



Money, Anxiety and Abundance

BY **ROGER JONES**, FAMILY MINISTER, UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST SOCIETY OF SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA

Ongoing political controversies about homosexuality and abortion rights could give you the impression that the Bible is bursting with guidance about same-sex relationships and family planning, but actually it says less about sexual morality than it does about financial morality.

According to Rev. Stephen C. Gray (in an address to UU ministers): Of the 38 parables or stories told by Jesus in the Christian Scriptures, 16 deal with the relationship between what you say you believe and how you use your money and possessions. By Gray's calculation, in both testaments of the Bible one out of eight verses talks about the relationship between faith and the use of our wealth. Of the Ten Commandments, three provide instructions on how we relate to money and possessions.

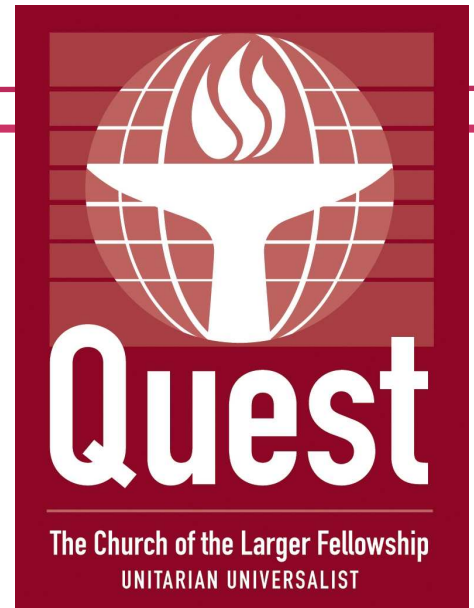
Here are some other examples: Hebrew prophets in several books condemn the oppression of the poor by the powerful, and Jewish Scripture prohibits lending money at high rates of interest, the way credit card companies and payday lenders do today. It speaks of the jubilee year—a celebration every 50 years in which land was to lie fallow, all property was returned to its original owners or their heirs, all debts were forgiven and indentured servants released. (Contrast this with debtor prisons that existed in Europe and the U.S. until the mid-19th century.) In one New Testament scene, Jesus of Nazareth praises the poor widow for her generous offering to the temple while scolding the rich donors for their pride and their lack of equal sacrifice.

Stephen Gray writes: "If you wonder why money and possessions are referred to so often in the Bible, I would simply remind you of the number one reason for family conflict, which is, of course, money." Money was a major source of domestic disagreements long ago, and it still is. This is why premarital counseling and couples workshops help engaged couples to talk about financial priorities and habits, as well as the messages they received about money while growing up.

I, certainly, am someone who grew up with mixed messages about money. Instead of learning clear lessons about financial security, frugality or generosity, I learned to be anxious and ambivalent about money. My relationship to money was shaped in part by the habits, attitudes, complaints and worries I heard from parents and close relatives. We were secure financially as a family, but it didn't feel that way. By contrast, I've heard other people say, "I grew up in a poor family, but we didn't realize we were poor. We had enough to eat, fun ways to spend time, and lots of love."

A newspaper column entitled "Yoder & Sons" featured the *Wall Street Journal's* San Francisco Bureau Chief, Stephen Yoder, co-writing with his older son Isaac, who's now in college. A few years ago the team added the younger son, Levi, then a high school freshman. The father and one or both of his boys wrote their thoughts on topics like allowances, savings, spending, cell phones, summer vacations, summer internships, selecting a college and paying for it, volunteer work, giving to charity, and balancing work and family life. They didn't always see eye-to-eye, but they stayed in conversation, and all of them learned from one another.

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This could be our revolution:
to love what is plentiful
as much as
what is scarce.
—Alice Walker

A monthly for religious liberals

THINKING ABOUT ABUNDANCE

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One January 14-year-old Eli made a New Year's resolution to give away 10% of the money he made from writing the column. He said he would divide it between the family's church and another not-for-profit organization. A month later he was still putting it off, and he reflected on that. He said his church youth group was collecting money to support a clinic in Indonesia, one "that provides health care in local villages in return for the villagers' pledging not to cut down trees there, and to restore part of the rainforest by planting seedlings."

