In 1725, the French playwright Léonor Jean Christine Soulas d’Allainval completed his first major work: L’Embarras des richesses. In 1738, John Ozell gave us his English translation of the title and created a meaningful idiom in the process: “an embarrassment of riches.” There is a bitter irony attached to this phrase, given that d’Allainval himself died in poverty and obscurity. There are reports that his life was simply one of misery. And yet. He gave to the world an idiom to help concentrate the mind on our experiences of abundance—life’s riches.

I recall originally hearing the phrase in my late teens and having no idea what it meant. I remember hearing it again and again, in various contexts across the years that followed, and only starting to appreciate what the strange phrase was really getting at: that there are moments when we are aware that our lives, at least in some ways, are blessed by abundance. I’m struck now by how often it seems to describe so many aspects of life, if we’re willing to notice.

As we take up this theme for the month, we invite you to reflect on the blessings you experience in your life. The areas of abundance you note may relate to the whole of your life, or they may be contained to a particular area or two. In this assessment, you may also find areas of scarcity or even, well, over-abundance. These may point in directions of change.

The overarching questions for this month are about how we respond to the experience of abundance. Does it move us to gratitude? Does it inspire wonder or overwhelm us? Does it make us uncomfortable and, even, a bit embarrassed? Does it move us to make some response, by sharing what we already have plenty of or deciding to not take on more than we need? This month’s theme is an invitation to delve deeper into the meaning of abundance, with all the complexities it contains.

I’m wishing you a fruitful month of reflection.

In faith and love,
Shawn
Questions to Live With

1. Is there an “embarrassment of riches” in some part of your life? How do you feel about it?
2. How do you understand the difference between abundance and enough?
3. Some traditions speak of abundance as a sign of blessing or an experience of grace. How do you make sense of abundance?
4. And how do you make sense of a lack of abundance?
5. Have you ever experienced having too much of a good thing? What was that like?
6. If not one of the above, what is your question about abundance this month?

For Inspiration

When it comes to life the critical thing is whether you take things for granted or take them with gratitude.

- G. K. Chesterton

Enough is a decision not an amount.

- Alison Faulkner

“Abundance” - Amy Schmidt

in memory of Mary Oliver

It’s impossible to be lonely when you’re zesting an orange. Scrape the soft rind once and the whole room fills with fruit. Look around: you have more than enough. Always have. You just didn’t notice until now.
“Splendour” - Thomas Centolella

One day it’s the clouds, one day the mountains.
One day the latest bloom of roses - the pure monochromes, the dazzling hybrids - inspiration for the cathedral’s round windows.
Every now and then there’s the splendour of thought: the singular idea and its brilliant retinue - words, cadence, point of view, little gold arrows flitting between the lines.
And too the splendour of no thought at all: hands lying calmly in the lap, or swinging a six iron with effortless tempo. More often than not splendour is the star we orbit without a second thought, especially as it arrives and departs. One day it’s the blue glassy bay, one day the night and its array of jewels, visible and invisible.
Sometimes it’s the warm clarity of a face that finds your face and doesn’t turn away.
Sometimes a kindness, unexpected, that will radiate farther than you might imagine.
One day it’s the entire day itself, each hour foregoing its number and name, its cumbersome clothes, a day that says come as you are, large enough for fear and doubt, with room to spare: the most secret wish, the deepest, the darkest, turned inside out.

“Merit” – Lynn Ungar

Why me? What did I do to deserve this?
A blue September sky and the scent of late-blooming honeysuckle and roses, the maple just starting to flash red and—who knew—a second crop of raspberries starting to ripen on the vine.
What have I ever done that merits the generosity of rain, and the way the world opens into green? I mean, I have tried to be kind, but not like the cherry tomatoes, blushing and turning sweet and giving themselves away by the handful. Of course I don’t deserve this, any more than you deserve fire or flood or sickness or heartache. There is not math for this, no equation that balances the equal sign.
Only this outpouring of all that is, the waterfall we stand under, and drink from, and try not to drown.
It is difficult to know what to do with so much happiness. With sadness there is something to rub against, a wound to attend with lotion and cloth. When the world falls in around you, you have pieces to pick up, something to hold in your hands, like ticket stubs or change. But happiness floats. It doesn’t need you to hold it down. It doesn’t need anything… Since there is no place large enough to contain so much happiness, you shrug, you raise your hands, and it flows out of you into everything you touch. You are not responsible. You take no credit, as the night sky takes no credit for the moon but continues to hold it, and share it, and in that way, be known.

