

5th May 2024: PLYMOUTH UNITARIANS

Rev Kate Whyman – Abundance

1. **PRELUDE** – ‘Right here’, Sam Turton. ‘2’50”

<https://youtu.be/j5kHXlisF5w?si=PcD1-1fk1GqCUNk1>

2. **OPENING WORDS**

Welcome to you all, here in the church as well as online. And a special welcome to anyone here for the first time.

Blessing, by Rev. Laura Dobson

May we be blessed by the fertile Earth,
our foundation and bedrock,
with gratitude.

May we be blessed by the spring rains
and the glistening dew,
quenching our thirst for freedom and beauty.

May we be blessed by the shining Sun
and the growing light, renewing and revealing all as it truly is.

May we be blessed by the sweetly scented spring breeze,
sweeping away the cobwebs of winter,
and bringing us inspiration and hope.

It is May, season of blossoming, and our theme is ‘Abundance’

Let’s light our chalice, as a symbol of our free religious faith, and as a symbol of the light that is always within us and around us.

3. **1st Hymn 176 (G) O come together in love**

O come together in truth:

O come together in peace;
O come together in joy and sharing,
come together in knowing and caring;
come together,
O come together,
O come together in love.

We come together in search
of new beginnings for all,
where understanding and trust surround us –
gone the hate and fear that bound us;
come together,
O come together,
O come together in love.

Words and music by Dorothy Grover

4 PRAYER

Sabbath Song, Carla Grosch-Miller

Welcome this day,
this gift,
this jewel
that crowns all days.

I turn uplifted face and hands
towards the sun
of Your countenance.

I woo You,
that Your languorous ways
might infect and inhabit me,
body and soul.

You are siren song
summoning me not to crash
upon indifferent rocks,
but to float,
buoyant,
held up by the ocean
which is the Whole.

My hands stilled,
my mind quietens,
I shed the anxiety that rules the other days
like a snakeskin grown brittle.

The fresh breeze a caress,
the scent of hyacinth a seduction,
the blue sky never bluer,
even blades of grass startle.

Time suspends.
Now is enough.
Today is forever.

Divine Spirit, thank you for the gifts of life and love.

Help us to embrace fully the sweet and the bitter moments of our days.
Help us to treasure the times of abundance and to find meaning in the times of
emptiness.

In our times of abundance may we reach out to those who hunger —
and in days of hunger may we admit our needs and accept the caring hand of our
neighbour.
May it be so.
Amen.

Let us pause for a few moments to bring into our hearts and minds the suffering of the world. Those human, animal and environmental stories that touch our hearts.

PAUSE

We ask that all the pain of the world be held in the light of healing love. Amen.

5 STORY Stone soup – Christian (from Concentration & Compassion, Bill Darlison).

Once upon a time, the people of a little village somewhere in Eastern Europe were going through hard times. A recent war and two bad harvests had left them desperately short of food, and what little they had they kept for themselves, jealously guarding their small supply even from their closest neighbours.

One day a young man came to the village. The people eyed him with suspicion. 'What do you want?' they asked him. 'You won't find any food here. It might be better if you moved on.'

'Oh, I've not come to take *your* food,' the traveller replied. 'In fact, I'm going to share *my* food with you. I'm going to make some stone soup.'

The people were intrigued, and they gathered around the young man with great interest and anticipation. He took a big cauldron from his cart, filled it with water from the well, and set it to boil over a fire. Then, with great ceremony, he pulled out a little velvet bag from his pocket. Inside was a smooth stone, which he held up for all to see. 'This magic stone will provide us with the most delicious soup!' he said, as he popped the stone into the water.

After a few minutes, he dipped a spoon into the cauldron and tasted the hot liquid. 'Hmmm,' he said, 'It's lovely. So full of flavour and so wholesome! However, I think a little cabbage would improve it. Does anyone have any cabbage?'

One of the bystanders went into his house and brought out a cabbage. 'Here, take this,' he said.

The traveller cut up the cabbage and put it into the pot. 'Splendid,' he said. 'Stone soup with cabbage and a few carrots is even better. Does anyone have any carrots?'

'I've got some,' said a woman, and within minutes the carrots were in the pot along with the cabbage and the stone.

'This soup is truly amazing,' he said, tasting it again. 'But some potatoes would give it a bit more body...and some peas would add colour...and some parsnips would deepen the flavour...and a turnip would thicken it up...and some onions would add zest...and a little salt and pepper would season it.

Whenever he suggested an extra ingredient, someone would bring it from his secret store and throw it in the pot, and before too long there was indeed a tasty and nourishing soup for all the villagers to share.