Eli wrote: "For the fund-raiser, we're going to ask the adults to pitch in, and I figure I should lead by example." He noted, however, that the fundraiser was only a temporary event. He wanted to start making donations regularly, and he struggled to figure out which not-for-profit agency will benefit from his tithe. He committed to visiting the bank on the upcoming Saturday to withdraw 10% of his earnings to give away.

The abundance of life flows around us and through us.

Like many people with the last name of Yoder, this is a family of the Mennonite Church. Related historically to the Amish, Brethren, and Quaker traditions, the Mennonites are a peace church. They stand against war and capital punishment, and are involved in ministries of health care, economic development and emergency relief in poor countries. Steve Yoder, the father, wrote that he learned the practice of tithing from his own parents: 10% of his allowance and earnings went into the church offering plate.

Yet he added: "Talking to my sons about their money decisions sometimes means admitting my own failures.... I must confess one here: We should be giving more money away." He explained that he and his wife, Karen, do

give away both time and money, but they have fallen behind their own standard of tithing, and it's become less of a priority.

Recalling the Jewish Biblical tradition of giving away the first fruits of one's harvest, Yoder commented that if any of us waits until we think of all the other things we want or need to do with our money, we will find reasons to give away less than we can—or give almost nothing. He recounted the story of a Mennonite cattle-farming family that every year would donate the first calf born for the benefit of the Mennonite Central Committee, a service agency that is their "rough equivalent of the Peace Corps." The so-called "MCC Calf" would "be fattened and nurtured just like the rest of the herd. At year's end, no matter how thin the family finances were, the full-grown cow would be sold, and the proceeds sent to the (service agency)."

"Giving first—before spending on yourself" said Yoder, "has got to be a lifestyle choice, like investing in the 401(K) before buying a new car." Now he and his wife are talking about downsizing their home and becoming more frugal in order to "leave more money upfront to give away, while still allowing us to do the things we value, such as travel." Inspired by his son's thoughtfulness and good intentions, Yoder granted that "Levi is on the right track. Now if Karen and I can just get ourselves on that track, too."

Even in a family like this, with strong traditions and common commitments, managing money is a challenge. It's a topic for ongoing dialogue, and a reason for support and encouragement. I can't imagine it's any easier for other families than it is for the Yoders. Stresses about money and possessions are a real part of real life and it's important to acknowledge that our personal reactions to such stress often bring up strong feelings. It can help to be clear about what gives us joy, and clear about what our hopes are, as well as our dilemmas, doubts and fears. It's

especially useful to explore anxiety about money. This is important whether we are a family of one person, two, three, seven or more. Anxiety is a sign that something deep is going on in us.

Anxiety is a challenge to look internally. It's not a feeling to run from, avoid or conquer, as much as we'd like to get rid of it. It's a feeling to look in the face. If we know our own values well and keep to them, if we stick to our personal priorities, we can let anxiety be what it is, without allowing it to drive our decisions and run our lives. We can respect our anxiety without letting it chase us around.

I know adults who learned to tithe as children, but I didn't. My parents were somewhat generous to the church and larger community, but there was a sense of duty about it, even a sense of caution: Make sure you don't give away too much! What I missed then was a sense of joy in giving. We didn't experience the joy that comes from living with an attitude of abundance and gratitude.

When I think of the spirit of abundance and gratitude, I see the image of gardeners passing some of their vegetables over the fence to neighbors, or bringing extra produce to church to give away. I remember a house I saw last year in a Sacramento neighborhood where I was apartment-hunting. It had a sign in the front yard: "Help yourself to fruit from the tree." I said, "I want to live near them!" Alas, the apartment I found was 12 blocks away.

But a few weeks after I moved into my new place, a neighbor from a family in the next building knocked on my door to introduce herself. I'd already met her spouse when he brought me a piece of mail that had ended up in their box. As a housewarming gesture, she brought me two cupcakes, freshly baked and frosted. I was delighted—and I obliged by eating them at once. Who knows if the joy was greater for her or for me? But it seems clear that joy increases in all directions by the act of giving and

receiving—giving away without expectation, and receiving graciously.

