

Imagining Abundance into Being

Unitarian Universalist Church of Spokane

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1/27/2018

Reading

Our reading is a poem by Gwendolyn Brooks, the first African American to win a Pulitzer Prize. In it she lifts up fellow great American Paul Robeson, referring to his deep baritone singing voice. As we enter African American history month, let us follow her lead and honor the many Black teachers and leaders in our midst who are transforming our nation's legacy of pain and suffering into wisdom for healing.

Musical Interlude

“This Land Is Your Land” by Woody Guthrie

Sermon

There's another verse to the song we just sang that I never heard when I was a kid:

Was a big high wall there
That tried to stop me.
A sign was painted,
Said “Private Property.”
But on the back side
It didn't say nothing.
This land was made for you and me.

This land was made for you and me, *and* millions of other people who have lost their rights to it, or are kept out by walls. This is the discomfort I'm working with for the next three weeks. I invite you to find your own discomfort, and lean into it. I'll start with some of my own story.

It was the dawn of the financial crisis, and I had serendipitously stepped out of the labor market, right as it crashed, to pursue a PhD in Agricultural and Resource Economics in

sunny Davis, California. I wracked my brain over increasing poverty in the *developing* world while my undergrad friends were on the quad of the university protesting tuition hikes. My job, which I took just as seriously as they did theirs, was to study the implications of climate change for Kenyan farmers. I was learning that crop failure, disease, undernutrition, poor education, local resource depletion, and changing temperatures were interrelated problems and no model would be sufficient to capture them all. But I was sustained by hope that my small model of farmer decision-making, even with lots of assumptions, would be helpful for finding solutions to a subset of the problems. Other people, working on their own subsets, would take care of the rest.

Much of my research was in collaboration with the World Agroforestry Center in Nairobi, Kenya. We were interested in whether farmers could benefit from a carbon market if they were compensated for the carbon sequestered from planting trees. One of my findings was that it was incredibly costly to get even minimal increases in tree coverage. More trees means less grain, and farmers were already facing food shortages. As long as they were committed to growing food for their *own* households, they did not have much room to switch to carbon sequestration as a cash crop. As I spent more time on the topic, I realized that this was just the *latest* cash crop idea. There'd been a cotton craze in the 1980s and various tree plantation schemes since then. None had been the silver bullet, and the carbon market wouldn't be either.

The expat researchers I worked with in Nairobi lived in gated communities and made infrequent excursions in the countryside. Ongoing rural poverty justified their salaries and kept their living expenses low by generating a flow of cheap labor into the city. I was less and less confident in the value of research conceived from this vantage point. But at least the wooded surroundings and tropical bird calls made the World Agroforestry Center quite a lovely place to work... until I found out that the campus was carved out of the Karura Forest against the wishes of local residents.

The silver bullet against deforestation had surely killed trees.

As I finished up my dissertation, I became convinced that ultimate solution to interrelated problems requires an ethical framework and accountability on the part of global power brokers. And although economics has its roots in moral philosophy, it did not provide or even acknowledge such a framework. The kind of personal ethical engagement I wanted with my field seemed impossible.

I returned to the source of my inspiration to go into development work in the first place: my religion. Both economics and religion use what social psychologists call legitimizing

myths: “values, attitudes, [and] beliefs... that provide moral and intellectual justification for social practices” upholding our level of social equality. These myths are not true or false; we *behave* as if they're true, and then because *everybody* is behaving in a certain way, we think their *reason* for doing so must be true. Maybe this is just the way of community, but the trick is: we get to choose our myths. In the words of William R. Murray,
These are the days that have been given to us;
Let us make of them stories worth telling to those who come after us.”

But let's dig into the story of scarcity for a moment. It goes like this: There is only a finite amount of most resources. The goal of economics is to allocate them in the “best” way. (So if you care about justice, become an economist!) Now there's actually a lot of room to discuss what “best” means, and justice is not the only criteria. But over the past fifty years, the field of economics has downplayed *that* question and focused more on the technical details of allocation. This is a potential pitfall for all of us who bring dedication and excellence to our work in the world: getting caught up in the physical elegance rather than the social relevance of our solutions.

Taking scarcity as a starting assumption leads to other concepts. Like “thinking on the margin;” for example, choosing whether to convert an acre of farmland into trees for carbon sequestration. The marginal cost is how much that one additional unit costs. The marginal benefit is how much more we'd value another unit. For tree planting, the marginal benefit might be the value of the shade from an acre of trees, plus the fruit harvested from them, plus the compensation from a carbon offset program.

