

## Abundance: What's It All About?

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### Gleanings from Contemporary Prose and Poetry

From Patrick T. O'Neill (slightly adapted)

Nothing I had ever read or studied prepared me for the sheer beauty of Chartres Cathedral. It sits in the midst of an agrarian countryside, fifty miles from Paris, with no city high-rise buildings around or anywhere near it. As my wife and I approached it one spring day, driving from the south, it rose up ten miles away. We saw it as we imagine pilgrims in the 12th century saw it as they walked from all over Europe to visit Chartres.

It was an aesthetic experience in every way just to be inside that building. But above all it was the light, the softness and texture of the light, as it filtered through gorgeous glass windows, stained red and blue and green and gold more than eight hundred years ago, still vibrant with color. It was the light, above all, that I remember about Chartres, the light of 167 windows in that cathedral . . . each one of them a masterpiece of beauty and workmanship, transcending time, transcending space. . . .

Not far inside the cathedral I found myself standing at the foot of one soaring, magnificent window with hundreds of pieces of mosaic glass of all colors. It seemed to recount the entire Old Testament, it was so elaborate and exquisite. At the very bottom of the window there was a small frame that showed a cobbler, a shoemaker huddled over his worktable.

"This is the shoemaker's window," our guide explained. "It was installed in 1201 and is considered one of the most beautiful of all. It was a gift from the shoemakers of every village in France, who each contributed whatever they could, even the smallest coins, to commission this work of art for God's house."

The royalty and the wealthiest nobles of France, he continued, gave some of these windows, but this window was the gift of the shoemakers. Another window was given by village water-carriers from all over France. Butchers gave another. Fishmongers yet another. Vinegrowers and tanners, masons and furriers, weavers, coopers, carpenters, cartwrights, blacksmiths, milliners gave others. "These windows, many of them," said my guide, "were given one mosaic at a time, piece by piece, coin by coin, by people who wanted to contribute something beautiful to last the ages."

The irony, as my guide told me, is that these majestic windows, which are the very symbol of medieval greatness in art and architecture and which are beyond value today, were mostly the gifts of common people—people who had little to begin with, but still felt proud to be able to give.

From Tom Hennen

Today there is the kind of sunshine old men love,  
The kind of day when my grandfather  
Would sit on the south side of the wooden corn-  
crib

Where the sunlight warmed slowly all through  
the day

Like a wood stove.

One after another dry leaves fell.

No painful memories came.

Everything was lit by a halo of light.

The cornstalks glinted bright as pieces of glass.

From the fields and cottonwood grove

Came the damp smell of mushrooms,

Of things going back to earth.

I sat with my grandfather then.

Sheep came up to see us as we sat there,

Their oily wool so warm to my fingers,

Like a strange and magic snow.

My grandfather whittled sweet smelling apple  
sticks

Just to get their scent.

His thumb had a permanent groove in it

Where the back of the knife blade rested.

He let me listen to the wind, the wild geese,

The soft dialect of the sheep,

While his own silence taught me every secret  
thing he knew.

### Reflections

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Following a festivity-filled weekend on which we dedicated this marvelous new space, we return to business as usual. Nevertheless, I for one retain some of the warm feelings that were stirred by Robert Fulghum's wise and witty words and Steven Paulus's magnificent music. Our choirs and musicians were outstanding, our guest speakers articulate, the food delectable, and the mood electric. Despite a small glitch or two, it was truly a remarkable celebration.

The sentiment that has stood out most strongly for me this past week has been gratitude. When I consider the graceful beauty and utility of this space and think about the hundreds of individuals who gladly contributed time, treasure, and talent to its creation I still am left in awe. So many people gave so much, and why? Because they, too, felt grateful for their lives and their faith community and felt moved to make some meaningful and generous gesture. I suspect it was not out of duty or obligation or guilt that people contributed, but because having *been* blessed, they in turn wished to bless the world.

I would wager that for those who did participate the giving felt good—not onerous or painful but satisfying and, paradoxically, enriching. Why? Because, Robert Thurman writes,

The feeling of wealth is enhanced when you give, since subliminally giving means you have enough to share, while taking means you may not be getting enough. Giving is a relief. Taking is a burden.

Regardless of how many tangible assets we have or how secure our financial situation, this is what it means to possess a sense of abundance. We may not have everything—may not have as much as some others—but we know that what we *do* have is more than sufficient, and therefore we can afford to give something away.

The flip side, of course, is this. Since last weekend's celebration the stock market has slid to a five year low, more layoffs were announced, the retail industry is bracing for a bleak holiday season and millions of Americans have suffered a reduction in either their retirement savings or income. No one is really able to predict when the economy might begin to recover. In many parts of the country, the perception is one not of abundance, but of increasing scarcity.

In light of this development, it might be fruitful to probe more deeply into this notion to see whether it remains relevant. Putting aside its material and economic connotations let's examine other possible ways in which "abundance" can be seen and experienced. To start that process, I'd like to consider another Unitarian culture whose sensibilities and way of life differs markedly from our own.

