

## Having Enough, Being Enough

Rev. Linda Thomson

First Unitarian Congregation, Toronto

Sunday, October 12, 2025

A while ago I was at the mall. In the past 5 years I've probably averaged 1 maybe 2 visits to a mall each year. So, it has been a while. Because it happens infrequently, it felt new. It felt a bit new and a bit shocking. The colours, the lights, the larger-than-life posters telling me all the things I need and should want, felt a bit overwhelming. Apparently, the right face cream, or the right shampoo, or the right purse will make me feel better about myself and the world. Whew, who knew it would be so easy?

The trouble is, purses wear out, skin and hair – even when pampered with all the right treatments. The satisfaction promised by the ads is, at best, temporary. Now don't get me wrong. I am human, I have a body and senses, and I do find some satisfaction in physical, time-based things. A good meal, a comfortable blanket, a good haircut... these are all things I enjoy. But I know that they are not permanent pleasures. The advertisers know it too, and so they turn up the volume: tweaking labels, revising logos, changing ads – their business is to tell me that I'm not enough. They tell me that I am worth it, but they are quick to jump in with suggestions about what I need to do to be enough.

And those are the messages about our physical selves. I put the words self-help into the book search, in Amazon, and was flooded with over 80,000 titles. From Dale Carnegie's, "How to Win Friends and Influence People" to one I'd not heard of before, "14 Habits that are Holding You Back from Happiness"... the titles go on, and on, and on. Clearly, we all have some work to do.

And we do have work to do, we always will. I sometimes imagine we are all walking around with small tattoos that read, "Under Construction". I also imagine a 2<sup>nd</sup> tattoo, one that reads, "Perfect, just the way I am." I believe both, seemingly contrary things.

There is a tension in this. Striving can get in the way of contentment and gratitude. This is an ancient human issue. The Tao te Ching, over 2,500 years old has this to say on the topic, "There is no greater calamity than not knowing what is enough, no greater curse than covetousness, no greater tragedy than discontentment; and the worst of all faults is wanting more – always. Contentment alone is enough." We find a similar sentiment in the Christian text, Matthew Chapter 6, "Can any of you add a single hour to the length of your life by worrying? And why do you worry about clothes? Consider the lilies in the field and how they grow. They don't work or spin yarn, but I tell you that not even Solomon in all of his splendor was clothed like one of them." Stop fussing, the ancient teachers said, "What you have is enough". Wanting more won't make you better, won't make you look better and it may very well erode your sense of peace. I think it is

fair to say that is not a message I'm going to see at the mall anytime soon. Maybe humans have always needed to be reminded of the value of contentment. But I can't help but think that we, with mass media and social media, need the reminder more than earlier people may have.

In fact, studies show that the seemingly steady diet of images many of us consume through Facebook, Instagram and other social media can leave us feeling discontented. As with so many things, it's likely a balancing act. The connections and community that many enjoy via their phones and computers can have a positive effect. But the curated versions of other people's lives we see can reinforce the idea that our own lives are lacking – the opposite of contentment. In 2018 a Canadian Internet Use Survey gave us some information about the negative impacts. Individuals, aged 15 – 64, were asked about their use of websites and apps that allowed them to share and create their own content while viewing and interacting with the content of others. In each age group, more than half of the respondents reported using social media sites. The survey asked about 6 possible impacts: lost sleep, difficulties concentrating on tasks or activities, reduction in physical activity, feelings of anxiety or depression, feeling envious of the lives of others and feelings of frustration or anger. In total, about 20% reported at least some of these. Perhaps most concerning is that the negative impacts were more pronounced in younger people. We value our well-being, yet many of us struggle to give it the attention it deserves. These sites can make it more difficult to settle into ourselves and focus on the things that might lead to higher levels of contentment.

Contentment comes from the Latin *contentus*, which means “held together” or “intact, whole and over time, the word evolved into something that could reflect onto a person, which describes one who feels enough, one who feels intact or whole. Contentment asks, “How complete are you as a human being?” Most human emotions require external input; they are based on reactions to and relationships with events outside of ourselves. Contentment, on the other hand, requires no external input and is sourced entirely from within.

