

Human Flourishing, Abundance, and Social Justice

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School may have started for many of us but the days are still long, the grass is still green, and the sunflowers are still high. Phoebe's garden produced beautiful zucchinis that are in the process of becoming multiple loaves of zucchini bread. Two weeks ago many of us here today were in this room, bathed in love, moving our bodies and raising our voices. Gayan Gregory Long ended that service, the Dances of Universal Peace, with a prayer that all beings be blessed with abundance. It was a perfect service for the height of August, a time of heat and harvest, embodiment and energy, when the only possible response to the abundance around and among us was a sung, danced, or played "thank you." Embodied and spiritual, the fullness and wholeness of this season might get old 12 months a year but doesn't it sometimes feel like a touch of perfection? We miss it when it's gone and sometimes when we are in the middle of it, we are simply floored by how powerful a simple sense of abundance can be.

In the midst of these moments, these days, it seems almost churlish to talk about the horrific impacts of social inequality on those who face mistreatment and worse because of the social groups to which they belong. Take, for instance, the fact that about a year ago Michael Brown was shot to death and left to rot in the street. And that racial and class segregation still damages and destroys lives on a regular basis, from crappy schools to the violence that emerges easily out of grinding poverty, to the poor person of color knowing the rest of society doesn't care about his well-being even slightly, to the disaster of Hurricane Katrina, which took place ten years ago, almost to the day. And it might appear ungrateful to bring up the fact that it's hard for someone to feel the sheer freedom of abundance when walking in the street at night scares the hell out of them because they are female or gay or black and therefore might attract unwanted and dangerous attention. And, really, why do I have to mention that some county clerks are still refusing to marry same-sex couples or that in 31 states such couples can be fired from their jobs on Monday with no recourse simply for mentioning that they got legally married on Friday? It's not that these things are not true; they are. But they are downers. Why do we have to talk about them in our season of abundance? What, in fact, do they have to do with us if we are not people of color or women or sexual minorities or poor?

Some years ago, Unitarian Universalist minister Tom Owen-Towle wrote a book called *Growing a Beloved Community: Twelve Hallmarks of a Healthy Congregation*. One of the chapters is titled, "Balance Justice and Joy." The chapter itself does not go in a direction that helps us here but its title does raise a good question: what's the relationship between justice and joy? And I'm afraid that for too many UU congregations the answer is that they are different enough that they need to be balanced: joy one Sunday, justice the next. This month, in which we have focused on abundance, has leaned a bit more toward the joy: creating it among ourselves, seeing what gets in the way of it, contemplating how to cultivate joy in situations that don't seem to be conducive to it. So perhaps some of you are thinking that today is the balancing act, where we came in from abundance and will go back out to it, but in the meantime must earnestly focus on justice and lay the joy aside for an hour.

But I hope not. Because I would like us to think today about justice and joy in a different way, one in which they are interdependent, one in which my justice is bound up with the justice of others and their joy is bound up with my joy. With our joy. And one in which our mission statement, which calls the congregation to inspire spiritual growth and act for social justice, is not listing different priorities but is instead affirming our single overarching priority: to our individual and communal and societal and global well-being. Because spiritual growth always draws us back to others in support and solidarity, and social justice always draws us back to ourselves for reflection and replenishment. So, understanding that these aspects of our mission are linked, what exactly is the connection between spirituality and social justice?

Often, social justice demands of us that we bear witness to, and then respond to, the wrongs of society, the violence and hardship and fear and self-hatred that follow almost naturally from being in a socially devalued group. But our social justice cannot merely be a statement about what we are against, any more than our Unitarian Universalism can be simply a rejection of religious conservatism. We stand for something. We have a vision. We have goals. What are we doing here anyway? What is it we want?