There have been Unitarians in Transylvania for four and a half centuries. During most of that time they have been barely tolerated by the surrounding population and at intervals been actively harassed and persecuted.

Originally a province of Hungary, Transylvania was annexed by Romania after World War I and almost immediately the Hungarian-speaking Unitarians became second class citizens. A great deal of Unitarian property was confiscated, and many churches faced financial crisis. Fortunately, the American and British Unitarian movements stepped in. They launched a "sister church" program that lent moral and financial support to these beleaguered congregations.

That program terminated with World War II and the Nazi occupation of Romania. Because of their relationship with the Americans and British, the Unitarians were again targeted for persecution. Ministers were imprisoned and some churches closed or even destroyed.

The post-war situation was no better. Under the repressive communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu Unitarian clergy were continuously harassed and church property sometimes taken over by the state. Thousands of Romanians were relocated to ethnic Hungarian villages, farmland collectivized, and the teaching of the Hungarian prohibited. Once again, those of Hungarian descent were singled out as unwelcome "aliens" in their own country.

With the overthrow of Ceausescu, conditions in Transylvania have improved but economic development has been slow, and discrimination remains a fact of life. Moreover, after the meltdown of the nuclear reactor at Chernobyl, a cloud of radiation drifted over Romania, contaminating crops and soil and creating widespread health problems among the population.

But despite centuries of hardship and social disadvantage, 130 Unitarian churches serving over 80,000 men, women, and children have survived in Transylvania. Many are located in small villages like Naj Aita, with whom our own congregation has enjoyed a warm relationship for the last 15 years.

A number of our congregants have visited our partner church. Twice in the past members of the Society Choir and Meeting House Chorus have traveled to Transylvania and experienced first-hand life in a part of Europe that has changed little over the past four centuries. Pete Marion describes Naj Aita as "The 19th century with cell phones."

Worship in a village Unitarian Church maintains many of the forms and usages of the past. Women and men sit in separate sections of the sanctuary; the Lord's Supper is celebrated quarterly; sermons are always based on biblical text; hymns tend to be somber, reflecting long years of patient suffering.

Nevertheless, Transylvanian Unitarians don't typically complain about their situation and tend to rejoice in what little they do have. Imre Gellerd, a prominent member of the movement once said that "It must be considered positive that our preachers have escaped from the spirit of resignation, desperation, losing heart." Suffering, she continues, has given rise to special powers and qualities among us: unity, solidarity, strong faith, self-knowledge, and a sense of historical orientation.

I spoke the other day with Scott Prinster, our former associate minister and a man who has spent considerable time in Transylvania. Scott is now studying for his Ph.D. in the history of science at UW-Madison, but he continues to find his Transylvanian connections profoundly nourishing. They allow him to gain perspective because "abundance" doesn't mean the same thing there that it does here.

Scott told me a moving story of his first visit to Transylvania in 1996. The country was still in transition after the fall of communism, and much of the population was living in or close to poverty. The new government was notoriously corrupt and provided very little assistance to ordinary citizens. Inflation was running at around 300% a year. Public transportation was so bad that Scott recalls being infested with lice and fleas from riding on the train. Roads, railways, hospitals, schools—the entire infrastructure was in serious disrepair.

Nevertheless, this is where Scott enjoyed his most powerful experience of gratitude. Transylvanians who hadn't been well off to begin with were suffering increased deprivation. And yet, every meal at which he was a guest began with grace—a heartfelt prayer of thanksgiving. Moreover, the Unitarians he met were unfailingly generous with the little they had. I know others from our congregation who have visited Naj Aita have had a similar experience.

For many middle-aged and older Transylvanians, the Church remains the center of their lives because it has always been the one institution where support, solace, and a stable sense of personal identity could be found. For years, it was the only place where a Transylvanian could speak Hungarian safely; the only place where children could be made aware of their own heritage; where true celebration was permitted. In the midst of poverty and repression people found their security and acquired a sense of abundance from the church.

I am pleased to report that our own congregation, led by our Partner Church Committee, has done its part to improve the fortunes and lift the

spirits of the Unitarians in Naj Aita. Over the years we've raised money to help with restoration of their 1,000 year old sanctuary, to supplement the salary of on minister, to pay for another's emergency bypass surgery. We've also provided funds for computers and scholarships. Fortunately, a little American money still goes a long way in Eastern Europe.

What can our Transylvanian brothers and sisters do for us? The most important thing, perhaps, is to help us reframe our own experience. What does it mean to live a "good life?" How must our attitude and expectations shift in order to cope emotionally and spiritually with an economic downturn or some other social misfortune? Under less than ideal circumstances, how does one retain a sense of abundance?

To begin with, we need to alter the happiness equation. In the end, it's not really about how much we have. Once the average person has achieved a certain modest level of financial and material well-being, further gains don't make them more appreciative or internally satisfied. Surveys of Americans showed that, after World War II, we were the happiest people in the world. Fifty years later and with a lot more "stuff" in their houses, Americans were less happy than the citizens of 15 other countries.

