

Abundant Blessings
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UU Fellowship Edgecomb, ME

I've begun to wake up in the morning with the aches and pains of a body that has been upright for 59 plus years, and is feeling it's age. As I go down the stairs to let out three exuberant dogs with full bladders, I recite my morning prayer..."ouu, oww, ahh, ouu, oww, ahh." I then begin to fill up my mind with all the stuff that goes with 21st century life....my anxiety about a dog-hair filled house that hasn't been vacuumed in too many days, my disappointment over a rejection letter from a church to whom I sent my ministerial record, my concerns about the rising cost of heating oil and how it will affect both my family and the families in my community.

Where is blessing and gratitude? Where is abundance and generosity? I read recently of a man who starts each day "counting his blessings," enumerating what he is grateful for. What he realized is that as he began, listing just one thing, another came to mind, then another and another. He was astonished at how blessed his life is.

I think we live in a time of fear that breeds a sense of scarcity in our lives. This sense of scarcity spills over into all aspects of daily living. It affects how we understand the very concept of time; "oh, dear, I never have enough time to do everything I NEED to do," "oh, if only there were more hours in the day." And yet....when we really think about it, what is this thing called "not enough time?" Have we taken the notion of scarcity and applied it to time as if we could acquire more of it or hoard what we have to save for

later. Trust me, my friends....my time as a hospice chaplain taught me this lesson well.

We have all the time we have. Let me say that again.....we have all the time we have. It's kind of a use it and lose it proposition.

A sense of scarcity invades our well being when we think about personal resources...."I know I don't have enough money for all my NEEDS," "how can I afford college for my children," "will I run out of money before I die?" We especially have concerns today about money when we see the price for gas and heating oil go up faster than a rising thermometer on a hot summer morning in Sonoma California. How in the world can we not be concerned when the cost of a trip to Boston has more than doubled, when commuting to work takes an additional \$15 or \$20 a week?

When we begin to focus on what seems scarce to us, we neglect to see what is abundant in our lives. I believe we live in a climate of scarcity that is, in part, a result of our governmental direction or misdirection with our national wealth. In his sermon "A Not-So-Quiet Week in Lake Woebegone," the Reverend Randolph Becker says: "I grieve that war creates a climate of scarcity"....and he says; "every dollar given to war is a dollar taken from somewhere else" ...and, most importantly I think, he goes on; "no matter where you fall on the political spectrum....you are pushed toward scarcity living and thinking by the excessive economic demands of war. Scarcity thinking erodes our attitude towards everything else—sense of self, sense of family, meaning of community – until it threatens the vibrant heart of our liberal religious faith; the abundance of goodness, of potential in a

world of promise.”

It is so easy to get sucked into the culture of scarcity when we look at what is happening in the world, in this country and in our own communities. One way to remind ourselves of the cultural pulls on our values and our lives, is to do an annual assessment... a “well baby” exam or annual car inspection. I use tax preparation time for this... a time to assess both my generosity and my feelings of scarcity and fear. Every year, as we prepare to meet with our financial planners and our tax accountant, I pull out my checkbook register and highlight all the charitable donations I’ve made. I am always disappointed and embarrassed. I talk a good game all year about being generous and sharing my gifts with others. I’ve talked with our financial planner about wanting to give more and to plan from a place of gratitude, generosity and abundance. And yet.....another year where I’ve probably spent more money at the dog groomer and definitely more money at the vet than I’ve given to the organizations, including my church, that mean so much to me. And, I know, if I studied that check register just a little more carefully, I would find things on it that I “needed.” And yet, did I really need some of that stuff, or was I convinced by our culture of consumerism that I had a need.

Between our culture of consumerism and our society of scarcity, it’s no wonder that all charitable organizations – those that help our neighbors, those that provide art and music to our communities, those that offer a place to worship and to learn, are reporting a lack of support and private funding.

How do we who claim a theology of hope, a theology of goodness and potential live into the reality of abundant blessings? This is a question of spiritual discipline and spiritual growth. This is not a sermon about money; this is not even a sermon about giving more. This is about our spiritual well being. There is a lot of chatter “out there” in the bookstores and on line about gratitude and giving; a sense of abundance in a time of false scarcity. Some of this chatter – actually, much of this chatter – will instruct you on how to give more of yourself, usually financially, so that you will get back a whole lot more. In this so-called “market economy giving,” we give in order to receive great benefit. Whatever is given returns to us under a different form to satisfy our needs and wants. This giving is qualitative...there is an equivalence between what we give and what we receive. This concept of “market economy giving” can insidiously enter into how we think about giving to our churches and other charities. In a large UU church in the mid-west, that will remain nameless for obvious reasons, there was (and maybe still is) a culture of entitlement that was exhibited in a tit-for-tat giving—market economy giving. There was an expectation that money, time and gifts would be given and taken away based on how members felt their personal needs were being or not being met.