If contentment is something we can aspire to, it is useful to know what it is or is not. But knowing it, recognizing it, doesn't make it easily attainable. I think some of us have temperaments that make contentment more likely. The strong messages we receive make it hard to even understand contentment, rather than happiness, as the goal. Some of us, for reasons of brain chemistry or other circumstances, will find it more elusive. We spend a lot of time in our lives striving for more, striving for happiness. And I've known for a long time that happiness was fleeting. I don't know why I figured out, when I was in about Grade 6 or so, that happiness, while a lovely thing was not the goal. I remember walking home, looking at cloud formations, and birds and being struck by the notion that it would be better to strive to be content than to be happy. More than a few years have

passed since that walk home from school, and I think I was right and I also think I was very fortunate to have that insight when I did. On reflection I know I had some good teachers. My husband used to say that my grandma was like the buddha- Finding joy in the loons returning to the lake, even though her husband of 60 years had just died, knowing that stuffing envelopes with newsletters for her church was worthwhile, even when she couldn't contribute in other ways... I was lucky to have her as an example and to have her genes...Contentment and happiness are not the same things. Certainly, both can, at least some of the time be elusive. But I believe contentment is longer-lasting and makes a greater contribution to our well-being. I also see evidence that it equips us to deal with the troubles of life, the injustices and hurts that are always present.

There are things we can do, practices we can cultivate that will move us in the direction of contentment. That feels worthwhile. Each of us must find the practices that will work best for us. this is not a one size fits all endeavour, what works for someone else may not fit you...

But there are a few basics –

- Want what you have. This is a basic gratitude practice. Make a list of other things you are grateful for at the end of the day.
- Don't make comparisons. If we go through the day comparing our situation with another's, 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."
- Practice mindfulness. Mindfulness is the cultivation of focused attention to the present moment, without judging your experiences as good or bad. It is one of the most [well-studied practices](#) for calming down the body and the mind
- Reevaluate your well-being contingencies. We all have them, "When I have x dollars in the bank, I'll be happy", "When I retire I can begin to do the things I want", "When my kids can do X then I'll know I was successful as a parent." It is ok to have goals, but if we don't evaluate and reevaluate them, we may really be telling ourselves that our well-being needs to wait.
- Accept all emotions. This is tough, and most of us don't like it. But feelings come and go. Knowing that is important, because if we don't, we hold on too tightly to some, even as we work to deny parts of our human experience. Feeling whole now, feeling complete, requires us to do so even when we are sad, or embarrassed, or anything else. This radical appreciation of all of life's experiences is a cornerstone to contentment,

which is the idea that right here, right now, everything is OK as it is.  
Contentment is the underlying acceptance of what it means to be human.

So here we are, Thanksgiving Sunday. A holiday which was traditionally, in Canada a Harvest Festival – a Sunday when Churches traditionally encouraged people to pause, to appreciate the bounty of the earth and to share what they had. Giving thanks to God may not work for many of you, at least not in the way that many others will today. But that doesn't mean that we can't be thankful, that we can't cultivate gratitude and that we can't develop practices that help us to foster a sense of contentment. You are, I am, whole. We are enough. And we are imperfect. Perfectly so. I'm not saying we should all just shrug and say I don't need to try any more, I don't need to grow anymore. But I encourage us to be ok with where we are today, at this stage of your journey. Thanksgiving seems like a good day to think about contentment and to play around with practices that help us. For me, the clue is found in that long ago walk home from school. Watching clouds, observing the birds. I've learned that imagining a small lake or watching the silhouette of branches against the sky is enough to ground me, to help me bring all the spinning bits back under control, and to feel contained again.

I don't know what will work for you, but perhaps today, we can all remember these words from the poem I read earlier.

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.

I wish you peace, and a moment of rest in the grace of the world. Happy Thanksgiving.