From a cross-cultural standpoint, our contemporary, consumer-oriented conception of the good life is probably the exception rather than the rule. As cultural geographer Yi Fu Tuan's studies indicate, physical comfort "is without doubt a component of the good life," but by itself is hardly sufficient.

Truth be told, only a modicum of comfort is required for human beings to experience a sense of physical well-being. Yi Fu Tuan cites the example of a traditional Mongolian family, the day's chores accomplished, enjoying the evening meal together in the snug confines of their yurt. They play music, sing, tell stories, and are grateful for protection from the outside elements. By contrast, many of the royal and very rich have learned to their dismay that "comfort and splendor are incompatible,"

Cultural conceptions of the good life do vary, but certain features remain fairly consistent. Health and vitality is an unalloyed blessing. Intimacy—physical, emotional, or intellectual—makes a huge difference. Remember the last time you had a deep and meaningful conversation with someone and how satisfying that felt? "A meeting of minds can be as ... intoxicating as a meeting of bodies," Yi Fu Tuan writes.

Rendering service, enhancing the well-being of

others, also contributes to our sense of life's goodness. In this respect, self-aggrandizing behavior may actually prove counter-productive, compromising rather than complementing our happiness. Yi Fu Tuan quotes a repairman who contrasts the experience of fixing a television for a house full of appreciative children with other jobs where fee-for-service is his only reward. "Knowing that I made a family happy" magnified the repairman's sense of accomplishment.

Yi Fu Tuan also mentions "having a home base"—an attachment not just to people but to place—as something most humans associate with the good life. Engaging in productive labor that serves a valid purpose can be deeply satisfying—particularly when performed in the company of others who are also invested in the enterprise.

To these elements of the "good life" I would add a sense of personal integrity and the ability to savor the moment without regret or anxiety.

The good life is available to us right now, with little or nothing added. It deals with the everyday and the unexceptional, attended to and raised to a new level of appreciation. "To live lightly on the earth with simple, joyful elegance," is how one writer described his own approach to existence.

Buddhist teachings describe perpetually dissatisfied, grasping, over-anxious people as "hungry ghosts." As much as they long for happiness and the experience of true contentment, these sad individuals are unenlightened about how an abiding sense of well-being might be secured. The "hungry ghost" subsists on the deceptively thin fare its culture provides—easily appropriated pleasures and products that dull the cravings but do not satisfy them. An appreciation for beauty that is more than skin-deep, trustworthy relationships—such reliable sources of happiness lie beyond the ghost's reach and are usually beyond its ken.

The Chinese language has two words *pin* and *tan* that on the printed page look very similar. The first means "greed" and the other stands for "poverty." This, in a nutshell, is the dilemma of the hungry ghost: greedy for experiences and possessions to fill its emptiness, yet for all the effort the ghost expends, it still feels impoverished. It hasn't acquired the insight, the tools or the self-discipline to tap into the true wellsprings of human nourishment.

Our religious cousins in Romania remind us that abundance is as much a state of mind as a priv-

ileged economic condition. But we don't live in Transylvania, so how might we develop that sensibility, here in our own less traditional and more prosperous society? Robert Emmons has a simple suggestion: begin keeping a "gratitude journal."

Emmons, a research psychologist at the University of California, instructed the subjects of his study to pause once a day to list the things they were really grateful for. The results were startling: participants exhibited as much as a 20 percent increase in positive mood. Even people with muscular dystrophy or post-polio syndrome improved their outlook. Moreover, seeing the benefit of the practice, over half of the subjects continued to journal after the trial had officially ended. "I suspect they will experience a permanent shift toward greater happiness," Emmons says.

Gratitude, happiness and a sense of abundance—these are psychological elements without which the "good life" is simply inconceivable, no matter how materially blessed we might be.

I'd like to end with a testimonial from Sam Keen, a philosopher who, as a younger, more ambitious man, serendipitously discovered what abundance is all about.

"Yesterday morning I awoke and started to get out of bed but, remembering that it was Sunday, decided to settle back and simmer for awhile. For some time I listened to the ocean waves . . . and gradually I became aware of the sea-breeze flowing over my body. Unhurriedly, I savored the dapple-gray sky, sheets on my skin, my wife humming, and the smell of cooking bacon. Musingly my mind began to play with the possibilities of the day. I called the alternatives before me and sampled each with satisfaction. Having settled into a tentative plan, I allowed the moving air to caress me once more, dressed, and followed the smell of cooking bacon to its source.

"Afterward, in remembering my manner of awakening, I was struck with a sense of thanksgiving so strong that I felt like singing a hymn. My joy was created not only by this moment, but by the realization that . . . I was awakening with awareness and anticipation rather than anxiety. For most of my life it had been the custom to begin the day by re-assuming the burden of my ancient fears and inadequacies and by planning tasks which *must* be performed. Until recently, I have been unable to drop this dreadful burden. Freedom was too threatening . . . and now it is happening. I am *allowing* myself to be happy."