It can be challenging to feel a sense of abundance or gratitude when we are beset by misfortune, loss, illness or money problems. Yet often we meet or hear about people who get by on little money but show gratitude for life and for what they have, and who give to others with joy. We see on television or read in the paper about a sick child or an adult with a life-threatening illness, and we're amazed that they show gratitude for special moments in life. Perhaps abundance—rather than a certain quantity of money—is a measure of “enough.”

Perhaps gratitude is a practice, a way of looking, a point of view, a lens. Through the lens of gratitude we can see our lives anew, and remember our connections to the world around us, to all of life, to all the gifts of life.

The abundance of life flows around us and through us. We don't own it; we are merely its keepers. We're the stewards of the gifts of this world. The word “steward” comes from Old English, meaning “keeper of the hall.” We are the keepers, the temporary keepers. Stewardship is about giving thanks for our gifts, tending them, sharing them, and—eventually—letting go of them. Stewardship is about gratitude and relationship.

When money flows through our hands, it represents the abundance of life. It represents the gifts of hard work and wise choices and good luck. It represents the gifts of all the other lives that are connected to our lives, all the other beings that make your life possible. Money reflects our interconnection and interdependence in telling ways.

Money is a gift that passes through us. But the very first gift that passes through us—through each one of you and through me—is life itself. Our very existence is a gift, of which we are temporary keepers. As much as possible, let us be joyful receivers and grateful givers of our gifts, and of ourselves. ■



The Stretcher and the Swan

I drove by an accident the other day. Emergency services people were putting a woman on a stretcher. They were tender, attentive, capable. She was being taken care of. Traffic was directed competently around the wreck. It would be cleaned up, hauled away. Taken care of. A fire truck was parked beside the ambulance, its chunky lights flashing. Standing by, just in case a fire happened. So they could take care of it. That was one well-taken-care-of situation.

I wanted to be on that stretcher. I wanted calm and capable people to take care of everything. It looked restful.

I was tired. I was the kind of tired you get at the end of a month-long project. I had pushed through to the finish and I'd made seven mistakes along the way but the thing was done. I was the kind of tired you get when you have ten different people feeling in their heart that you should have done it differently. Their way. I was the kind of tired you get when your house is messy, your grass is too long, your car is cluttered and your gas tank is empty, along with your bank account. A tiny piece of me thought it would be restful to lie down on clean sheets, be fussed over in a clean hospital room, have people bring Jell-o and chicken broth and straws that bend.

Usually I think it's a good day when I don't have to take a ride in an ambulance, and I got back to that state of mind pretty fast. Anyway, I talked to a friend of mine who used to work in an emergency room and she said that what happens when you come in is that fast-moving people with big scissors cut off all your clothes. That didn't sound restful at all. She suggested I pay for a day at a spa where helpful, calm people

would fuss over me all day long. I'd rest, but no one would cut off my clothes with scissors. It would be cheaper than a hospital stay, and I could drive home afterward.

I know now that when I have a “stretcher day,” when being helpless looks good to me, I just need to rest. How did I get to be a grown-up and not know that I need to rest sometimes? Resting used to sound weak to me. I used to work sick. Well, I still do that.

I used to have two speeds, a hundred miles an hour and full stop. Crash. I thought I was supposed to go and go at full speed until I couldn't go any longer, then I slept. Then I'd wake up and start again.

As I get older I'm adding more gears. I have “slow” now. Some days.

One of my holy books, the *I Ching*, talks about the wisdom of not doing. I get tired when I forget and act like I'm the source of my energy, my love, my creativity. I'm the one who sustains my friends, who gets things done, who works things out.

The poet Rilke wrote about a swan and how awkwardly he moves on the ground. His bearing changes once he lowers himself into the water, which “flows joyfully” beneath him, while the swan, unmoving and marvelously calm, is pleased to be carried, each moment more fully grown, more like a king, further and further on.

I'm experimenting with letting go, allowing wave after wave to hold me up, move me along.

