

“Abundance!”

Delivered by the Rev. Jen Raffensperger to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Roanoke, Sunday March 22, 2026

How many of you have ever fallen asleep on public transit? I don't mean an airplane, where many sleep, where sleep is even expected and at times provided for - I mean a train or a bus or a subway. How many of you have ever noticed someone else asleep on public transit and wondered, “Are they going to miss their stop? Should I wake them and ask?”

I used to have a commute - from Laurel, Maryland to Arlington, Virginia - that was primarily traveled on the Washington, D.C. Metro system. I'd drive to my nearest Metro station - Greenbelt, the end of the Green Line - and I'd ride into the heart of D.C., change trains at Metro Center, onto an Orange Line train to the Ballston stop. In the morning, I would sometimes read, but mostly I would stare sleepily at the other commuters around me. In the evening, I might read or stare for the first leg, but once I was on that Green Line train, I would often sleep. I was riding to the last stop, you see. End of the line. No way for me to miss it.

But on those days when I didn't fall asleep, I'd wonder at the other riders who did. They couldn't all be going to the

end of the line, like I was. Part of me admired how trusting they were - of their own instincts and of those around them. Part of me worried about how tired we all were, all the time. And part of me remained tentative, looking at my fellow passengers, a kind of furtive gladness that I didn't have to take that kind of risk.

“Often I am moved by all the information

I've gathered but don't know what to do with.
That the needles used for upholstery are curved

like parentheses. That there's a star somewhere
two hundred times bigger than our sun.

That far back in its etymology the closet
actually meant a space of intimate privacy

where you might welcome others, not a place
of shame you're supposed to leave behind.

The abundance of that closet, crowded now
with my fierce friends. The abundance

of having a new truth in the mind, the bloom
in your senses like biting into a fennel seed.

The abundance of America, its orchards
and its libraries, its cemeteries and its airports,

the circle of people praying in the basement
of a church and the muddy field after a festival,

the boy counting the sixty-seven rings
of the fresh-cut log washed up on the beach

and the girl wearing red sunglasses on the train
in the morning, startled awake at her stop,

then, like all of us, walking into the day,
into the one thing there's plenty of: the future."

That girl on the train startled awake at her stop - the [poem](#) doesn't tell us how she knew. The poet doesn't speculate as to how she slept on that train, whether the sunglasses rested atop her head or covering her closed eyes in double darkness. But the richness, the abundance we are invited into in this poem is exactly this: From whatever position we occupy, when the time comes, we will be ready. We will be ready to share all that information we might think is useless, that someone else might need to know so badly. We will be ready to imagine a sun two hundred times larger than our own, and from there to imagine the vastness of this world we can barely begin to

know, and be gobsmacked again and again by how much beautiful abundance is within our grasp even in our tiny corner of Earth. We will be ready to welcome new people into our safe spaces; we will be ready for a burst of new taste and new ideas; we will be ready for what time and tides bring to us and we will be ready for what we might go out and discover in that expansive space - the future.

Now of course, in these times, there are so many forces that may be shrinking our circle of consideration rather than widening it. We may hear of so much loss, harm, pain, and hate on a daily basis that it turns our whole outlook darker, it might make us shrink within ourselves. I know there are many days I would rather hide from the tide of news, because I can feel it diminishing my spirit, wearing me down.

At the start of this year, I made a small change in one of my daily spiritual practices. Each evening, when I am putting screens away and preparing for bed, I write longhand in a journal for at least a few minutes. This is not my only journaling practice, but I find using a pen and paper at the end of the day helps to settle my mind. Now, this has been my practice for years, but that small change I made in January was that I begin each evening's journaling with a gratitude list. Sometimes it is long and effusive. Sometimes it is short and stingy. There are

constants on my gratitude lists - my friends, my partner, my cats - and there are new discoveries every day, like the first daffodils I saw blooming, or the birthday card a friend made for me, or a delicious meal I'd eaten, or the extremely satisfying conclusion of a book I'd just finished.

