Marlene was the kind of woman who had nearly everything but it was still never enough. One night below their luxury condo she heard the sound of glass breaking. She said to her husband “There are looters in the street!” Smiling, she suddenly said “George do you think that we might…there’s a mink coat in the store down the street. This is an opportunity George.” So George said “Marlene you already have enough of everything but this is a cheap way to get a mink coat so why not? Who’s to know?” So they went out to the store and George threw a brick through the window and Marlene got her fur. As they were turning to go Marlene spotted a flat screen TV which she had always wanted. It was in the window of the electrical store beside the furriers. “Oh George” she said “look…” and so George threw another brick and out came the TV. As they are going home they passed a jeweler and she said; “Oh George look at that beautiful necklace. I’ve always wanted one of those! One more little thing won’t make a difference.” “Oh for goodness sake woman” said George “You have everything and it is still not enough. Do you think I’m made of bricks?”

“I have had an amazing two years” she said. “About two years ago I graduated from College and joined the family business. Just over a year ago I married a wonderful man. This past spring, my husband and I bought a fantastic house for the children we hoped to have in a few years. Just over a week ago, I completed my master’s degree. Sounds like I should have been happy, right? And yet I wasn’t. About six months before, I realized that I had lost my purpose and my joy. I tried everything to get it back, all to no avail.”

This true story, of a young woman, is quite a common tale these days. We keep passing milestones in our lives, but what we are searching for often eludes us.
I had a friend once in Stratford and we were having lunch together. We were talking about money and how much we needed to be able to live a full life. He smiled at me and said; “David you will never know the answer to the question How much is enough?!" I think that he was right. How much is enough?

Most people want more than they have. That’s why we buy lottery tickets and ask for raises in salary. But the very rich often know that more things don’t necessarily satisfy. Janice Joplin once said: “I been rich and I been poor, rich is better." But the very rich Beatles said “Money can’t buy you love.”

Jesus told a parable about a rich man who wanted to build bigger barns to accommodate all his stuff. He thought that after he had finished he would relax and eat drink and be merry for a while. But in the midst of his building he suddenly passed away. He never enjoyed it. Somebody else got the loot.

In the Jewish tradition, wise King Solomon had everything he desired. He was well thought of in Israel, wealthy, with more wives and concubines than his father. He was respected throughout the Middle East and even the Queen of Sheba paid a courtesy call to hear his wisdom. We have a small part of that wisdom in the book of the Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. In Ecclesiastes, he says that he did not hold back from any pleasure. He was at first pleased with all his building and labors but one day he concluded with this harsh truth: “Vanity of Vanities all is vanity and striving after the wind and there is no profit under the sun.”

The Buddhist answer to this common problem of not being satisfied but always striving for that better job, that political post, that better car or house, is to realize that the problem is one of discontent. And when we are discontented we always want more, more, more. For the Buddhist, desires can never be satisfied. Hindus and Sikhs also teach about the impossibility of satisfying desire. But the answer according to them is surprisingly simple. We can adopt a spiritual practice of contentment. At the heart of that practice is to realize that we already have everything that we really need.

It is always amazing to me when I visit the folks at Loaves and Fishes that I hear so much laughter there! These folks have nothing except the clothes on their backs. They sleep outside, they panhandle and somehow get along with almost nothing at all and yet their laughter does not leave them. Amazing!

St. Paul’s personal life moved from luxury to hardship, much hard and dangerous travel and finally imprisonment. He said that he had learned to be content in whatever circumstances he found himself. In other words, through his spirituality and faith in the goodness and guidance of God, he was able to cope and even be content, which included being content in prison!

He also said he knew how to live with contentment in prosperity. He didn’t obviously want more, more, more!
So in this idea of contentment, the traditions come together and actually agree. The Quran also chimes in to this chorus: In Sura 48, verse 4, it says that God is the one who places contentment into the hearts of believers to increase their faith in addition to what they have. So here contentment is a gift from God, not only an attitude that can be chosen. This is an important insight I believe. We can pray to God and ask for this gift, a gift that will free us from vain searches for happiness in all the wrong places.

But just this week, there was a scientific report that stated that the discontent we feel in Mid Life crisis may have an evolutionary function even between species. Apparently apes suffer from midlife crisis, but instead of buying a sports car and getting divorced, in their species it is a catalyst for change and new vitality, before life is finally set down. In this model, discontent has an evolutionary purpose. Perhaps in us also there can be a purpose to midlife discontent.

We can dream new dreams, we can break out of the old, we can form new relationships, travel to new places and seek meaning where we had not before. Perhaps that is part of why I founded the Experience, which for me was a vehicle to go where I had not been before. Many of you say to me that this is where you are today as well, seeking, striving, wanting to be more open; to get beyond dogma into a more truthful way of relating to other religions and even our own.