This, I would argue my friends, is not good for our spiritual well being. As religious people we are called to develop a generous heart and be generous of heart for our spiritual health. One way to do this is to practice a discipline of abundance. This is hard because we are constantly reminded of what is scarce. So...let's try. What are some

resources that are, or could be abundant? How about happiness? Is there anything inherently scarce about happiness? Does being happy necessarily mean a scarcity of happiness for others? What about love? When we love others, does that reduce the love that we hold in our hearts. When we love our neighbors, or when we love our faith community, what often happens? What I've seen is that, rather than being diminished, love returns to us in multiple ways.

What about energy? I mean personal energy right now....the ability to get things done? Who hasn't had the experience of getting so involved in a cause, activity, project or relationship that we become so energized by it we lose track of time and feel invigorated.

What about money? Only you know if you have enough money. And enough for one person is a lot for another person, or not enough for someone else. What I do know about money is that this is another place where our society impinges on our ability to live faith-filled, faithful lives. We are told, in many ways, that we don't have enough money, never will have enough money and when we do have money we need to spend it on things that will give us eternal happiness...things like a new car, a bigger house, liposuction, whatever. The other thing I know about money is that I can be more generous with the money I have....will I have the courage to do so?...that I'm not so sure of

So...practice, practice, practice! Imagining abundance forces us to go against the current mores of our society. We are told in so many ways that we deserve more. That we should have more....more of everything.....more stuff, more money, more resources.

More of what the world has to offer...should be offered to us, and if not offered...taken by us.

This attitude drains us of our spiritual soul...this attitude drains us of our gratitude, our joy. For us to live as fully spiritual beings....people of faith....religious people, we must find a way to save our souls from these sins of scarcity thinking and entitlement. You see, my friends, ultimately this is about saving ourselves—our souls and our being. And saving souls is hard work that requires discipline. Practicing the spiritual discipline of abundance could lead to what Randolph Becker fears we are losing....it could lead to a strong sense of self, a strong sense of family, a strong understanding of community. And from that will come what Becker believes is the heart of our liberal religious faith... abundance of goodness and potential. I call that soul-saving, heart saving, community saving.

And, I might add, through a spiritual practice of claiming abundance in our lives we will become grateful and generous people. Gratitude and generosity—spiritual disciplines in themselves....seem to come naturally from an abundant heart. When we “count our blessings” finding blessings in both the mundane and the spectacular we cannot help ourselves....our hearts and minds, and even our bodies are filled up with gratitude. Gratitude....the spiritual discipline of rejoicing in all that we have, taking nothing for granted, appreciating it all and saying “thank you, thank you, thank you” to the whole world. These spiritual practices of abundant blessings and gratitude can give us a

wonderful sense of satisfaction. Not the kind of satisfaction that we sometimes see in ourselves and others....the smugness that indicates I have the answers, I have the secret, I have it all....but a deep sense of satisfaction that my life is full and I am blessed.

And when we wake up in the morning along with our prayer of “oh, ow ah, oh ow, ah” we can utter a prayer of “thank you”--our hearts will be open to the gloriousness of our lives, however hard at this moment, the gloriousness of our lives.

And from this will come a spiritual practice of generosity. It only follows that if we are so blessed, we are compelled to bless other. And given that we have such abundance in our lives, we will find we have so many new ways to be generous.

Let's go back to time. If in our new discipline of abundant thinking, we agree that time is abundant....that we have all the time we need.....we have all the time that there is. Now we have the opportunity to be more generous with our time. We will spend less time worrying about how much time we don't have or how much time we need, because in our new spirit of abundance, we know we have all the time we need. And we can generously share it with others. This is the time to offer ourselves to our families, friends and communities in new ways. Maybe you have, as I have, driven past the local nursing home and wondered how many residents there have not had a visitor this month. Maybe you've thought, as I have, that, if you had the time, you would “adopt” one resident and visit once a week. Well, guess what....time is abundant....now is the time. Stop in, make a new friend, maybe read to this new friend.... the classic novel you've been wanting to read but

“didn’t have the time!!!” Oh, my gosh, you just got blessed with more time!