May I be granted the wisdom to know when to paddle my feet.

by **Meg Barnhouse**, minister, First Unitarian Universalist Church of Austin, Texas, from *Did I Say That Out-loud?: Musings of a Questioning Soul*. Published by Skinner House in 2006, available from the UUA bookstore at www.uua.org/bookstore or 800-215-9076, or from the CLF library at www.clfuu.org/library. ■



Summer

Where I live, summer's keynote is abundance. The forests fill with undergrowth, the trees with fruit, the meadows with wild flowers and grasses, the fields with wheat and corn, the gardens with zucchini, and the yards with weeds. In contrast

to the sensationalism of spring, summer is a steady state of plenty, a green and amber muchness that feeds us on more levels than we know.

Nature does not always produce abundance, of course. There are summers when flood or drought destroy the crops and

threaten the lives and livelihood of those who work the fields. But nature normally takes us through a reliable cycle of scarcity and abundance in which times of deprivation foreshadow an eventual return to the bountiful fields....

Here is a summertime truth: abundance is a communal act, the joint creation of an incredibly complex ecology in which each part functions on behalf of the whole and, in return, is sustained by the whole. Community doesn't just create abundance—community is abundance. If we could learn that equation from the world of nature, the human world might be transformed. ■

by **Parker J. Palmer**, from an essay called "Summer" in *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, published by Jossey-Bass in 2000.

Dog Days

Everyone needs a spiritual guide: a minister, rabbi, priest, therapist, or wise friend. My wise friend is my dog. He has deep insights to impart. He makes friends easily and doesn't hold a grudge. He enjoys simple pleasures and takes each day as it comes. Like a true Zen master, he eats when he's hungry and sleeps when he's tired. He's not hung up about sex. Best of all, he befriends me with an unconditional love that humans would do well to imitate.

Of course my dog does have his failings. He's afraid of firecrackers and hides in the closet whenever we run the vacuum cleaner. But unlike me, he's not afraid of what other people think of him or anxious about his public image. He barks at the mail carrier and the newsboy, but, in contrast to some people, I know he never growls at the children or barks at his spouse.



So my dog is a sort of guru. When I become too serious and preoccupied, he reminds me to frolic and play.

When I get too wrapped up in abstractions and ideas, he reminds me to exercise and care for my body. On his own canine level, he shows me that it might be possible to live without inner conflicts or neuroses: uncomplicated, genuine, and glad to be alive.

Mark Twain remarked long ago that human beings have a lot to learn from the Higher Animals. Just because they haven't invented static cling, ICBMs or television evangelists doesn't mean they aren't spiritually evolved. Let other people have their mentors, masters, and enlightened teachers.

I have a doggone mutt. ■

by **Gary A. Kowalski**, interim minister of the UU Congregation of Santa Fe, New Mexico. Kowalski is the author of *The Souls of Animals and Goodbye Friend: Healing Wisdom for Anyone Who Has Ever Lost a Pet*, both from New World Library.



The wellspring of decency

is loving this life in which people die, people suffer, there are limits, and we make mistakes. The wellspring of moral action is not utopia, not a counterfactual vision, not a declaration that the world could and should be otherwise.



Rather, it is a deep affirmation of the joy, richness, and blessing that the world is.

The ground of challenging exploitation, injustice, and oppression is not a vision of how the world could be or will be in the future, in the reign of God, or after the revolution. The ground of challenging injustice is gratitude, the heartfelt desire to honor the wonder of that which is; to cherish, to celebrate, to delight in the many gifts and joys of life.

by **Sharon Welch**, provost and professor of religion and society, Meadville/Lombard Theological School.

Special Collections for Prison Ministry

We are grateful for every contribution you make to the CLF, helping to spread Unitarian Universalism's saving message of love. This church without walls couldn't exist without your generosity, and we recognize and appreciate your gifts as a deliberate endorsement of the work of this liberal religious church.

UU congregations have also begun acknowledging the CLF's impact on social justice by directing special collections to the CLF—especially to benefit the CLF's Prison Ministry program. We are pleased the Prison Ministry resonates with so many.

We appreciate the generosity of the First Universalist Church in Minneapolis; the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis; the UU Church of Reading, Massachusetts, the UU Fellowship of Central Oregon and others for making the CLF Prison Ministry a special priority in their own work in the world.

