

Of measurements and immeasurables

Donna Schaper | Aug. 23, 2013 Eco Catholic

Mishnah 1: ?These are the things that have not measure: the Peah (corners) of the field, the first-fruits ? and the study of the Torah.?

Measurement is very important. Consider dosage. Get the dose wrong and the medicine can turn into poison. Substitute two cups of salt for two cups of sugar, as I did in a spice cake last Christmas, and people who usually regard you highly and warmly will say really mean things at your Christmas table?s finale.

I know an organic farmer who has moved to the corner of the organic movement, from which position he takes pot shots at Whole Foods and the rest of the so-called organic movement. He thinks their measurements are false. I respect his point of view and wish I could be half as radical or grizzled as he is. I also wonder why a little more organic is not better than a lot of purity in the soil.

Price is also a big word. We love to show off our bargains. Someone says a kind word about our dresses, and we respond, self-diminuating, ?I got it on sale, off the rack.? Or we find a good restaurant, where the food is superb, the service even better, the ambiance in rivalry for the pre-existing excellences. And when we tell other people about it, we don?t brag about how much we did pay for such worthy worth; instead, we often say that we ?got a deal.?

Robert Bellah, the great sociologist of religion who just passed away in July, said that religion was nothing more or less than the imagination of another reality. The poet Paul Eluard said that there is another reality, and that it is right here. We can measure the world while knowing that our experience of it is immeasurable.

The Mishnah, a rabbinic commentary on Torah, begins with the rabbis exhorting the people to understand what the Torah means -- and to respect so highly its learning that nothing compares in importance. Still, the people wanted a measure. They wanted to know how much Torah was good enough. So the rabbis suggested dedicating a Sabbath corner of their lives to learning Torah.

They also wanted to know how much they should give to the poor. The people, faced with that second reality that is right here within the first, the heaven that exists in the earth wanted measurements for the immeasurable. The Mishnah goes on to say that the people should give at least 1/60th of the field?s corner to the poor. God gave the whole field to all and understood its gift as immeasurable. We measure because we are far afield.

Think of the last great meal you had and how you bragged about how little you had to pay for it. Then think outside the deal, beyond the bargain, beyond paying off the poor with a corner. When you do that, you have moved into that other reality, which is also right here.

Did God really want the poor to always be with us and to be paid off with a corner? No, the whole immeasurable field was created to belong to everyone. That great meal that we got for \$30.00 prix fixe when its true value to our spirits and our souls was at least thrice that. Not to mention what we would like to have given that waiter for a tip.

You do get what you pay for -- and if you pay in the coin of immeasurable gratitude you have already moved into heaven.

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