



Living Abundantly in an Age of Scarcity

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We live in a world of Paradox. A Paradox is a phenomenon in which two opposing ideas or realities that are both seemingly true exist side by side in the same space and time.

Paradox is the greatest of teachers because it is in that area of tension between opposing Truths that humans experience the deepest amounts of growth and learning. Knowledge itself is born out of paradox. As a high school history teacher, I knew that I was entering the most sacred of learning spaces when I could ask questions of my students that would force them to live in and struggle with the tension of opposing truths. For example: How could the early leaders of our country write truly revolutionary founding documents and governmental structures that proclaimed and institutionalized the political philosophy that all men (or people) were created equal, and then, at the same time they enslaved a whole population of people thereby making a mockery of the very ideals they held to be absolutely true? Here is another. How can the creation of one thing of social value lead to the destruction of another thing of equal and great social value? This question poses the dilemma of technological and philosophical progress. Is it really progress when an industrial revolution that mass-produces the tools and materials necessary for a modern society to exist while at the same time it causes the destruction of the social and family structures that we all cherish? Or, The United States is often considered a country with the greatest amount of Freedom in the world. On the other hand, the United States also has the largest number of people in prison and the largest percentage of its people in prison than any country in the world. It is only by wrestling with the tensions or conflict that these contradictory realities create that we find ourselves most fully alive and at our most creative. This is not easy work. In fact, it is hard work. But it is essential for us to struggle with these kinds of lived contradictions if we are to create a better world for ourselves and for future generations. That is what the quest for Truth is all about. It is also why I love that the Tiffany window depicting this Genderless being representing Truth is above us all and at the center of our sanctuary. My only lament is that Truth in this case is represented as being “White”. Hopefully it can serve as a constant reminder to all of us that White Supremacy is an historic

legacy our UU faith and heritage and that we must continually challenge that fact if we are to remain faithful to our quest for Truth.

Now the Paradox I would like to talk about today is the truth that we live in a world of great abundance and great scarcity both at the same time.

If living on this earth for the past 66 years has taught me anything it has taught me that we live in a world of abundance. We experience that abundance every day of lives. We live in a world filled with the capacity of its natural resources to provide enough to sustain every living being. We see and feel an abundance of beauty that is gilded by every sunset, sunrise, twilight, and starry night. And we also live in a world populated by an abundance of human talent, enough talent to make right almost all of the challenges and problems that we face. In short, we have inherited a paradise of unfathomable proportions and possibilities that continues to give and inspire us on a daily basis.

We need to revel in that realization.

But we also need to recognize that there are limitations to the abundance that surrounds us. There are real issues of scarcity that are driven by the fact that we have squandered the abundance we inherited. We have abused and destroyed so many of our natural resources that we now face the real possibility that we will not pass down to future generations a planet that can sustain human life in any of the ways in which we are accustomed. I do not need to recite the litany of endangered or extinct species of animal and plant life that have been depleted in our lifetimes. Nor do I need to review with you the impact of Global Climate Change. We all know that the collective human impact on this earth is so huge and so predominantly negative that something has to be done to turn the trend of extinction and destruction around or we will no longer have an inhabitable planet. The paradoxical twist to this scarcity is that there is still enough of everything for everyone to live a reasonably good and comfortable life. The problem is that a very tiny percentage of the world's population is unsustainably consuming and destroying close to 90% of the world's resources leaving the vast majority of the world no option but to live in squalor.

This is a false scarcity. There is enough wealth and enough food in our world for everyone to live. No one should be starving, and no one should lack enough wealth to maintain a survivable standard of living for themselves and their descendants. But our predatory local, national, and world economies have created a world in which 62 of the world's richest individuals now own more wealth than half of the rest of the world. Additionally, the top 1% of wealth holders control more wealth than the entire 99% of the world below them. This kind of lopsided economic order spells disaster for all of us. Rich and poor.