We could use your help! In addition to making your own gifts to the CLF, you can help by letting us know if you belong to a church that might consider extending its social justice work by supporting the CLF—through a second collection or perhaps a special church fund or grants program. Helping support the CLF strengthens our UU values. Many thanks to you and to all who support us! ■

Gratitude

Often I have felt that I must praise my world

For what my eyes have seen these many years,

And what my heart has loved.

And often I have tried to start my lines:

“Dear Earth,” I say,

And then I pause

To look once more.

Soon I am bemused

And far away in wonder.

So I never get beyond “Dear Earth.” ■

by *Max A. Kapp*, (1904-1979),
Universalist minister

Abundant Life

BY **KENDYL GIBBONS**, SENIOR MINISTER,
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MINNESOTA

San Ysidro creek starts somewhere high in the Inez mountains above Santa Barbara, California, and it falls through a boulder-strewn stream bed down to the bay and the Pacific Ocean. It is a dream of a creek, bubbling, dancing, pouring; sun-dappled and butterfly-haunted, laced with blossoms and grasses for which I have no name. In February, which is when I know it, it is in spate, swift with the melted mountain snows. The first time I saw this creek, my immediate thought was, “They must turn this off at night, when no one is looking at it.” Realizing how silly that was, I still had to wrestle a bit to wrap my mind around the idea that this pouring forth was continuous; that the stream flows all the time, splashing over the rocks and into the tiny pools constantly, whether I was watching it or not. And it struck me that the creek, in its careless fullness, in its unceasing abundance, is a kind of model for the ceaseless creative energy of the universe, which is also pouring out and over us all the time, whether we see it or not. So I go back to the creek every

year to remember; to remind myself that we stand always in the flow, that the waters of life are washing over us in a springtime torrent every day we live.

Which is not to say that scarcity is not a reality as well. It can be easy to lose track of the simple abundances of life if we are hungry, or unsheltered, or in want of something as simple as mittens in the raw Minnesota winter. Abundance has this dimension—that it is responsive to need. There is a Sufi teaching story that explores the nature of abundance. It tells of a seeker who was meditating in the forest and observed a bear with a mangled foreleg. Unable to run or to hunt, the bear seemed destined to die of starvation, yet as the seeker watched, a fox came with its prey of that day, and after eating its fill, it left the remainder of the meal for the bear. Several days the seeker observed this same pattern, saying to himself, “Behold, how good and generous is God, who feeds the bear by means of the fox, how He provides for all His creatures! I, too, will put my trust in Him utterly.” And the seeker retired to a cave, to await the arrival of his provision, but days passed and nothing came. Finally, on the fifth day,

as he was fainting from hunger, a voice said to him, “O thou who art in the path of error, repent! Stop imitating the injured bear, and go out and follow the example of the fox!”

We can understand the abundance of the universe in two ways: as an invitation to complacency, or as an invitation to generosity. Much depends upon that choice. For if we respond with complacency—if we merely accept all the creative energy and all the love and sacrifice that have made our own lives possible, then the abundance of the universe comes to a stop in us. If we choose to receive what we have concluded is our due—and even, perhaps, to complain that it is not given exactly as we would have preferred it—then we make ourselves something outside the process, something other than the ever-flowing stream of life, something transitory and futile and ultimately trivial. It is when we respond to the abundance of life with gratitude and generosity that we become a part of that universal creativity. When we contribute our own energy to the flowing stream then it fills us and pours out of us to others, so that the stream is enhanced. ■



From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY
SENIOR MINISTER,
CHURCH OF THE LARGER
FELLOWSHIP

My daughter did a science report on potassium, and we were discussing what to put in the closing paragraph. I asked, "What do you think is the most interesting thing about potassium?" She thought for a moment and said, "Well, we're never going to run out of it!"

Having never researched potassium myself, I always thought of its existence as limited to places like bananas, or kiwifruit. Who knew? It's in every living cell on the planet! My daughter's confidence in this eternal abundance made me think about all the things that I fear we might, or will, run out of. Fossil fuels, rain forests, drinkable water... the list is pretty much endless, so I'll just zero in on one that is pretty strong for me. Time. I think of time as something that not only I personally will run out of, but that the entire planet is likely to use up soon.

