

Abundance of Community
Presented by Margie King Saphier on December 7, 2003,
at United First Parish Church in Quincy, MA.

Do we live in a world of scarcity or a world of abundance? To answer that question, most of us would assess our physical possessions or material resources. Even when we have enough, if we think only of the material aspects of our lives, we risk creating an illusion of scarcity; and our world view becomes very limited. Instead, the quality of our lives depends heavily on how we assess the community around us. Community is the context in which the experience of abundance can replace the attitude of scarcity. We all yearn for community, because to one degree or another, we are all lonely. Our society's emphasis on individuality often creates the illusion of scarcity causing us to lose sight of the potential for abundance that a **well-developed community** inherently has to offer.

Our separate identities make us unique. As a society and as a religious movement our fundamental tenet is the sacredness of the individual conscience, the individual person. Expressing this concept theologically, one might say we are called to develop our unique gifts. In the development of our unique gifts, we are also called to wholeness; but we can never be whole in and of ourselves. Therefore we need to recognize our incompleteness and our need for community. The ancient Hebrews seemed to understand this. The Hebrew word for soul is "nephesh." It also means appetite. Our souls hold our deepest hungers,

our deepest thirsts to be complete, to be whole.¹ So there is a paradox here: we are called to wholeness while simultaneously recognizing our incompleteness; we are called to individuation within the context of interdependence. When we focus only on rugged individualism, making it the sole prize of a whole being, the illusion of scarcity is created. We lose sight that to be whole to be living fully is dependent on the interdependence of community.

Community is often created during time of crisis. We, as a society, experienced a renewed sense of community immediately after September 11, 2001. But the spirit of community that is created during a time of crisis usually ends when the crisis is over. When I served the UU society of Wellesley Hills, a parishioner told me a story in which the spirit of community was able to transcend the hardships of war by bringing people together as they shared they openly shared their hopes, fears, loneliness. There was singing, laughing and tears that ultimately bound their wounds in the knowledge that they were not alone.

During World War II, Dorothy was a nurse stationed in Australia, not far from New Guinea. The army hospital was located in a small army camp that received the wounded soldiers. At the army base material scarcity was serious and real, but the abundance of spirit that the community of people were able to bring one another was real and ultimately transcendent.

Christmas was coming. The soldiers and nurses were all feeling sad and lonely thinking about their loved

¹ Brita Gill-Austin, "Rediscovering Hidden Treasures for Pastoral Care," Pastoral Psychology, Vol. 43, No. 4, 1995, p.244.

ones back home. So they decided to celebrate Christmas, not with just each other but with the ranchers who were living in the surrounding area. Of course all the men were off at war, so that meant inviting the women, children and the elderly. To make this a joyous occasion, they wanted this to be a real Christmas with a tree, decorations, presents, a meal, and of course Christmas carols. For a moment they thought they might have to give up their idea of celebrating Christmas. They had no tree, certainly there were no decorations, food was meager - it was all government issued. They were concerned about what to do for gifts? All they had was a PX that supplied them with the essentials of life.

With collective creative thinking they found they were rich with ideas. The nurses went through their personal possessions and found linen hankies and nylon stockings to give to the women. The soldiers set aside some of their cigarettes for the men. Temporarily they were at a loss for toys for the children, but someone came up with the idea of making dolls out of socks. The PX had plenty of socks and buttons for eyes, so the nurses began making dolls. Being in Australia with all the sheep, there was plenty of wool. So these dolls all had plenty of hair made of wool! While the nurses worked making dolls, the soldiers worked on creating a make-shift tree. For decorations they collected tin cans. Christmas stars were cut from the circular ends. Icicles were made by cutting the cans into thin strips and twisting them. When the nurses saw what the men were doing, they had the idea to wrap tiny match boxes in colored paper to hang on the tree. It was the most beautiful tree!

The nurse and soldiers invited the ranchers. About 16 families came. The dinner consisted of rationed canned army food; but it did not matter, they were all so happy to be together. One of the men had a Santa Suit. It is a mystery where he got it!! So he distributed the presents. After dinner we got around the piano and sang Christmas carols until we were all crying. We cried and sang and then sang and cried. But it was a wonderful Christmas!! After the ranchers left, Dorothy was alone. She stepped outside into the beautiful clear night. There up in the sky was the Southern Cross with the moon at its head. It was beautiful and she felt so at peace. As she looked at the moon she knew her family back home was looking at the same moon, missing her as much as she was missing them. At that moment she felt very close to them. Suddenly she was flooded with the feeling that she was one with the world and the world with her. Although Dorothy was 90 years old, she told me she never forgot that feeling.”

Dorothy’s story shows us how the spirit of community can be more than the sum of its parts. The seed of community is humanity; but like a gem, the community needs to be cut and polished many times over so that each facet can shine. For communities that are on-going, this process is continuous.

In 1630, speaking to his fellow colonists John Winthrop urged, "We must delight in each other, make others' conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our community as members of the same body." Certainly Dorothy and the others at the army base made others' conditions their own by inviting the neighboring

families - all of whom - were isolated on their individual ranches to be together on Christmas day. They rejoiced together, they mourned together, and suffered together. In so doing, they became members of the same body. Their spirit of community was inspired by the crisis of WWII and the isolation they all were experiencing. But once the crisis is over, so was the community.

People often come to church looking for "a sense of community." Ironically, there are many churches that are not true communities. M. Scott Peck claims community is authentic when a group of individuals have learned to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure, and who have developed a significant commitment to John Winthrop's injunction to "rejoice together, mourn together," and to "delight in each other, and make others' conditions our own."

