

Choosing Abundance

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Text: *Snow Geese*, by Mary Oliver

Mary Oliver's poetry points to a different way of experiencing life. In this poem, the snow geese reflecting gold from the sun are lit up for us, too. She has become a master observer of nature--slowed down to fully notice abundance. We see through the veil with her, as if a haze parted and an image suddenly came to focus. Oliver has learned to gaze deeply, joyfully, clearly, and we participate in her skillful vision.

Our 21st century understanding of vision is changing. Scientists say that it doesn't matter if we actually see the geese, or just imagine them while listening or reading. If we experience the picture as expansive and beautiful, our bodies respond in the same way, whether real or dream or mental picture. In *The Brain that Changes Itself*, Dr. Norman Doidge writes about this research:

Brilliant scientists, at the frontiers of brain science...showed that the brain changed its very structure with each different activity it performed, perfecting its circuits so it was better suited to the task at hand...they began to call this fundamental brain property "neuroplasticity."

They showed that the damaged brain can often reorganize *itself* so that when one part fails, another can often substitute; that if brain cells die, they can at times be replaced; that many "circuits" and even basic reflexes that we think are hardwired, are not.

Here's why this matters in the life of the spirit: what we practice changes what we experience, and what we experience can change the brain itself. You know the common phrases: seeing life as "glass-half-full", having an "attitude of gratitude", or visualizing abundance instead of scarcity. Contrary to what skeptics in the house may think (and I know you are out there), these are not happy ways to trick yourself into being Pollyanna! The frame of reference we choose literally shifts what we think, feel, and imagine. The synapse connections we cultivate create ease or anxiety, happiness or suffering. The joyful life is more available to folks who choose abundance. Your choice.

This is also a scientific fact: the brain of someone who practices equanimity changes over time. Priscilla Warner, in *Learning to Breathe*, tells of Andrew Newberg, a neuroscientist at the University of Pennsylvania. Newberg has scanned the brains of Tibetan monks, Carmelite nuns, people who speak in tongues, and atheists who meditate. Sounds like a UU congregation, almost. His goal is to measure brain neurobiology when people enter deep reflective states. In the front regions of the brain, we cultivate ability to enter a state less focused on time and space. People who meditate or pray regularly learn to increase the feeling of oneness with all creation. They offer lovingkindness to all beings, or they practice abundant

thinking, and their brains change. Those Newberg studied displayed greater activity in their frontal lobes, and could deliberately reduce activity in the parietal lobes—the sections that keep us more conscious of individuality.

According to Jack Kornfeld, psychologist and Insight Meditation teacher, in Buddhist psychology, we are not limited to our biography. We can shift who we say we are, and who we are becoming. In choosing abundance, we can systematically train ourselves in thanksgiving. Remember, your central nervous system responds to the messages you present: snow geese glow golden in the sun, whether you are hearing the poem, or sitting in a field watching the sky. Either way, your body and brain enjoy the benefit of beauty. You practice the physical and emotional release of tension that celebrating nature brings.

By now some of you are saying, hey, we still live in a material world, and this sounds ephemeral to me. Well, I do grant you that staring at an empty cupboard with gratitude is not going to bring in food. I believe organizing people and money for concrete social change is absolutely necessary. Still, practicing contraction keeps gifts out of circulation, while practicing expansiveness allows new gifts to flow. Perhaps you have heard the saying: money is like manure, not much good unless you spread it around!

I still have vivid memories about expansive gratitude from time in Guatemala on a Witness for Peace trip. I was staying in a rural home with dirt floors, sleeping on a mat on the floor. We were co-existing in the house with a goat, some chickens, and a dog or two, all wandering through every night. Our group had for several days eaten the main foods available: rice, beans, tortillas, and a sugary corn drink. To my North American eyes and stomach, the place epitomized scarcity.

One morning my hostess was singing while preparing breakfast, and I commented on how joyful she was. She laughed, "Of course I am happy, because we have so much, and my heart is full of music." Her world was constructed with abundance--it showed in her radiant smile and kind patience with every person and animal. When our group left the area, she offered me a blessing for seminary, holding my hands tightly and calling on the angels. "Encircle Luisa with grace," she prayed in Spanish. "Angels of protection, surround her in school, and in ministry for many years to come."

I remember her prayer today, almost 25 years later, as I celebrate the grace of All Souls. Abundance of the Spirit vibrates in this Sanctuary, week after week. It is in the generosity of hundreds in the pews and classrooms. In the hard work of staff that truly cares to be here at this time. In

the joy of serving with clergy and religious educators who are passionate about ministry. In how we sing and dance with so much gusto, mostly on the beat. In the large number who participate in the mending of the world. All Souls *is* abundance to me, and has been for almost eight years.

Here is the hard paradox: because I have received so much, my time feels complete. Because this has been a site of much growth, I am ready to leave and try new things. Because my spiritual journey has deepened here, I perceive that my call has shifted. Through success and failure, conflict and reconciliation, joy and sorrow, I have always experienced great abundance at All Souls.

The educator Parker Palmer writes in *Let Your Life Speak* that, one day, we may find the life we are living is not the life that wants to live in us. This fall, several events caused me to ask, what is the life that wants to live in me? Be careful when you ask that question, because your still, small voice within may have an answer! The initial reasons matter less than the process, which took shape uncomfortably fast, for you and for me. As Palmer also notes, Quaker tradition holds that sometimes "way closes" before "way opens," and my way here closed quickly.

However, my seeds of discernment were planted over the last three years. In serious illness and recovery twice, a

new Master's degree at Tai Sophia Institute, shaping a Unitarian Universalist identity, marrying my life partner Regina--all these major transitions contained change. New practices created new appetites in me, and my brain changed. What I wanted to do and be shifted, as you knew when I changed my role here. So in this harvest time, I discern it is the right time to go, choosing for my health and wellbeing. My intention is to free the church to find new staff now, rather than waiting for my return from sabbatical.

I still plan to take several months out to rest and build some skills, including yoga teacher training. In 2012, I will work as a consultant: offering teaching, community organizing, retreats, preaching, weddings and memorials, and direct service. I hope that my middle-aged neuroplastic brain will still grow new pathways, and know the Spirit of Life will guide me.

Mary Oliver knows well the poignant nature of life: *Oh, to love what is lovely, and will not last! What a task to ask of anything, or anyone, yet it is ours, and not by the century or the year, but by the hours.* This is also the task of ministry: we fall in love with congregations, and one day, we say goodbye. Know that when I see you now, when I see All Souls in my mind in the future, it is deeply, joyfully, clearly. The abundant experience will always be in me, and for that, I deeply grateful. Blessed Be and Amen.