Here's what I want and what I hope most of you want: a life, a community, a society, a planet of abundance. Of delight, pleasure, joy, and meaning. Of dancing, singing, loving, creating art, developing and discussing ideas, having the freedom to be vulnerable, and the vulnerability to be tender. And yes, I imagine we all want this for ourselves and those we care about. But because we affirm that every person has inherent dignity and worth, we also want, or at least I hope we want, every person, every single person, every last person, to be able to live a life of abundance. Not a life free from pain, since our very love for other people guarantees our pain when they suffer or when they are gone. Not a life free from challenges or hard work, since we often achieve a sense of meaning and accomplishment from working hard and reaping benefits. But a life for which late summer, with its heat and harvests and dancing and drumming, could be a metaphor. A life where both our giving and our receiving are blessed, in which we are blessed by others and bless them. A life of abundance. Which, for me, is the most spiritual desire possible: the desire that all of us, and everyone on the planet, have lives of fullness and wholeness.

And it is largely for this reason that I take up social justice work and education. Not only because inequality is morally wrong, though it is. Not only because the UUA is committed to justice in both general and specific ways, though it is. But because only justice, true justice, will allow all people to flourish. Because equality and social valuation and the freedom to choose what kind of life one wants and access to the experiences and opportunities we deem worthy are necessary for abundant living. And social devaluation, social inequality, social injustice both interfere with abundance and cause unnecessary suffering. Simply put, it is not possible to have both social inequality and abundance for all. And this is where we come in.

We light candles. We send warm thoughts and prayers. We take good care of those in our community because the third part of our mission is to nurture a loving, respectful religious community. And having done so, we are the stronger once we are ready to turn outward and attend to the world, in its abundance and in its suffering.

For us to contribute to that abundance and participate in mitigating that suffering we need to have a sense of some of the preconditions of an abundant life. I'll start there, then suggest some obvious ways in which social inequality interferes with those preconditions, sometimes to the extent that someone cannot have an abundant life because the effects of inequality has brought their life to an end. I'll close with an invitation to us to take up this sacred work. Please notice that I'm shifting to "we" language here, treating us as both those in the congregation and those who face social inequality.

First, we can't have fully abundant lives if we don't have what I call basic survival resources. Fullness and wholeness don't go well with an empty stomach, the need to breathe polluted air and drink toxic water, the struggle to find somewhere to sleep each night because one is homeless. Second, if we are at risk of direct harm and violence the most reasonable response may well be fear, which interferes with flourishing just as asthma makes it hard to take a deep enough breath. And it isn't merely fear about something that might happen; actual violence, whether verbal, emotional, sexual, or physical in other ways, causes suffering and damages abundance. Violence shames and belittles us, signals that we don't belong somewhere, that we don't matter, that our pain brings someone else pleasure. Third, we need at least a certain degree of freedom to build lives that are meaningful to us. None of us in this room would be able to cultivate a life of abundance in the totalitarian atmosphere of the novel 1984. Part of the importance of freedom is its affirmation that we are moral agents, able to make appropriate decisions about our own lives, including when we should sacrifice some of our own freedom so that others might experience abundance.

Then, there are a variety of traits that matter because they need to be supported for someone to be able to live in abundance. Here are a few examples from a much longer list:

We can only experience reality by interpreting it; an abundant life requires access to interpretations of reality in which we are valued and valuable people.

We are embodied and for that reason are vulnerable to illness and injury; at the same time our embodiment allows us to experience great joy and agency through our bodies. An abundant life requires the ability to obtain decent healthcare along with access to the many ways we might enjoy life as embodied beings.

We want and desire things; an abundant life requires access to at least some of the things we want or we will receive the message that we are not worthy of having what society considers good.

We identify with particular groups of people, from our families to our communities to other types of groups; an abundant life requires access to the groups that are meaningful to us, meaning that we will not be cast out of them or shunned by them.

We have creative and artistic capabilities; an abundant life includes access to the creativity of others so that it might enrich our lives. It also includes time, space, and resources to be creative ourselves.

Similarly, we have the capacity to be playful; an abundant life requires time, space, and opportunities to play, relax, and laugh, and enough freedom from danger that we can set our minds on joy.

Our emotions are central to our lives; an abundant life requires freedom from emotional harm and the ability to live our emotional lives fully so that we can be joyful when we are joyful, grieve when we experience loss, be angry at injustice and otherwise be the emotional beings we are.