As a people of Faith, what is our response to a world so out of balance such as this? Well, I think there are some answers imbedded in all of the faith traditions from which we as Unitarian Universalists draw our inspiration and guidance. I hope you found a thread of consistency running through the text selections that Gabe and I read today. It is my belief that this thread probably runs the deepest through our Universalist heritage. Universalism proclaims loudly and clearly to the world that everything living is ultimately embraced by the power and order of the universe. In Judaic/Christian/Islamic language it means all beings

are ultimately welcomed into the presence of God, without exception. In our Hindu and Buddhist traditions “oneness with God” is the goal of all of life’s activity. Therefore, given that our “salvation” is guaranteed, the task of the Universalist is to live a life as though that has already happened. Or as Jesus said, our task is to bring the Kingdom of God down to earth. Or as the Prophet of Islam (PBUH) declared, the human task is to create or build the Dar al Salaam (The Abode of Peace) so that all people can share in the abundance of what has been provided by God. In essence all of Faith Traditions are pointing to the fact that our collective survival requires that we all live in Right Relation with one another. When we are in Right Relation with each other we are living in the presence of the power of God.

It all sounds so simple and, I guess, basic truth is simple until... it isn’t quite so simple. Simple Truth is also quite complex.

So how can we Live Abundantly in an Age of Scarcity?

First, I think we have to understand our age of scarcity for what it is. We live in a time of False Scarcity. The Dean of Old Testament Theologians, Walter Brueggeman, has repeatedly said, “We are living in the Pharaoh’s economy.” He compares our world today to the 400 years of Jewish enslavement in Egypt. He goes on to point out that the suffering and hardships of scarcity endured by the Israelites were imposed from above by the Pharaoh and were not the consequence of a real scarcity. Meanwhile the Egyptian elite lived lives of luxury that if shared, would have provided plenty for everyone. Because of the most recent \$1 Trillion tax cut for the billionaire class in America (and the past 40 years of tax cuts) the rest of us are now looking at a government that barely functions and a government that is planning austerity cuts to every social support system that exists in our country. This is a Pharaoh’s economy. In these same presentations Brueggeman then went on to define the term “Austerity”. He said, “Austerity is when the poor are forced to pay for the excesses of the rich.” We do live in a time when the poor are forced to pay for the excesses of the rich. And our ruling elites have demonized the word Welfare so much that it is only a distorted caricature of what it actually means in practice.

The second thing we need to do is to figure out what it means to live abundant lives in the face of this artificially imposed scarcity. And this is precisely where the rubber of our faith meets the road. This is the test of our resolve to live lives that seek out the building of right relationship with each other. We must treat every human being as a child of the universe or a child of God. This is a fundamental step toward building solidarity with one another. This kind of Solidarity recognizes that when the least among us is injured we are all injured. With every child that is taken from her parents at the border our children are being taken as well. With every parent who loses a child to gun violence we lose a child to gun violence. With every child that goes to school hungry our children go to school hungry. When people living on the streets lose their only home because our local government and our business community refuses to provide safe and affordable housing it is as though we are homeless, too. Feeling and sharing the pain of oppression is our only way to maintain our humanity in an inhuman system that survives, thrives upon, and ultimately demands the suffering of others. And from that identification with the rest of humanity we find ways to make a difference in the lives of others by sharing our abundance and working to build a society and an economy that shares abundance. It is these little acts of solidarity that maintain our

humanity and when combined with the big dream of a better world it provides us the hope to go on.

The Big Dream of a Better World is essential. One such dreamer was an Islamic scholar by the name of Muhammad Al Farabi who was born in Kazakhstan around 870 of the Common Era. He lived 80 years and consulted as a political philosopher studying throughout the Middle East from Kazakhstan, to Baghdad, to Turkey and Damascus writing books on music, religion, philosophy, history. He took his Muslim commitments seriously but he also studied Christianity and Greek Philosophy. His most famous and influential book was called, *The Virtuous City* (read State), which merged the economic thinking of early Islam and the idea of Zakat (the Islamic Welfare State) with the political philosophy of Plato's Republic and Aristotle. He created a societal model whereby 1/3 of the productive capacity of any national economy would be set aside for the common good so that all would share in the abundance of that society regardless of skills, position in life, or merit. So, taken by these ideas were the Islamic Caliphates that many of his policy suggestions were instituted which helped to create the greatness of the Golden Age of Islamic Civilizations. Not coincidentally this Golden Age of Islam also marked a sustained period of time in which Islam, Judaism, and Christianity existed side by side in comparative harmony with one another in many areas of the Islamic World. It should be noted that this was long before Europe would awaken from its collapse into barbarism and warring factions following the fall of the Roman Empire, known as the Dark Ages. In essence, Al Farabi took the Zakat and combined it with notions like the Old Testament Jubilee to propose a society based on a perpetual Jubilee, not just a forgiveness of debts every 7 years.

