a word of ambiguous meaning, whether it is applied to people or place. On the dark side, it is bondage and we are glad to be freed of bondage. On the bright side, it is a mutuality such that people pour affection into a place and that place in turn imparts its qualities to people, making them into the sort of human beings they are.” In other words, it matters what you attach yourself to, because it influences who you become. Attachment can be co-dependent, or keep you stuck in a job you hate or a town that stifles you, and these are obviously not conducive to a good life. But overall, Fu-Tuan argues that the mobility of the 21st century swings the pendulum toward a nomadic and untethered life, weakening what should be the healthy love of home that sustains us over time, and he worries that this will take a toll on both our mental health and our moral sense.

One of the reasons that staying put and attaching to something is important is because it changes our sense of time. If all we focus on is immediate gratification, the horizon of our thinking remains in the near distance. We can’t get enough perspective, we can’t see beyond our own impulses and desires. We become easy targets for marketing and we get caught up in crematistics, the accumulation of coin, and forget that wealth is only useful in service to the greater good of the household.

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3 “Space, Place, and Nature: The Farewell Lecture” April 4, 2014 at the University of Wisconsin-Madison
4 P. 11
Staying put extends our horizon because our experiences of place go deeper when we sink roots. We can use our past experiences to help us imagine the impact of our actions into the future. The farmer who has worked the same land for decades has a sensitivity to changes in the environment that an absent corporate entity will never have. The farmer who knows that his ground must yield fruit for generations treats the earth differently from a company that simply wants to extract the highest yield possible.

Staying put, finding ourselves attached and invested in something for the long haul, helps us to cultivate the capacity to think long term and at the same time be attentive to the present moment. We must let long-term thinking infiltrate our experience of the present, and influence how we make our daily choices, and yet not disconnect us from here and now.

Once again, we are back in religious territory. Meditation, mindfulness, prayer, singing, gathering, lighting a flame and ringing a gong, these things bring us into direct contact with the here and now, with our breath and our body and our mind as they are, right now. And yet they exist in the context of traditions that are thousands of years old. We step into a stream that flowed for centuries before we were born, and will continue long after we are gone. Religion can remind us that we are part of something larger than ourselves, that we have an obligation that extends beyond our own desires, and continuity with the past and the future that we ignore at our peril. It is in religious community that we learn how to reconcile the infinite and the intimate. And it is this skill that will keep us on a sustainable path.

\textit{(bowl gong)}

The infinite and the intimate. The sound of a bowl gong contains both. The intimate experience of the vibrations of air that wash over us, the immediacy of the sound in this space, in this time. And it is also the sound of the infinite. That exact sound has rung from that exact bowl for over a hundred years. When it was made, and the tradition of singing bowls was already ancient, and some southeast Asian bells date back nearly 4000 years. And so the sound of countless bells is contained in this one bell, the work of countless hands contained in the moment of striking.

Find your roots. Connect to the present moment. Let the awareness of the infinite permeate your being.