

21st CENTURY ABUNDANCE: DOING WITH LESS

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Thomas Strauss

I'm reading an amazing novel "September in Shiraz" about an Iranian family that had excellent connections and lived well when the Sha was in power, but after the fundamentalist Islamic revolution when the mullahs rose to power and began persecuting the secular elite...they lost everything. The father of the family is arrested and thrown into a bare cell in Teheran, the son escapes to the United States where he lives in isolation and poverty in New York City, the young daughter, living in their once-beautiful home with her mother, reflects on how things and people keep disappearing from her life.

The writer, Dalia Sofer, fleshes out the undercurrent of feelings about the things -- both material and emotional -- that defined this family. The focus on the beauty of a small teapot, or a painting that has been in the family for generations, or the feel of a good fabric against the skin, these things slowly disappear and I am moved to consider the things that surround me in my home and office- the things that bring me pleasure and comfort-the things that define me and my family.

How abundant, how rich, would any of us feel if we lost everything? Is there a kind of abundance- a beauty, a satisfaction, a fullness - that is available to us all regardless of material wealth or employment status or education or family history?

Sadly, for millions of Americans this is not a rhetorical question. For some of us here this morning or for some of our family members, this is not a rhetorical question.

In the middle class suburb of Chicago where my brother and his family live in a small house, on his block, and all around his neighborhood, houses have been abandoned because job loss has made it impossible for homeowners to pay their mortgage...and there is no one who can afford to buy the houses.

Young adults graduating from college cannot find jobs, and those without college degrees have seen their employment options shrink. Today there will be a march and demonstration here in Washington in support of legislation to protect immigrant rights. How many of us are here today because our ancestors were also immigrants? And yet, in hard times, with so many unemployed, people and governments can become selfish and mean-spirited. They turn against the most recent immigrant group- those on the rung below. And yesterday an anti-war march in DC focused on the human costs of diverting federal dollars from social supports to military supplies.

Elderly people have seen their retirement resources shrink and they are anxious about their future. And today there will be a decision on Obama's health care bill. All things financial are connected!

Circumstances can force a climate of fear and a mindset of scarcity. Feelings of anger and helplessness can rise. And yet, today I want us to affirm abundance...and to understand abundance as a religious and spiritual category- abundance as a place to stand, and a spirit of abundance as a place to start.

The economic crisis, the employment crisis, has caused me to feel even more guilty than usual when I spend money. This winter, while shopping at the Giant, I noticed what people had in their shopping carts, and it seemed to me there were fewer treats, fewer luxuries, fewer organic choices, more hamburger and noodles and potatoes. I became more and more aware of my own material abundance, of my comfortable lifestyle. Of how often I shop at Whole Foods.

Oh, I do my share of giving money to good causes. I pledge generously to my church, I send money regularly to my unemployed niece, I help family members with plane tickets and small loans. I don't buy new stuff all the time or vacation lavishly. I drive a Honda Civic hybrid! I recycle, mostly.

Yet, this morning I had my favorite home-brewed coffee and a perfect banana.

I am living a lifestyle that is not in full harmony with my ultimate commitments. I am enjoying "the good life" while children around the globe starve and die and suffer from malnutrition and polluted water and lack of shelter.

Theologian Sallie McFague, author of *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy For a Planet in Peril*, urges us to redefine "the good life." She urges us to reflect on our consumer culture and how it oppresses poor people and damages our planet. She urges us to move from the neo-classical economics we inherited...an economics that begins with and emphasizes individual desires.

You can have whatever you want in America! All you have to do is work hard. We have all been seduced by consumer culture.

Have you noticed how the coming of spring seems to also stimulate your desires...and I'm not just talking about Cupid...aren't we conditioned to want something new for our spring wardrobe, or how about new patio furniture, or a new lawn mower, or just the right work-out equipment to lose that weight before beach time? Even we conservative spenders participate in the oppression that results from our consumer culture.

It's such a huge problem, a problem on an international scale, a problem on a planetary scale. Don't get me wrong, I am not preaching guilt, or even sacrifice...but maybe we can participate in an attitude shift...maybe we can change the definition of "the good life."