Let’s go back to love. When we fully recognize the love that surrounds us...the love of our families, our partner, our community, our church family, our co-workers, those whom we assist in some way in our daily living, the person waiting on you at Shaws to whom you give a heartfelt greeting, more love fills your heart and overflows, looking for a new outlet to give away. Maybe this feeling of generous love will compel you to go to the Religious Education Director and volunteer to teach our children about this glorious, life changing faith of ours. Maybe this abundant and generous love will overcome your trepidation of herding a bunch of small children for an hour and a half and you will find yourself on the floor playing with a group of wiggly, happy, cranky, loving children who know how to love generously and how to give it away.

Happiness.....not over-the-top, oh my gosh, I’m so happy I could sing from the rooftops...but a sense of contentment that comes from a spiritual practice of abundant blessings and gratitude. I believe a sense of content happiness manifests itself in unselfconscious joy that you can see on the face of someone walking towards you, smiling, nodding their head and saying cheerfully, “good morning!”, “hello,” “nice day, isn’t it!” There is something about these people that we see everyday on the streets of our towns and cities that radiates a sense of abundant blessing, gratitude, generosity and joy. We can try it....I know I have....it’s not dangerous....although I’ve gotten strange looks, I’ve never been taken away by the authorities for being too strange to be on the street. It is, for me,

the best way to unleash gratitude and joy.

And of course, there is money. When we practice the spiritual discipline of abundant blessings, and when that practice leads us to the spiritual practice of gratitude and generosity, we are compelled to give away....give away our time, our love, our happiness and our money. For us who claim to be people of faith, religious people, it's easy...we have a built in way of sharing our financial wealth by giving our money to our church. The Reverend Cecilia Kingman Miller recommends tithing for Unitarian Universalist. A concept unheard of in our churches. She says: "Tithing tells me that the income I earn—large or small—does not define who I am. Tithing teaches me, over and over, about my dependence upon others and theirs upon me. Ultimately it teaches me to place my trust in something other than money. To understand that my security does not lie in material things. Rather, my security lies in community." What Kingman Miller is alluding to, I believe, is that, for her, tithing connects her to her community of abundant love, her community of abundant happiness, her community of abundant time. And she chooses to bless that community with her money as well as with her gifts.

And so, in this time in history, where we are barraged by messages of fear, of doom and gloom, let us move away from that....let us move purposefully toward a new story of how our lives can be. Let us reject the message of scarcity. Let us stare down the belief that we are entitled to more and deprived because we don't have more. Let us move toward a spiritual life of abundant blessing. Let us practice, practice, practice until we can

say every morning.....thank you, I am blessed, I have everything I need, I have faith that I will have all my needs met, I will share my blessings with the world. And I will live in the knowledge that my blessings will return to me ten fold....to be given away again.

Amen....

READING: “ON GIVING” From **Simple Truths** by Kent Nerburn

Giving is a miracle that can transform the heaviest of hearts. Two people, who moments before lived in separate worlds of private concerns, suddenly meet each other over a simple act of sharing. The world expands, a moment of goodness is created, and something new comes into being where before there was nothing.

Too often we are blind to this everyday miracle. We build our lives around accumulation – of money, of possessions, of status – as a way of protecting ourselves and our families from the vagaries of the world. Without thinking, we begin to see giving as an economic exchange – a subtracting of something from who and what we are – and we weigh it on the scales of self interest. But true giving is not an economic exchange, it is a generative act. It does not subtract from what we have; it multiplies the effect we can have in the world.

Many people tend to think of giving only in terms of grand gestures. They miss the simple openings of the heart that can be practiced anywhere with almost anyone.

We can say hello to someone everybody ignores. We can offer to help a neighbor. We can buy a bouquet of flowers and take it to a nursing home, or spend an extra minute talking to someone who needs our time.

We can take ten dollars out of our pocket and give it to someone on the street. No praise, no hushed tones of holy generosity. Just give, smile, and walk away.

If you perform these simple acts, little by little you will start to understand the miracle of giving. You will begin to see the unprotected human heart and the honest smiles of human happiness. You will start to feel what is common among us, not what separates and differentiates us.

Before long you will discover that you have the power to create joy and happiness by your simplest gestures of caring and compassion. You will see that you have the power to unlock the goodness in other people’s hearts by sharing the goodness in yours.

And, most of all, you will find the other givers. No matter where you live or where you travel, whether you speak their language or know their names, you will know them by their small acts, and they will recognize you by yours. You will become part of the community of humanity that trusts and shares and dares to reveal the softness of its heart.

Once you become a giver you will never be alone.

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