

“The Quest for Abundance”

By Rev. Kim D. Wilson

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Poconos

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We think of abundance as having as much of something as we want, or even more. The dictionary defines it using phrases like, “great plenty;” “ample quantity;” and “more than enough of something.” Abundance can also refer to “wealth” and “financial prosperity”.

If we were to sum up the point of the story, The Table Where Rich People Sit, it would be that money can't buy happiness, that material possessions won't lead us to a life of contentment. And we know these statements are true. But we often forget, and need to be reminded, like “Mountain Girl.” And these words of wisdom are easily drowned out by the hundreds of messages our culture bombards us with every day: “You need this; you are incomplete without it.” I don't think any one of us can ignore these messages completely. Who hasn't ever wished for a nicer car, a nicer house, a better-paying job, or a hundred other things?

The job of marketing is to tell us one story, although it's said in a thousand different ways. That one story is a story of scarcity. We don't have enough; we're missing something. We are lacking in some way. And the story gets us focusing on those things that we don't have, whether they're material possessions or, for women especially, aspects of our physical selves that fall short. Or what's lacking could be less tangible; maybe it gets us thinking that we don't have the love or the respect or the prestige that we want.

Sometimes our values and our spiritual goals require that we resist what society is telling us. And we can see that our quest for abundance will not end well if we “buy into” the powerful and alluring story of scarcity. Scarcity is a myth, of course. We know this intellectually. Yet I think most of us need to be reminded

from time to time that the marketplace is not where we need to be seeking abundance. It will leave us feeling empty.

People like Wendell Berry, and the family in the story we heard experience a sense of abundance in the natural world. I do, too. Out in the woods, here in the east, I love seeing the trees and the landforms, all the way down to the tiny details in a patch of moss, or an insect, or the veins in a leaf. Out where I've hiked in southern Utah, the landscape is similar to the one in the story, with massive rock formations and vast areas of wilderness. There's so much to see and experience and I drink it all in.

It occurred to me one day that some people describe places like this as being "in the middle of nowhere." Or, by saying, "There's nothing out here." Obviously, they're referring to the lack of human development, but these wild places are definitely not "nowhere" or "nothing." My first time in Utah, I discovered abundance in the immense quiet; the endless sky, the rocks and huge cliffs in all their colors and weird shapes; and the piñon pines giving off their distinctive woody scent, cacti, wildflowers, birds, lizards and insects. Being in nature fills me up with its wealth of beauty and the awesomeness of creation. Whenever I lose the sense of abundance in my life, immersing myself in nature brings me right back.

Not everyone wants to be out in the wilderness hiking in canyons or sleeping in a tent. But we all need nature, and, fortunately, nature is almost everywhere. Nature can be a city park, or even a weedy lot. You'd be amazed to see what's there, once you stop and look. Nature can be one dandelion growing in a crack in the sidewalk. Studies show that being in nature reduces stress. Just gazing upon shapes that nature created, as opposed to those sharp human-made angles, relaxes us and brings us into the present moment. In nature, as Wendell Berry says, we can be "quiet in heart, and in eye clear."

Every one of us has a life of abundance, if only we can wake up and pay attention to it. With quiet hearts and clear eyes in the present moment, we can begin to

feel and see differently. UU minister Angela Herrera says that abundance is not about “having what you want, but about noticing what you have.” We need to get out of our heads and quiet our hearts in order to see clearly what we have.

And, once we start noticing, we begin to see more and more abundance. St. Catherine of Siena said, “I cannot lose anything in this place of abundance I found. If something my heart cherishes is taken away, I just say, ‘Lord, what happened?’ And a hundred more appear.”

In our opening words this morning, we heard Manish K. Mishra-Marzetti suggest that we “ground ourselves...in this time and space.” The idea of grounding ourselves is one I like. Electricity needs to be “grounded”; the first layer of a painting is called the “ground;” a plane that’s not flying is “grounded.” The ground is literally the earth, or in painting, it’s the foundation. The solid base upon which all else depends. To ground ourselves is to be connected, body and mind, to our foundation, to the earth. It means consciously being where we are; being aware of the space we occupy; focusing our attention on our surroundings, using all of our senses, being in the moment. Whether we’re in a natural setting or not, being grounded opens us to sensing the abundance of our lives.

Staying grounded in the present moment isn’t easy for most of us. It’s easier to let our minds run on with its thoughts about the past and the future. It’s also easy to lose awareness of how much we have, in the sense of the things in life that matter most. And when we’re worried about something, or dealing with physical or emotional pain, we might not feel like our life is abundant at all.

One practice that can help is making a gratitude list. If we challenge ourselves to name things for which we can be grateful, it makes us recognize what we have. For example, we might say, “I’m grateful for all the people in my life whom I love and who love me. (And we could name them.) I’m grateful for my health, and for all the parts that work well. I’m grateful for my mind. I’m grateful to have a roof over my head and good food to eat each day.” And so on.

Making a gratitude list a good exercise, because even though we might start off not feeling grateful, it makes us more aware of what we value but may take for granted. And many times, in the process of remembering what wealth we really do have, expressing our gratitude can lift our spirits. Some people like to make a written list, and keep it in a place where they can refer to it often. Other people like to speak it out loud. I say my gratitude list in the mornings as I start my day.

I love the family meeting in [The Table Where Rich People Live](#), and how, in the process of making the list of things they value about their lives, the girl gradually lets go of her original gripe about not having enough money, as she's reminded about all the wonderful things they do have, and how she comes to realize that those are the things that matter. The beauty of their surroundings, their love for each other and the ability to live lives that don't require them to compromise their values.

I do recognize that the parents are clearly making a choice to earn less money in exchange for living the kind of life they want to pursue. And I recognize that not everyone has the luxury of making that kind of choice. It's a point that we want to keep in our awareness. But the message of the story still stands; that it's ultimately not the items beyond the basic necessities that are going to fill our lives with happiness and meaning; it's those things that we value most: our relationships with the ones we care about, being loved and supported in times of need; the kindness and generosity we receive from others; the beauty, natural and otherwise, that is always around us.

What happens when we tell ourselves that we don't have enough? We tend to hold on tighter to what we do have. There's a fear of loss. We turn inward to protect what we possess.

How is it different when we are feeling a sense of abundance? We have plenty; we have more than we need. We can afford to be generous. We turn outward to share our abundance with others.

Angela Herrera asks, “What are you struggling with right now? Health? A relationship? Politics? ...The pain of this world? Could it be possible to experience, also, a sense of rapture? To cultivate a boundless heart? To find deep meaning and joy in the days you are blessed to live?”

She says, “I invite you to ...[accept] that you are enough. That you have what you need already, within you and around you. That your life is rich with abundance... That you have more than enough meaning, beauty, love, time and resources. That you are deciding every day whether [or not] to notice them... “

When we are able to keep before us the reality that our life is rich with abundance, our world expands. We see how we are connected with everything else. We feel our connection to that which is larger than ourselves, to God or our higher power, to Great Mystery. May you be blessed with the ability, more and more each day, to dwell in a place of abundance. May it be so.