But finally even in the midst of midlife or general discontent we have to take on, once more, **what is at the root of our discontent.**

According to Tenzin Palmo, a Tibetan Buddhist nun, when we begin to deal with the ‘more, more, more’ thing, we come to realize that having more won’t solve the problem. We even discover that happiness does not reside in relationships either, although studies show that people are happier with good relationships than say with a new car or house which has a shorter shelf life in terms of happiness. But the answer to the problem actually lies **within** us. Tenzin says if we don’t find happiness inside we won’t find it on the outside either!

Old Socrates said that the secret to happiness is not found in seeking more, but in developing the capacity to enjoy less.

Normally, I like to drive everywhere but I have been listening to Socrates lately. Last week I decided to ride my bike to an appointment. I took my time and really enjoyed this simpler form of transport. I pedaled along up alleys, looked up at the old trees, heard birds singing and I felt strangely independent. I didn’t have to stop for gas. I didn’t need to look for a parking space but drew up right to the building. Feeling refreshed after the ride I was in a great mood and I was content and happy!

I have often noticed, as you have, that the best things in life are free. Nature is truly awesome. Walking in a park can be a rich experience. A delicious sandwich by a river is so much better than munching at a computer in a cubicle. And all but a bike ride away, so thank-you Socrates.
One of the problems that comes from buying into ‘shop to you drop’ Black Friday mentality and purchasing new boy toys, comes from the fact that they are means to an end and not ends in themselves. We get the new car to feel better, to enjoy the power to travel along with friends and as a means to get from A to B. But material things are always just means to ends. But if we are looking for happiness from these things in themselves we are doomed to fail. For we can’t drive to where we need to go to get to happiness. For what we are looking for above all else, is meaning for our lives. That is what Jesus’ rich farmer was looking for but missed. He never got to eat drink and be merry. He also probably never gave a damn about the people who were starving around him in Palestine at the time Jesus told his story. In our day he would be part of the 1% and insulated from the poor by his wealth. He was not able to see, as Solomon was, that all his efforts were striving after wind.

There are many folks like that today- folks who just don’t get it. They do not understand that we are here to love each other, that we are here to be kind and that we are here to alleviate human suffering not create it.

I was watching the tears flow down a beautiful young Palestinian girl’s face, this week, as she looked at the devastation of her home by a bomb attack. Violence does not heal anything. It misses the purpose of life and just because we are wedded to it does not mean that we solve problems with it. The problems are solved by ceasefires, negotiation, compromise, cooperation, and conflict resolution. These are the tools of adults. Bombs and missiles that kill are for the immature, the angry child in the grown up body demanding revenge.

The Sikh doctor, last week, quoted Guru Nanak to say that Sikhism teaches that we are all are created by the same one God, whether we call him Raam, Allah or by any other name. “See the Divine Light in all”, was his message. “There are no strangers or enemies.” It is said that he started his mission with the message that “there is no Hindu, there is no Muslim”.

When are we going to get that?

How do we bring meaning into our lives? Do we throw bricks through windows to get flat screen TV’s? Do we graduate from college, marry a wonderful man, go into the family business, get a post graduate degree and still come up empty? Do we emulate the rich farmer who had everything but didn’t get to meaning?

Jesus told another parable about a good Samaritan who helped a beaten up Jewish man by the side of the road. That story was about how to find meaning and it was by helping others, at that time over real barriers for Jews had no dealings with Samaritans. The Samaritan [aka Palestinian] used his material goods to help a Jew— the very opposite of what the rich farmer did.

When you have everything and it still is not enough, what is the enough?
It is the love of the neighbor, it is realizing that the stranger and enemy is also neighbor. We can make our enemies our friends as Abraham Lincoln once suggested. And when we do so, we can enter into Thanksgiving properly. For gratitude and love make the world go round and fill it with real meaning!

In the 1960’s, Alabama was a hot bed of racial prejudice. Whites did not help blacks because of fear. Common humanity gave way to racial prejudice and those who crossed these barriers were few.

One night at 11:30 pm, an older African American woman was standing on the side of an Alabama highway trying to endure the lashing of a rain storm. Her car had broken down and she desperately needed a ride. Soaking wet she stood beside her car trying to flag someone down. Car after car passed ignoring her. But a good Samaritan finally stopped. He was not at all wealthy, but he had enough to give a seat, to a soaked black woman, in his warm dry car. This was a difficult thing to do in those conflict-filled 1960’s. This young man struck up a conversation with the African American woman as he took her to safety. He helped her get assistance and finally put her into a taxi cab. She seemed to be in a terrible hurry but the young man did not know why. She wrote down his address, thanked him for all his efforts and drove away in the cab.

Seven days went by and a knock came to the front door. To his great surprise a giant combination console color TV and stereo record player were delivered to his home. Had someone thrown a brick? Oh no! There was a note with it, which read as follows;

Dear Mr. James:
Thank-you so much for assisting me on the highway the other night. The rain drenched not only my clothes but my spirits. Then you came along! Because of you, I was able to make it to my dying husband’s bedside, just before he passed away. God bless you for helping me and unselfishly serving others.
Sincerely,
Mrs. Nat King Cole