It turns out that what we may suspect has truth to it - gratitude improves our lives, and can even be a contributing factor to us living longer lives. Having an ever more abundant future, you might say! In a [study](#) published in the Journal of the American Medical Association in July of 2024, a population of 49,275 older female nurses (average age 79), a 9% reduction in mortality was observed over a span of four years after the initial self-reporting in a survey of their own sense of deep gratitude. Though the exact link has not been scientifically proven, one of the co-authors of the study noted this is a “meaningful, if not huge, difference.”

People who generally appreciated their lives and the things in their lives that gave them joy tended to live longer lives.

When we revisited the story of Stone Soup this morning, we thought about how each of us has things that are unique to us. When we feel ground down by the world, when we feel exhausted or small or hurt or angry, we

might just want to keep those things to ourselves. We might think they are of no use to others - what good is a single potato? What good is the knowledge of the star two hundred times the size of our sun?

“Often I am moved by all the information

I’ve gathered but don’t know what to do with.”

What about ALL that we have, that we don’t know what to do with? I once attended a party at the home of a friend who is a professional musician, and there were many other musicians at that party, but when someone started playing a fiddle tune and I - a non-musician - decided to grab two spoons and start playing them...suddenly I was surrounded by talented musicians who were keen to learn this small thing I’d picked up at summer camp decades before.

Every one of us has something we don’t know what to do with. But what we DON’T have is the knowledge of who MIGHT know what to do with it, how powerful our knowledge - or our time - or our space - or, yes, our money - might be when combined with the unique gifts of others.

Every spring reminds us of all that lies beneath the surface, all the new life and new promise that can burst out - sometimes eagerly early, lulled into a false sense of security by unseasonably warm temperatures, say - and remind us that the very ground we walk on contains so much more than we see, comprehend, or understand on a daily basis. Spring also reminds us that when we are living in times that feel dark - like winter, when the visual evidence of the Earth's abundance is small and hidden - there is another truth outside of that one we might feel trapped inside. When we feel diminished and exhausted by the world we see, imagine the one we cannot see, or cannot see yet - the one that does, in fact, exist below the surface, ready to burst into fullness. *From whatever position we occupy, when the time comes, we will be ready.*

Sometimes we have everything we need. Sometimes we can trust that we'll wake up in time for our stop. And sometimes, we understand that what we need is others. We need our friends and we need every stranger on that train. Like we talked about last week, children need adults AND adults need children. We need our knowledge, our talents, our time, our treasure - and we need the knowledge and talents and time and treasure of so many beyond ourselves, to truly live into that abundant future. *From whatever position we occupy, when the time comes,*

we will be ready.

This morning I speak to you not just of the spiritual nature of abundance but I invite you to consider the practical, physical nature of what this church has been, is now, and can become as we strive to grow into the abundance this faith points to for us all. Last year, we didn't have a "business as usual" stewardship campaign, because this church made the bold and amazing decision to undertake a capital improvements campaign that proved the abundance and generosity of this community. (You are going to start seeing real, physical changes here very soon!) It's my hope that this year also doesn't feel like "business as usual" during the annual stewardship campaign. Nothing feels like business as usual right now, honestly. Extraordinary times call for extraordinary gifts, the sorts of seeds we each carry within us that we wish to cultivate to build a more abundant future.

In our culture, sometimes it feels impolite or fraught or just plain wrong to talk about money. In the meantime, wealth continues to concentrate in the hands of a few, while the vast majority of us feel that sense of shrinking, of lack, of scarcity. When we feel that, I wonder what would happen if we leaned into gratitude. What do we already have in our lives that we are so grateful for, that we want to see grow into an abundant future? What about the sanctuary -

physical and spiritual - we can receive in this place, where we struggle and grow together on our own spiritual journeys, where we share where we've been and our hopes for where we're going? It is radical to invest in community rather than corporation. It is a radical act of hope in this time of darkness to proudly say "We are shining the light of our faith here - and the more of us hold up a flame, the more of us can find our way."

You're going to hear a lot more about the nuts and bolts of this year's Stewardship Campaign soon, and reminders across the next few weeks of how much this place means to so many. I can say that along with my own gratitude practice, my practices of generosity bring me a sense of hope and grounding in this world...while dreaming of the bigger, better one ahead. Let's move out into our abundant future, together. *From whatever position we occupy, when the time comes, we will be ready.*

So may it be.