Finally, we are shaped by our memories; an abundant life requires enough access to a good life and enough freedom from fear and harm that our memories do not traumatize us and, moreover, that they solidify our sense of being good people with lives of blessing.

If you find these preconditions of abundance convincing, you can probably see how the workings and messages of inequality interfere with abundance and cause suffering. For example, poor people may well not have basic survival resources, at least not consistently; survival mode tends to force out at least some kinds of abundance.

Anyone who is a member of a devalued group may fear and face the violence that is a too-frequent response to being dehumanized. We see this in rape and gaybashing, in the bullying of children and youth because they don't conform to gender norms, and in domestic violence. We see violence, often deadly, aimed at black people because they walked into their stairwell or broke a very minor law for which a white person would never be face police interaction or, come to think of it, because they were 12 years old and thought it was fine to play with a toy.

And, of course, the freedom to construct a meaningful life for ourselves is a joke when we cannot walk alone at night safely, when our marriage could cost us our job, when we must memorize a long list of ways to behave in case we encounter a police officer, when politicians and religious leaders are trying to control what we can and can't do with our body. These are the effects of inequality, of injustice. They damage abundance and cause suffering.

And when such things happen, the traits on which our humanity is built betray us as well. Here I'll mention just a few items from above.

If an abundant life requires access to interpretations of reality in which we are valued and valuable people those interpretations of reality are hammered out of us with each day we are homeless and hungry, each strike of a fist, each mocking word, each job we didn't get because our gender trumped our qualifications, each shot of a gun striking flesh.

If an abundant life requires the ability to obtain decent healthcare, those illnesses and injuries that damage and sometimes kill us because we can't afford appropriate healthcare are like hatchets chopping off pieces of abundance in our lives.

If an abundant life requires the freedom to engage our bodies in pleasurable and rewarding ways, messages of inequality that certain bodies are inferior, disgusting or dangerous because of their

ability, age, sexuality, gender, race, or class cause harm both direct and indirect, leading at worst to violence against the disturbing body with the goal of erasing its presence.

If an abundant life requires freedom from emotional harm and the ability to live our emotional lives fully, all messages and actions of devaluation tip the abundance/suffering calculus in favor of suffering and force us to manage our emotions because that is the only way to survive. The woman in a violent marriage, the man pulled over because he fit the profile of being something other than white despite having done nothing wrong, the gay man yearning to hold his spouse's hand in public but knowing the potential consequences, the person working a minimum wage job who cannot feed her family and cannot ask a rude customer not to be rude – these people are in danger of suffering yet more if they do or say anything even slightly wrong.

So here's the real question for us. What do these people have to do with us? Are they our responsibility? One answer is that some of us are them. Some of us have suffered the effects of sexism, racism, homophobia, class inequality, and other forms of devaluation. And many of us have benefited from being in valued groups, and plenty of us have complicated identities that make it tempting to focus on where we are mistreated and ignore the ways we benefit.

But it's not enough to answer the question of what to do only by considering who's in the room. The harder question is about our obligations to those who are not in the room. If we affirm that all people have inherent dignity and worth and therefore should be treated well, and if we affirm that we are part of an interconnected web that includes those who suffer while we give thanks for abundance, then challenging inequality becomes a spiritual practice, not merely moral, not merely political, but one in which we demonstrate with our bodies and minds and hearts and souls that we seek a world in which everyone has access to the kind of abundance we enjoy or want to enjoy ourselves. Our spiritual affirmation becomes a political commitment, energized by our moral values and given weight by our communal presence.

On September 27, I will continue these thoughts with a focus on social justice work as a spiritual discipline. We'll think together about how we grow spiritually when we engage in building a land of abundance. For now, as we return to the abundance of late summer, I wish for us the ability to remember that joy invites justice as well as the capacity to pursue justice with joy. I wish for us abundance to carry us into the cooling of autumn and the short days of winter. And above all, I wish for us fullness, wholeness, and peace for all the days of our lives. Amen and blessed be.