

Originally Blessed

*A Sermon by Rev. Molly Housh Gordon
Delivered at the UU Church of Columbia
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This is indeed a day, which God has made.
Let us rejoice in it and be glad,
And let us count our many blessings.
Let us be grateful for the capacity to see, hear, feel, and understand.
Let us be grateful for the incredible gift of life,
And let us be especially grateful for the ties of love, which bind us together,
Giving dignity, meaning, worth, and joy to all of our days.

In the church where I grew up, at All Souls Unitarian in Tulsa, Oklahoma, these words began our Sunday morning worship every week.

In fact, they began my family's Sunday morning worship even when we didn't make it to church.

You see, my family filled our summers with camping road trips, and often in June or July we would wake up on a Sunday morning in a big tent somewhere in South Dakota or Wyoming, or Maine.

When we did, without fail, one of us would remark: "Hey. it's Sunday." And another would begin "This is indeed a day." We'd say the whole thing together: "let us rejoice in it and be glad."

And we would count our many blessings, and we'd remember what a gift it was to be wherever we were, together, under the setting stars and the rising sun. And then we'd go about starting the fire for oatmeal-making. Those few words were enough. We'd been to church.

There's a reason that our worship at All Souls began with those same words every week, and a reason that those words were enough for us when we were away. They expressed a cornerstone of our Unitarian Universalist faith and a core of our theology.

That we are originally blessed, born not into sin but into many blessings;

the capacity to see, feel, hear, and understand.

the abundant spirit of love, powerful beyond our imagining.

and the mysterious and wondrous gift of life, which cannot be bought or sold, but is

worth all we have and all we are.

Whether in our churches or camped out somewhere in the Badlands, we carry with us that central faith...

That this....

Life, as complicated and messy and lovely and heartbreaking as it is...It's a gift.

All of it...

Not a right. Not a guarantee.

A precious gift.

At All Souls we would say: "This is indeed a day, which God has made" even amid our diverse belief systems, theist, atheist, agnostic . We said it as a way of acknowledging: Here we are on this day – and we did not make it, or earn it, or buy it. This day was given to us.

It is from this reality that a culture of abundance can spring forth. Because when we stand in awestruck wonder at the extravagance of these gifts – not just life, but love too – the rest is all gravy – gravy we can pour out upon the world liberally, without fear or greed.

Abundance is all around us, if we can train ourselves to see it. It is in fact a state of heart, one that can be held at any income level or socioeconomic station – a state of heart that people of every faith live even under the most stringent injustice. That state of wonder at the gifts of life and love, and the responsive desire to share them.

This is not the state of heart that rules our contemporary culture, where colliding forces of entitlement and impoverishment seem to rule the day. We are taught to believe that we deserve it all, and at the same time to fear that there won't be enough to go around.

This culture seems especially powerful during election season, when political ads drum up feelings of scarcity and fear in hopes that a given candidate can swoop in promising us the world and ride that tide of scarcity straight into office.

It is present in our consumer culture, built on the need for each of us to always want more. It is in our work culture that demands more and more of our time.

Author Craig Gay writes: "The single most subversive and ultimately redemptive idea that we can set loose within the capitalist world today is the simple recognition that life is a gift..." "This paradigm shift frees us from our ties to the powerful cultural narratives of discontent and scarcity and allows us to experience joyful gratitude with what we already have, what is right in front of us"

Unitarian Universalist luminary Forrest Church said it most simply as his theological mantra: "Want what you have; do what you can; be who you are."

When we recognize life as a gift unearned but given freely, its abundant blessing refocuses our perspective, away from what we can get to keep, toward what we have to give.

According to philanthropist and activist Nipun Mehta, moving from a culture of scarcity to a culture of abundance involves a change in attitude: "from consumption to contribution, transaction to trust, and from isolation to community."

In a world where consumption, transaction, and isolation tend to rule the day, I believe that enacting a cultural transformation toward abundance is central to the mission and ministry of our congregation. Our unique theological message of original blessing and calls us to contribution, trust, and community. And it could be a powerful force for transformation toward collective flourishing – if we will only embody it.

So how do we transform our culture toward abundance? It is as simple and as difficult as recognizing our blessings and sharing them.

There is a trend on Facebook this month to post every day, one thing you're grateful for. This is the first step of which I speak: recognizing our blessings. But what if we didn't stop there? What if we shared them? What if we translated that gratitude into giving?

Our feeling of abundance and our own generosity mutually reinforce one another. When we give, we experience feelings of connection, wholeness and contentment, which lead to gratitude for the original gift of life, which leads to the desire to give even more.

In his book *Simple Truths*, author Kent Nerburn states: "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. . . .

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."

Remember our reading from the Buddha: 'Consider the flame of a single lamp. Though a hundred thousand people come and light their own lamps from it so that they can cook their food and ward off darkness, the first lamp remains the same. Blessings are like this too.'

Abundance is like this – our light, when shared, is not diminished, but rather multiplied. I think of our chalice flame, from which we could light a thousand candles without diminishing its spark.

I think of the way the flame is passed in our traditional Christmas Eve service, each candle lighting the next until the dark room grows bright with flickering candles lighting up each face.

That is the culture of abundance: recognizing the steady strength of our own light, and sharing it with another, that the whole world might be lit up.

And when the world seems dark, and disconnected. When anxiety tamps down our collective fire, our calling should be ever more clear.

We are a people originally blessed, and we must pass along the flame of spirit that lights our lives and our church community, with complete faith that it will not be burned out, but will shine ever more brightly as it is given away.

During this Month of Abundance, I challenge each of us, in the words of our forebear Ralph Waldo Emerson: Give yourself.

Give yourself, in faith that you will not be depleted, but rather filled up, tenfold.

Through acts of giving, we will proclaim our good news of abundance, whether in the church or in the coffee shops, under the roofs that shelter us or under the setting stars and the rising sun that bless us with light.

We will count our many blessings for all to see and share: the incredible gift of life, and the ties of love, which bind us together, giving dignity, meaning, worth, and joy to all of our days.