Such thinking brings anxiety. So I wonder, what might it feel like to have confidence that time will never end, that its presence is held in every cell in the universe? Because of my own inability to imagine this I was intrigued to learn that a group of scientists is designing a clock to last 10,000 years, powered by seasonal temperature changes. When completed, it will tick once a year and bong once a century. A cuckoo will come out every millennium.

One of the creative minds behind this clock is Stewart Brand, former publisher of the *Whole Earth Review*. It was Brand who campaigned to have NASA release images of the Earth from space in 1966, after which he distributed buttons of this cosmic portrait for 25 cents. He thought the image of the planet might give us a sense of the earth as "an island, surrounded by a lot of inhospitable space...this little blue, white, green and brown jewel-like icon."

Now Brand has a website for "The Long Now Foundation" (<http://longnow.org>), on which he says that a 10,000 year clock could "do for thinking about time what photographs of Earth from space have done for thinking about the environment. Such icons reframe the way people think."

Maybe it's because the clock isn't built yet, but I can't even begin to imagine how that device could transform my thinking about time. Focus my attention on 89 years from now, when I might hear the clock chime? Not likely.

My sense of "a long time" right now is the two months my cell phone has to last before I can get a new one without paying a penalty, given that it's barely holding a charge and I am constantly tethered to sockets. Can I really last that long, I wonder, with a badly charged cell phone? I generally tend to measure time by similarly fleeting and superficial yardsticks.

The truth is, while I often deride corporations and politicians for thinking only about immediate results rather than the longer term effects of their decisions, I am also regularly guilty of shortsighted thinking. My imagination barely reaches out to the possibility of the grandchildren my daughter assures me I will never have. If I have to wait more than a few seconds for an internet connection or during a pause in conversation, my mind is likely to wander.

Contrast this shallow sense of time with what is known as "deep time," based on the scale of planetary geological history. In his book *Basin and Range*, John McPhee challenges us with this comparison: "Consider the Earth's history as the old measure of the English yard, the distance from the King's nose to the tip of his outstretched hand. One stroke of a nail file on his middle finger erases human history."

What if I could somehow rest in the reassurance that the earth's history resides in all the living cells that also contain potassium? What if I could imagine that once every 1,000 years curious visitors would go to the 10,000 year clock's location—Brand and his friends have bought land for this monument in Nevada—and cheer as the

cuckoo came out? Forget even visualizing 10,000 years of cuckooing birds; what if I believed that the cuckoo would get to sound even once, say at the turning of the year 3,000 CE?

Scrunching up my limited mind to imagine this does inspire me to think differently. Born in the second half of the 20th century, I was once hard put to truly believe that even the year 2,000 would occur. Now I can't remember what it felt like to write that old prime number, 19, to start a year on my checks. (Heck, with today's technology I can barely remember writing checks at all!) And yet, I'm suddenly wishing I'd heard a cuckoo bird at Y2K.

Perhaps thinking of a 10,000 year clock and immortal potassium won't solve the day-to-day time crunch of too many things to do in an hour. But somehow, pausing to remember that time is a resource not just abundant, but actually infinite, gives a new perspective to the crowded day. ■

Upcoming Online Class

Wounded Words: Building a Vocabulary of Faith

This course will explore what important religious words such as God, prayer, worship and religion might mean for us personally and as Unitarian Universalists. We will read sermons by the instructor and others on the topics and address reasons to use (or not use) religious language in our interactions with others and in our progressive congregations.

Taught by Rev. Dr. Barbara W. ten Hove, who serves with her husband Jaco as co-minister of Cedars UU Church on Bainbridge Island, WA. Together they wrote the popular adult RE curriculum, *Articulating Your UU Faith*.

This course begins August 1st and runs for four weeks. There is a \$40 registration fee. To find out more about CLF online classes or to sign up go to www.clfuu.org/learn. ■

REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

Abundance seemed like a totally logical theme for this July-August issue of Quest. After all, at least for those of us in the Northern Hemisphere it's a time when farmers' markets are full of fresh fruits and vegetables, a time of sunshine and swimming, a time for vacation and camping and the pleasure of being with family and friends. Hopefully, that's what you're in the midst of right now.