Genuine community does not just happen. It requires conscious effort and commitment to be **inclusive**. It is not merely a matter of including different sexes, sexual minorities, races, and creeds. It is also inclusive of the full range of human emotions and idiosyncrasies. Tears are welcome as well as laughter, doubts as well as faith. Sooner or later the differences within the group will raise the critical decision as to whether one is going to exclude another or exclude themselves. **Exclusion is the great enemy to community**. This is the moment when one needs to make the conscious decision to be committed to the group. Ironically in 1636, John Winthrop made the decision to exclude our forbear, the Rev. John Wheelwright, the minister assigned to the growing

settlement of Mount Wollaston, because his preaching was unorthodox. Anne Hutchinson was banished to Rhode Island the following year. John Winthrop's sense of community was well-defined by members adhering to certain beliefs. Wheelwrights's preaching for freedom of thought and the right of individual conscience contradicted Winthrop's orthodoxy. Exclusion is often the remedy of congregations.

Unlike Winthrop, Gurjieff, a spiritual teacher, tells the story of "The Disgusting Teacher." Gurjieff was leading a month long retreat. One of the participants was a loud individual, who had bad body odor and refused to change his clothes or bathe. He ate his food chewing with his mouth open, often making slurping noises. His speech was full of crude language. The other participants shunned him and even became overtly rude to him. So one early morning the troublesome participant left the retreat. When the other participants told Gurjieff of his departure, he commanded that they go find him, explaining that if it was necessary they should pay him to come back. When they objected, Gurjieff stood firm explaining that this man who seemed crude and slovenly was their real teacher.

For true community to develop, there comes a time when our individual differences have to be acknowledged and they need to be held in creative tension. Instead of asserting our individualism by claiming our way is the only way, we need to inquire about the other's intentions. All too often, we think we know why someone said what they said or did what they did; but we never check out our assumptions. As a result we live in a world of self-generating beliefs, which remain largely untested. We

adopt those beliefs because they are based on conclusions, which are inferred from what we observe, plus our past experience. Our ability to achieve the results we truly desire is often eroded by our feelings that:

Our beliefs are the truth.

The truth is obvious.

Our beliefs are based on real data.

The data we select are the data.

Let me give you a fictional but realistic example from Peter Senge's book The Fifth Discipline: I am standing before the executive team of my company, making a presentation. The participants seem engaged and alert, except for Tom at the end of the table, who seems bored out of his mind. He turns his dark, morose eyes away from me and puts his hand to his mouth. He doesn't ask any questions until I am done, when he breaks in: "I think we should ask for a full report." In this culture, that typically means, "Let's move on." Everyone starts to shuffle their papers and put their notes away. Tom obviously thinks I am incompetent – which is a shame, because these ideas are exactly what his department needs. Now that I think of it, he never liked my ideas. Clearly, Tom is a power-hungry jerk. By the time I've returned to my seat, I've made a decision: I am not going to include anything in my report that Tom can use. It's too bad I have an enemy who is so prominent in the company.

In those few seconds before I take my seat, I have climbed up the 'ladder of inference,' – a common mental pathway of increasing assumptions, often leading to misguided beliefs. It all seems so reasonable, it happens so quickly, that I'm not aware I have done it. The more I

believe that Tom is an evil guy, the more I reinforce my tendency to notice his malevolent behavior in the future. Before long, for no apparent reason, Tom and I may find ourselves becoming bitter enemies.”

This story is a great illustration of the mind talk – the ego that we believe is true. Whenever I am aware that I am climbing the ladder of inference, I know it is time to be curious – to express compassionate curiosity. Often we don’t check out our assumptions, because questions like, “Tell me, do you think I am an idiot?” or “You really found my presentation boring, didn’t you?” is often how our curiosity initially arises. These questions sound like the accusations they really are and therefore are unlikely to get honest answers.

We live our lives by adding meaning to or drawing conclusions about everyday interactions. But we do not need to become slaves to the on-going meaning-making engines in our minds. Instead we can improve communication through reflection and awareness. First we need to become aware of our thinking and reasoning. Second, we need to make our thinking and reasoning more visible to others. And third, we need to inquire into others’ thinking and reasoning. These three steps invite the spirit of compassion.

In the example of Tom, in the first step I need to become aware that I am going up the ladder of inference and I need to stop myself and reflect on what is going on inside me. This means I do not project my anger on Tom. Second, I check my assumptions (or inferences, which I perceive to be the real data) while learning what Tom is thinking. “Tom, I want honest feedback regarding my

presentation. Tell me, was the material I presented relevant to your department? Was I clear?” The point of the inquiry is not to nail Tom, but to make both of our thinking processes visible so that we see what the differences are in our perceptions and what we have in common.

Notice that in this example there was no effort to show one of us was right and the other wrong. Instead the question becomes “Was the presentation relevant? Was it helpful? The issue is no longer about Tom or about me. Instead it is about the material presented and its relevancy. These questions invite input and diversity of opinion. These are the little but significant opportunities to create the experience of abundance within community.

In the initial scenario when I rapidly rise on the ladder of inference with Tom, I believe my viewpoint is right. When only one viewpoint is considered, there is the illusion of scarcity. People do not feel free to offer their thoughts. But when we take responsibility for our thinking and share it publicly and ask others what they think, we create an attitude or spirit of abundance. The environment becomes rich with ideas. People feel that the community respects their inherent dignity.

So I will end with this Buddhist meditation. I have shared it before, and I am sure I will share it again. Because I feel it is that important.

The thought manifests the word.

The word manifests the deed.

The deed deepens into habit, and habit hardens into character.

So watch the thought and its way with care, and let it spring from love

born out of concern for all beings.

May the peace of community be with us all.