When they had all eaten their fill, the traveller packed away his cauldron, and carefully put the stone back in its bag. The villagers begged him to stay, and some even offered him money for his 'magic' stone, but he refused their offers. He bid them all goodbye, and set off to the next village.

6 2nd HYMN 245 (G) All these things belong to me

The sun that shines across the sea,
the wind that whispers in the tree,
the lark that carols in the sky,
the fleecy clouds a-sailing by –
O, I'm as rich as rich can be,
for all these things belong to me!

The raindrops which refresh the earth,
the springtime mantle of rebirth,

the summer days when all things grow,
the autumn mist and winter snow –
O, I'm as rich as rich can be,
for all these things belong to me.

The task well done, the fun of play,
the wise who guide me on my way,
the balm of sleep when each day ends,
the joy of family and friends –
O, I'm as rich as rich can be
for all these things belong to me.

Music David Dawson, words Dimitri S Bortnianski (V.1) and John A Storey (V. 2 &3)

7 READING 'The Fountain by Denise Levertov

Don't say, don't say there is no water
to solace the dryness at our hearts.
I have seen
the fountain springing out of the rock wall
and you drinking there. And I too
before your eyes
found footholds and climbed
to drink the cool water.
The woman of that place, shading her eyes,
frowned as she watched — but not because
she grudged the water,
only because she was waiting
to see we drank our fill and were
refreshed.
Don't say, don't say there is no water.
That fountain is there among its scalloped
green and grey stones,

it is still there and always there
with its quiet song and strange power
to spring in us,
up and out through the rock.

8 REFLECTION: Let us come to a quiet time of reflection and contemplation.

Candles – what are you grateful for at this time

9 INTERLUDE: ‘What a wonderful world’, John Batiste
https://youtu.be/9542BuRJq6k?si=bRaWlyZ_CiITNY4r

10 ADDRESS

On Friday I went for one of my favourite walks from Noss Mayo, up along the coastal path, and back along the Yealm valley. The sky was so blue, the sun was so warm, and the fields and woodlands so very lusciously green. There were the bluest bluebells, I picked some wild garlic for dinner, and life felt richly abundant.

I know that recently the only thing I’ve really felt was abundant has been the rain, and I’ve struggled to appreciate it – though the greenery gave me reason to think more kindly. But I have generally been more aware of scarcity than abundance. The prevailing feeling that there isn’t enough of anything – not enough money, not enough resources, not enough energy, not enough care, not enough trains running, not enough staff in our hospitals, not enough volunteers in our congregations...and on and on it goes. The feeling that life is a struggle. And I’m not here to deny the very real problems that we experience in our lives, nor the even more unfathomable pain and hardship that many are suffering in other parts of the world. But perhaps today, on this first Sunday in May, I wanted to remind myself – and all of us – that shortages and scarcity aren’t the *whole* story. There is another way of looking at things too, which I know it’s helpful for me at least to remember.

So here is an opportunity to be thankful for all the gifts that arrive in our lives, which are unbidden and freely given; and a chance to nurture our capacity to see the abundance all around us, and to see it even in times of hardship – because actually that’s when we need it most.

So let’s begin by taking a look at what’s given to all of us, always.

There’s a song by Sam Cooke called: ‘The best things in life are free’. It starts:

Ah the moon belongs to everyone

The best things in life they're free

And comedian Steven Wright once joked: ‘I have the world’s largest collection of sea shells. I keep it scattered on the beaches of the world. Have you seen it?’

I really like that. It’s an abundant way of looking at life, and expansive and generous approach to ‘ownership’ and the things that are given to us. I think it’s true that the best things in life *are* free. What’s more they are available to us all. Our task is to notice them, or seek them out, and be grateful whenever they grace our lives.

Because when we stop to think about it (which I realise I don’t often enough) isn’t each and every moment just given to us? Each one arises, one after the other, after the other. I certainly don’t do anything to make them happen. Do you? It’s incredible.

And all of this – this whole world full of creation and wonder. Did you make it? Did you order it? I know I didn’t. It’s just – miraculously – here. All freely given.

Of course, it’s true that we have each contributed to the world and to this very moment, as so many others have before us, and will continue to do in the future. We play our part. Today we have shown up here, for example. We have come, I like to think, with warm hearts, and open minds, and a willingness to take part. But can we say we made all this ourselves? No. Yet here it is. How extraordinary it is, that I’m here, that you’re here, that each of us exists and moves about and has ideas and forms relationships, and makes beautiful things and that between us we have no end

of talents. It's amazing. When you stop to think about it. And it's important to stop and think about it.

What about the less welcome aspects of life, many of which are also freely given? There's no shortage of them either. Did we invite them? Did we cause them? Nope. Yet here they are too, showing up for us as anxiety or grief, pain or sickness, anger or fear, sadness or loneliness. Can we still say 'Thank you very much'?...hmmm, trickier.