Because, as we well know, "the (old) good life" is not sustainable, not possible for everyone in the world. The "good life" of material abundance and financial security is only possible for some...not all. The "good life" of health and healthy diet and home and meaningful work is only possible for some...not all. Our "good life" rests on the suffering of others. We know this is true.

So Sallie McFague and other religious writers, including the Dalai Lama, encourage us to change...to be mindful, to change the way we live.

And to change the way we think about the earth. To change the way we think about wealth and abundance. To change the way we think about

our brothers and sisters around the country and around the world. And how we think about the next generation and the next and the next...

McFague makes a case for changing to a ecological economics that rests on simplicity and empathy.

Simplicity is not a new idea. But it is one we need to keep in the forefront of our consciousness. The most effective way to protect our planet is to live more simply. To consume less. To throw away less. To share more. Just yesterday a board member expressed a desire for simplicity groups at UUCR...to create small groups that support us in our efforts toward simplicity.

Empathy is born in us. You can see it in small children; empathy is human, natural. We want to be liberated from our role as middle-class oppressors of the poor. We didn't choose to oppress others. We don't intend that our lifestyle contribute to planetary destruction.

Harvard economist Malcolm Young claims that the problem is not that Americans do not love nature, but that we are enmeshed in a success (or at least successful 'til lately) story- the consumer one- our success is ruining our planet.

He writes, "the value of autonomy, broad access to industrial products, individualism, efficiency, consumer choice, affluence and privacy which we regard too highly has been etched into our landscape..." and into our expectations.

"We defile our environment," Young continues, "not through the failure of our dominant values, but through their success."

We the people of liberal religion have a different set of dominant values...we value generosity, growing and making things with our hands, sustainability- we value saving and fixing and passing on to the next generation...we value interdependence...and cycles and circles of return, we value equity and justice...and building a world where all people thrive.

What is abundance? How do you see the world?

I offer these are questions for meditation and reflection.

The Gaia movement, the ecology movement, the green movement invites us to see the world as our mother...as the body that sustains all life. McFague, a Christian, sees the world as God's body. How shall we treat the body of the divine?

There's this wonderful song by Peter Mayer, "Everything is Holy Now"...that's how I want to see the world.

If everything in my world is holy, it matters little what material things I possess...or what kind of work I am doing at any moment...or who I am with or where I might be...everything is holy, blessed, filled with light...abundant with meaning and love.

A true good life is possible only if it is given to all people...we cannot have a good life until all people have their fair share of food, water, shelter, health, and work and beauty.

We must each take only what we need, and no more...enough is enough- enough is a feast! We must learn to love our neighbor as ourselves and refuse to let anyone suffer because of our excess.

Theologian John Cobb calls us to become social revolutionaries...to liberate ourselves from our oppressing consumerism, to live in a new way, to see the world in a new way...to contribute to a new understanding of the "Good Life."

He offers words of hope: "Love of earth is not altogether dead within the human heart. There is still a willingness to live a frugal and disciplined life if that can be seen as truly meaningful in relation to the massiveness of the problem.

Capacity for sacrifice is not altogether gone. There is a religious depth in a myriad of people that can find expression in lives lived simply. That spiritual depth must be touched and tapped, and it must be directed by an honest and encompassing view of reality. If that is done, there is hope."

Many of you might have seen the story in the *Post* about the DC man who is giving away \$10 a day for a year. This 36-year-old, Reed Sandridge, decided to do this soon after he lost his job.

His mother, who was remembered most for her kindness, had told him, "when you're going through rough times, that's when you most need to give back." So he started a year of giving...and he is watching his bank account diminish...but he is gaining a wealth of blessings from those he meets and those he helps just a little...many of whom tell him they will also give the money away.

I encourage you to sit down with loved ones and friends and talk about the abundance of your lives and consider how you might redefine "the good life." Choose to buy less and give away more. Choose to emphasize simplicity and empathy.

Articulate your most closely-held values, and how you are living in harmony with them.

Think about who you are, and how you belong to the earth.

Consider what it is that defines you.

Find ways to stand in solidarity with the oppressed, with the earth and with your values.

This is our work for the 21st century. I believe that we can make a difference. There are good people the world over who share our concern and our values. A revolution begins in the hearts of the people...if we can change, the world can be changed. This I believe. We are blessed to share in this good work. Come to experience the truth that "enough is a feast." Let us begin.

Amen/Blessed Be