

A few years ago the magazine *Adbusters* included an epigram, "The environmental crisis is a crisis of desire."

There are two ways of reading this. One that comes up immediately is that the problem is desire itself. The idea is that we need to stop wanting. There's certainly a rich religious tradition in this vein with different faiths venerating different kinds of self-denial.

But very few people will consent to be hermits. And there are some desires that are good, even natural.

We desire the happiness and well-being of our children—that's been bred into us by evolution, or we wouldn't be here.

We desire the love of that special someone—we would hardly be human if we didn't.

We desire shelter, warmth, and nourishment. And here begins the slippery slope. How much shelter, how much warmth, and what kind of nourishment, grown where and in what season?

We desire things to stimulate and entertain the mind, stories and experiences we can share with others—we are innately social, creative beings, and it would be a poor existence indeed to have nothing more than waking, working, eating, sleeping.

And then the trouble starts. These normal, healthy desires that help make us human, our modest desires for things, swell up as we think of our children's happiness more and more in terms of things and as we try to use things to gain the affection of others and status in our communities. Desires that are better satisfied through deeds we pursue instead through things, and when that doesn't work, we don't revert to deeds, but instead try ever more things.

This is the crisis of desire, and it's fiendishly hard to bring under control because we've let our emotions be used like twine to bind together our excesses with our most basic needs into one big ball of wanting.

And yet we must try to disentangle the two, and learn to think clearly about what we need, what we want, and what we can have without destroying the ecological fabric that ultimately sustains us.

There's a necessary conversation about rules and norms by which we use and share the Earth. But rules are not enough to deal with the torrent of desire we're facing. They are like bunches of sandbags dropped into the flood. They can deflect our desires away from certain targets, but the waters merely shift, to do greater damage elsewhere as they scour the landscape for resources we will use to try to make us feel complete.

Our real challenge is to reduce the flood at its source and get desire to flow in its proper channels.

Because the environmental crisis is a crisis of desire.

Karl Seeley, at Unitarian Universalist Society of Oneonta, April 20, 2008