- Naomi Shihab Nye

“Lightening the Load” - Francis Dorff, O. Praem.

The first thing we have to do is to notice that we’ve loaded down this camel with so much baggage we’ll never get through the desert alive. Something has to go.

Then we can begin to dump the thousand things we’ve brought along until even the camel has to go and we’re walking barefoot on the desert sand.

There’s no telling what will happen then. But I’ve heard that someone, walking in this way, has seen a burning bush.

- Annie Dillard, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek

The world is fairly studded and strewn with pennies cast broadside by a generous hand. But—and this is the point—who gets excited by a mere penny? But if you cultivate a healthy poverty and simplicity, so that finding a penny will literally make your day, then, since the world is in fact planted in pennies, you have with your poverty bought a lifetime of days.

- Annie Dillard, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek

We gaze into the night as if remembering the bright unbroken planet we once came from, to which we will never be permitted to return. We are amazed how hurt we are. We would give anything for what we have.

- Tony Hoagland

- "A Prayer among Friends” – John Daniel

Among other wonders of our lives, we are alive with one another, we walk here in the light of this unlikely world that isn’t ours for long. May we spend generously the time we are given. May we enact our responsibilities as thoroughly as we enjoy our pleasures. May we see with clarity, may we seek a vision that serves all beings, may we honour the mystery surpassing our sight, and may we hold in our hands the gift of good work and bear it forth whole, as we were borne forth by a power we praise to this one Earth, this homeland of all we love.
Optional Spiritual Exercise

This month’s spiritual exercise is an invitation to take stock of your life—to take an inventory of what you have and what you haven’t, to paraphrase the lyrics of Irving Berlin. What you decide to tally is entirely up to you. Perhaps it’s your album collection, or those teacups you’ve collected across the years. Maybe it’s the relationships that have sustained you throughout your life. Or the various types of trees you can name when you’re out in a forest or a park. The point is to identify those places where you recognise an abundance in your life—those places of plenty. With your inventory in hand, what do you notice?

“Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life” - Melody Beattie

Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns denial into acceptance, Chaos into order, Confusion to clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast, A house into a home, A stranger into a friend. Gratitude makes sense of our past, Brings peace for today, And creates vision for tomorrow.

Taking stock of what I have and what I haven’t, What do I find? The things I got will keep me satisfied Checking up on what I have and what I haven’t, What do I find? A healthy balance on the credit side…

Got no mansion, got no yacht, Still I’m happy with what I’ve got. I got the sun in the morning and the moon at night. Sunshine gives me a lovely day. Moonlight gives me the Milky Way. Got no chequebooks, got no banks, Still I’d like to express my thanks.

I got the sun in the morning and the moon at night. And with the sun in the morning And the moon in the evening, I’m all right.

- Irving Berlin
Join a Journey Group

Journey Groups are a great way to go deeper with our monthly theme by sharing with 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 firstunitariantoronto.org/journey-groups/ or look for the link in First Light.

Upcoming Themes

November – Impermanence | December – Healing | January – Grounding
February – Love | March – Anger | April – Welcome | May - Freedom

Upcoming Services
Sundays at 10:30

October 2nd
“Temples of the Heart”
Rev. Shawn Newton

October 9th
Thanksgiving Sunday & Harvest Communion
“Gratitude Adjustment”
Rev. Shawn Newton

October 16th
“The Place of the Pulpit”
Rev. Shawn Newton

October 23rd
“What Is Spiritual Care?”
Rev. Lynn Harrison

October 30th
“Facing Life’s Fragility”
Rev. Shawn Newton