These ideas of Al Farabi and many other life affirming ideas are imbedded into the DNA of our Faith Traditions, but they are in a deep slumber because our Faith traditions have been coopted by Pharaoh's Predatory Economy. Marx was not wrong when he said that religion is the opiate of the people. All one has to do to confirm this is look at the spectacle of the extreme Christian Right today as they mindlessly embrace a self-admitted sexual predator and megalomaniac as their supreme leader. Predatory nation states and predatory economies regularly press religious orthodoxy and its institutions into the defense of an ugly status quo. The early Christian church was overthrown so that it could become the church of the Roman Empire, where, in a large measure, orthodox Christianity still remains today. The same holds true for Judaism and the State of Israel, Islam and Saudi Arabia, Buddhism and Myanmar, and Hinduism and India. We have allowed our religions to become predatory religions that ideologically support the most obnoxious forms of nationalism, imperialism and economic predation. And that is true because we have allowed the ideology of scarcity to infect our religious ideals. How many religionists do you know that proclaim "salvation" can only belong to those who follow their religion exclusively? "Salvation" in this context is a falsely scarce commodity that only a certain few will ever attain and these few are frequently living lives of privilege. Scarcity thrives on inequality and injustice and it demands inequality and injustice. The sharing of abundance, the sharing of salvation for all, the sharing of the oneness of our existence exposes the lie that many people must suffer so a few can have obscene levels of luxury.

Universalism and the best thinking of every religious tradition all provide us with the tools we need to turn our predatory and slave holder religions into religions of God's abundance.

When Moses stood in front of his people as they were about to enter the Promised Land he challenged them to recognize that they held the key to their own survival in their own decisions. He laid before them Life and Death, Abundance and Scarcity. He said, “Choose Life so that your children and their children’s children may have life.” We have been given a similar directive. Will we choose life and abundance? Or will we choose Death and Scarcity? The path forward is clear. Who among us is ready to embrace that kind of abundance and live that kind of abundant life?

The Following Multi-Faith Texts Were Read Prior to the Sermon

From the Christian Gospel of Matthew, the 18th chapter verses 12-14:

"What do you think? If any man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go and search for the one that is straying? If it turns out that he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine which have not gone astray. So it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish."

Also from the Christian Gospel of John, chapter 10 verse 10:

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

From the Surah Ibrahim of the Holy Qu’ran, chapter 14 verse 7:

And remember! Your Lord caused to be declared: If ye are grateful, I will add more unto you.

Gratitude for the abundance you have received is the best insurance that abundance will continue.

Prophet Muhammad (*saws*)

Commentary on Abundance in Islam: Allah has given us these resources as a trust, which we are required to disburse according to His Will (the system of Zakat), which is, to make available to all living creatures according to their needs, without any hindrance or control, the sustenance and provisions of life.

It was the Prophet’s (pbuh) unshakable conviction, his utter commitment, and total obedience to this system of Zakat that led to the establishment of the basic infrastructure of a universal, welfare-based economic system in Medina, and which reached its pinnacle during Khalifa ‘Umar’s (R) time when, it is said, hardly anyone was in need of charity. The Prophet (pbuh) lived his life true to this principle: he was not an owner of anything, no land, no possessions; he was merely an enforcer of the Will of Allah – he established the system of Zakat.

From the Hebrew Book of Deuteronomy, chapter 30 verses 15-19:

See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in

the land you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live.

From the Theravada Buddhist Text *Khuddaka Patha, 8*— A man buries a treasure in a deep pit.... .But all of this treasure may not profit the owner at all.... But by charity, goodness, restraint, and self-control man and woman alike can store up a well-hidden treasure---a treasure which cannot be given to others and which robbers cannot steal. A wise man should do good---that is the treasure which cannot leave him.