In this pandemic “winter of our discontent” it may seem misguided to focus on this month’s theme of “Contentment.” But, perhaps, there is no better time.

At its most basic, contentment describes a state of happiness or satisfaction. In a deeper more spiritual sense, though, contentment is a state of inner peace. A peace that in its fullest expression abides, no matter what’s happening around us.

Admittedly, this is a tall order. Few are the giants of the soul able to know such peace in every moment, no matter what. But each of us, I hope, feels such peace at least from time to time. With practice, we may often feel it with some frequency. That’s our goal this month—to help each of us find more inner peace more often.

Over the coming weeks, I encourage you to take up the optional spiritual practices described near the end of this month’s edition of The Journey. These practices of gratitude (wanting what you have) and acceptance (resisting comparisons) are key to recognizing and honouring the deep satisfaction of true contentment.

May your explorations with this month’s theme bring you peace—to your heart’s content.

In faith and love,
Shawn
Questions to Live With

1. What does contentment mean to you at this point in your life?
2. How has your sense of contentment changed over time?
3. Reflecting on your life, is there a season of contentment that stands out for you? What made it so?
4. What, if anything keeps you from feeling contentment?
5. What role has discontentment played in your life?
6. If not one of the above, what is your question about intention this month?

For Inspiration

I have learned that to be with those I like is enough.
- Walt Whitman

We need much less than we think we need.
- Maya Angelou

I am content; that is a blessing greater than riches; and to whom that is given need ask no more.
- Henry Fielding

Good friends, good books, and a sleepy conscience: this is the ideal life.
- Mark Twain

My only sketch, profile, of Heaven, is a large, blue sky, bluer and larger than the biggest I have seen in June, and in it are my friends—all of them—every one of them.
- Emily Dickinson

I think instead [of happiness] we should be working for contentment... an inner sense of fulfillment that's relatively independent of external circumstances.
- Andrew Weil

Yes, there is a Nirvana; it is leading your sheep to a green pasture, and in putting your child to sleep, and in writing the last line of your poem.
- Kahlil Gibran, Sand and Foam

Contentment is not just a “peaceful, easy feeling” or a way to rationalize laziness. It is a deep, easy-breathing wisdom that knows what can and can’t be changed, and more important, knows when to do and when to wait. The contented person watches the world closely, but does not stare it down. She enjoys things, rather than trying to possess them or straighten them out.
- Robin Meyers, The Virtue in the Vice

We have so little faith in the ebb and flow of life, of love, of relationships. We leap at the flow of the tide and resist in terror its ebb. We are afraid that it will never return. We insist on permanency, on duration, on continuity; when the only continuity possible, in life as in love, is in growth, in fluidity... Intermittency—an impossible lesson for human beings to learn. How can one learn to live through the ebb-tides of one’s existence? How can one learn to take the trough of the wave? . . . Perhaps this is the most important thing: simply the memory that each cycle of the tide is valid; each cycle of the wave is valid.... One must accept the security of ebb and flow, of intermittency.
- Anne Morrow Lindbergh
A quiet secluded life in the country, with the possibility of being useful to people to whom it is easy to do good, and who are not accustomed to have it done to them; then work which one hopes may be of some use; then rest, nature, books, music, love for one’s neighbour — such is my idea of happiness.

- Leo Tolstoy, *Family Happiness*

So, along with clear seeing, there’s another important element, and that’s kindness. It seems that, without clarity and honesty, we don’t progress. We just stay stuck in the same vicious cycle. But honesty without kindness makes us feel grim and mean, and pretty soon we start looking like we’ve been sucking on lemons. We become so caught up in introspection that we lose any contentment or gratitude we might have had. The sense of being irritated by ourselves and our lives and other people’s idiosyncrasies becomes overwhelming. That’s why there’s so much emphasis on kindness.

- Pema Chödrön, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Time*

It was being a runner that mattered, not how fast or how far I could run. The joy was in the act of running and in the journey, not in the destination. We have a better chance of seeing where we are when we stop trying to get somewhere else. We can enjoy every moment of movement, as long as where we are is as good as where we’d like to be. That’s not to say that you need to be satisfied forever with where you are today. But you need to honour what you’ve accomplished, rather than thinking of what’s left to be done.


So in our own poor hides and from our miserable comrades we learn the nature of satiety. Satiety depends not at all on how much we eat, but on how we eat. It’s the same with happiness, the very same. . . happiness doesn’t depend on how many external blessings we have snatched from life. It depends only on our attitude toward them. There’s a saying about it in the Taoist ethic: “Whoever is capable of contentment will always be satisfied.”

- Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The First Circle*

When despair for the world grows in me and I wake in the night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be, I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in its beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds. I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief. I come into the presence of still water. And I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light. For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

- Wendell Berry

To know when to stop
To know when you can get no further
By your own action,
This is the right beginning!

- Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*
Optional Spiritual Exercise

Here are two practices you can use this month, adapted from the work of Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat. You can try them both, or just focus on one or the other.

- **Want what you have.** This is a basic gratitude practice. Don’t take your possessions for granted. Every day acknowledge what just one tool or object means to you and how it improves your life. Make a list of other things you are grateful for at the end of the day.

- **Don’t make comparisons.** Many of us go through the day comparing our situation with another’s, and inevitably, it seems, we come up short, feeling either second-rate or deprived. The Baal Shem Tov, a great Jewish teacher, said, "Compare not yourself with anyone else, lest you spoil God's curriculum." Focus instead on what is unique about you.

Join Us

Join a Journey Group

Journey Groups are a great way to go deeper with our monthly theme by sharing with a small group of people for a couple of hours each month. Groups meet online on Zoom and are scheduled at different times during the month.

For more information, visit our website https://firstunitarianstoronto.org/journey-groups/, or look for the link in First Light.

Upcoming Themes

March – Money | April – Awakening
May–Beauty

Upcoming Services

Sundays at 10:30

February 6
“Living the 8th Principle”, Donovan Hayden

February 13
“All Kinds of Love”, Rev. Lynn Harrison

February 20
“At Home in the Heart”, Nicole McKay, Seminarian

February 27
“Universalist Unitarianism”, Rev. Lynn Harrison