But the way our *Quest* schedule works means that I'm writing this in March, and what's most on my mind is the terrible tragedy in Japan caused by the giant earthquake and tsunami wave. It's hard to think about abundance when you know that thousands of people have died and hundreds of thousands of people have lost everything they own, and are trying to get by with not enough food, water or heat. In the meantime, people from New Zealand are trying to recover from their own earthquake and it looks like civil war in Libya. How do you celebrate abundance in the midst of so much suffering?

Of course, that's the way the world is. There are always people suffering terrible hardships. Natural disasters happen, but also people get sick and relationships fall apart and people get hurt in accidents and, well, there's pretty much no end to the list of things that can go terribly wrong.

But it's also true that the world is always full of absolutely amazing things as well. Flowers fill the air with their scent and sea otters play in kelp beds and people write songs and create families and bake pies. There's no end to the list of wonderful things that happen every day, too.

So what are we supposed to do with knowing about both all the horrible and all the fabulous things in the



world? How do we hold all those things together in our hearts and minds without somehow

exploding? The temptation is to try not to care too much, to just keep our distance from the joys and sorrows of the world so we don't get overwhelmed. And certainly, there can be a time for that approach. It's better than getting sucked down into a whirlpool of sorrow. But I think there's a better way.

When we start with an awareness of the abundance of the world and the abundance of our lives, we can more easily remember to be grateful for

When I have so much, why wouldn't I want to share?

all we have. At this very minute I can see jasmine starting to bloom in my back yard and birds flitting through the tree that is still bare of leaves (although it will be fully green by the time you read this). There is a cat purring on my lap, and there are good folks like you out there who share a commitment to our religion of open minds and open hearts. The abundance around me is obvious and inspiring.

When I have so much, why wouldn't I want to share? I can't make things all better for the people of Japan, or for the folks in New Zealand or Libya. I can't even fix things for my friend who recently lost her job. But there are things that I can do to help. When we are able to truly see both the suffering and the abundance, then creative solutions start to emerge.

A good friend of mine, who is originally from New Zealand, recently went back there both to see her family and to help with recovery efforts after their recent major earthquake. Before she left the U.S. she gave her friends here the opportunity to contribute to relief efforts that would

help the tens of thousands of New Zealanders left without water, power or other basic services. When she got there she discovered that one of the major problems was a lack of functional bathrooms (what they call "loos"), since sewer systems were destroyed and there were not nearly enough porta-potties to go around.

In an email to those of us back home my friend wrote:

My nephew got involved in a church group that took it upon themselves to design and create 7,000 loos out of five gallon paint buckets. There was a volunteer assembly line involving many steps and much people-power to create the final products, which were then distributed to incredibly appreciative recipients. The group members were wonderful people who simply had concern for the plight of others and realized that the New Zealand government couldn't come up with the goods for another two or three weeks, so they got to it with Kiwi ingenuity and came up with a solution.

It wasn't the way she expected to help, nor the way that her friends in the U.S. expected to contribute. But life is like that. You just never know. Sometimes abundance looks like having enough money to send some to help people in need. Sometimes abundance looks like having the creativity to think of using five gallon buckets in new ways. Sometimes abundance looks like a group of people who see a problem and care enough to try to find a solution. Sometimes abundance even looks like finally having a better way to attend to the basics of life.



There's no way to prevent terrible things from happening. But when we focus on living in the abundance of the world, then creativity and compassion can flow. However unsteady the ground may be under our feet, we can celebrate the joys and ease the hardships of our neighbors across the difficult, delightful planet we share. ■



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There is nothing I can give you which you have not.
But there is much, very much, that, while I cannot
give it, you can take. No heaven can come to us
unless our hearts find rest in it today. Take heaven!

No peace lies in the future which is not hidden in
this present little instant. Take peace!

The gloom of the world is but a shadow. Behind it,
yet within our reach, is joy. There is radiance and
glory in darkness, could we but see. And to see, we
have only to look. I beseech you to look!

Life is so generous a giver. But we, judging its gifts
by their covering, cast them away as ugly or heavy
or hard. Remove the covering, and you will find be-
neath it a living splendor, woven of love by wisdom,
with power.

by *Fra Giovanni*, written in 1513