The Unitarian Universalist minister Forrest Church – yes that was his name – had a mantra. He used to say “Do what you can, want what you have, and be who you are.”

It was part of his spiritual practice to choose to want and to welcome whatever showed up in his life. Which was fine when things were going relatively well, but when he got cancer he found that people started to question him – ‘So Forrest,’ they would ask. ‘Do you really want cancer?’ And he answered this question in a sermon. He said:

“We cannot selectively wish away all that is wrong with us without including all that is right. Each day that I am sick, I pray for the sun to come up, for people to love me, for manageable tasks that I can still accomplish, for a little extra courage, for reality to blow all the detritus off my plate. In short, I back away from the bedarkened pane of my health to gain a prospect of the whole window I am blessed to look through. The light then dances again in my daughter, Nina's, eyes. I laugh once more at my little foibles. I call dear friends on the phone and talk for an hour about everything under the sun. Yes, I kvetch at unseemly waits at the chemo center (until I realize how many other folks are waiting in line for their treatments also). I fall into a sour humour when my body wears down and cannot do what I want it to (until I shift gears and tackle something that lies within my powers). I even snap at my wife, Carolyn, when she tries too hard to fatten me up for the kill. But that, too, eventually is good for a laugh. So I do want what I have, even as I do what I can...’ Forrest Church died from his cancer in 2009 at the age of 61 but in the last two years of his life wrote two books, one on his philosophy of living and dying.

And I'm reminded of my friend Lucy who went through a difficult time after a relationship breakdown when she found herself on her own and with not enough money to last each month. When she felt particularly lacking - in love, in resources, in joy - she would go to her kitchen, open the fridge and the cupboards, pull out whatever she could find and start cooking. In a solo version of 'stone soup', she'd always be amazed at what she could concoct - and how much of it - from just a few cans and leftovers. Her feeling of lack and poverty would be magically transformed into a sense of abundance and richness by a bit of imagination and creativity, and an openness to noticing what she already had.

Because even in the midst of genuine lack there is still abundance to be found and rejoiced over. There is a choice offered to us: whether we want to define ourselves by what is missing from, or depleted in, our lives, or whether we will continue to see - and seek out - the blessings that are available to us. This is not to deny our pain, not at all, but to *also* see our abundance of blessings.

Marianne Williamson writes: "As long as we remain vigilant at building our *internal* abundance—an abundance of integrity, [an abundance of forgiveness,] an abundance of service, an abundance of love—then any external lack is bound to be temporary."

She is suggesting, I think, that if we feel unloved, then we should practise loving more. [If we feel unforgiven, then practise forgiveness of others.] If we feel unappreciated, then learn to appreciate what we have and what we are given. In other words, turn our perception of scarcity on its head.

And if you're wondering how to find the strength to do that, then perhaps the image of the fountain in Denise Levertov's poem might be helpful. You might understand the fountain as the love of God or the Cosmos, the fountain which "is still there and always there with its quiet song and strange power". The fountain that never dries up.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said: "It takes three things to attain a sense of significant being: God, A Soul, and a Moment. And the three are always here."

In other words, what we need most is freely given - in abundance. Blessed be.

11 3rd HYMN: 90 (P) Let us give thanks and praise

Let us give thanks and praise for the gifts which we share,
for our food and our friendship, for water and air,
for the earth and the sky and the stars and the sea,
and the trust we all have in God's love flowing free.

Give a shout of amazement at what life can bring,
put your heart into raising the song all can sing.
What a world we could build with our minds and our hands
where the people live freely and God understands.

Let us give of our best with the tools we shall need,
use our eyes, hands and brains so that we may succeed.
Inspire us to cultivate what we have sown
so that nature and nurture make a world we may own.

We adore you, great Mother, O help us to live
with a love for each other that each one can give.
Let the pain of our brothers and sisters be faced
and the healing of all souls on earth be embraced.

Music Ralph Vaughan Williams, words © Peter Sampson

CLOSING WORDS Lorelei Greenwood-Jones

Abundance is all around us.
That we are alive is priceless; that we are loved is beyond worth.
That we love others fills our souls.

And so, we leave blessed by our connections to one another, and to the spirit of life.

Walk lightly that you see the life that is below your feet.

Spread your arms as if you had wings and could dance through the air.
Feel the joy of the breath in your lungs and the fire in your heart.
Live to love and be a blessing on this earth.

Amen

CLOSING VIDEO 'Holy Now, Peter Mayer

<https://youtu.be/KiypaURysz4?si=wr50awv7icqy3KxF>