With these few ideas, we're ready for the punchline of microeconomic theory. You may have heard “demand equals supply.” Well, demand and supply are just different words for marginal benefit and marginal cost. In a world with perfect markets, demand equals supply, or marginal benefit equals marginal cost. In the context of my research, assuming there are markets for everything, the cost of planting that last acre of trees should be no more than the household benefits from planting it. Otherwise they won't do it. And the marginal benefits of planting the tree acre will be no less than the value of the crops they might have grown there instead. Otherwise they can't afford those trees.

This is a very useful framework, but it has its limitations. For one thing, there aren't markets for everything, and that's a *good* thing. But this framework is used as an approximation for decision-making in contexts without markets, as I did in my dissertation. It helps us think about what to do next, given what we have. But as a paradigm, or basic story of the world, marginal thinking is really limiting. It forces us to

sidestep the issue of the *infinite* total value of some things. I would die if I didn't have access to water, and yet its price is virtually zero. Diamonds are useless to me, but unaffordable. The model of demand and supply can't tell us about the actual existential value of things. But it's easy to use supply and demand to compare two things like water and diamonds. We could easily compute how many millions of gallons of water have the same "value" as a small diamond. But how satisfying is that to those of us who care about justice?

The diamonds and water paradox has been thought about since Plato. In the meantime, as the myths of economics have been articulated and adopted, we have seen things like water, infinitely valuable and abundant, actually take on market prices. And we've watched those market prices go *up*. The paradox is being resolved; myth is coming true. And when it comes to water being expensive, that's not a good thing.

Why is water getting more expensive? It's becoming more scarce. But where does *scarcity* come from? Sure, sometimes water is scarce because of a drought. Or a natural disaster. But often *someone* has stolen or polluted the water. The market develops because of scarcity, sure, but the real problem (for those who care about human and community development) is not how to allocate what we've got, but rather to arrest the one who stole or contaminated it.

In the case of expropriation and desecration, fancy theories about scarcity are a distraction. Scarcity is, instead, the smoking gun, demanding investigation. For me, this has meant reading beyond economic theory.

Many histories of capitalism consider its origin to be the enclosure of the English commons in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, but expropriation of land goes back much further. I've found it in Bible stories as old as we can date them, the eighth century BCE. With enclosure, land and labor become sellable, alienating people from their physical and social context. Ordinary people are branded as thieves for using resources stolen from *them*. Now it's possible to go to prison for hunting in forests that were traditionally managed in common, and to go into debt buying food and shelter for yourself and those you care for. Scholar Silvia Federici tells how, during the English enclosures, being forced off their land drove women into prostitution. Once prostitution was criminalized along with midwifery and female doctors, patriarchal marriages were the only means of survival. We can still feel this legacy.

The privatization of land is inextricably linked to the exploitation of labor. The anthropologist David Graeber argues that private property is derived from the institution

of slavery. The Latin word for private property, *dominium*, is derived from a word used for slave owner. I'll say that again in case you were dozing: The Latin word for private property, *dominium*, is derived from a word used for *slave owner*. This is linguistic evidence that the notion of private property originated to describe the relationship between two people, one of whom is also a *thing*, and was only *then* extended to cover other *things* that are not people. In Graeber's reading of history, things were not traded for other things in a commercial sense until *people* were made tradeable for things. Commercial trade, the basic ingredient of economics, the setting for supply and demand, is rooted in trading *people* for *things*.

This is the thinking that showed up in our bodies earlier with the game. From a scarcity mindset, we play it as a zero-sum game, trying to push, pull, manipulate, or otherwise gain control of our partner's body to get *it* on our side of the line. If there's a difference between us in strength, one person can win and the other person will lose. But if we realize that we can simply switch places, then we both win. I think of this as abundance. In our game, abundance was there all along, underneath everything. In fact, scarcity was just an illusion, arising from our interpretation of the rules of the game. I asked you to create an imaginary line, I labeled the two sides of the line "your side" and "their side," and I told you that your job was to get the other person onto your side of the line. How easy it is to accept the premise of imaginary lines between us, and to cling tightly to ownership of "our" side!

This habit of entitlement and defensiveness is good for survival in a market-based world. It is the basis of upward mobility in our society. It does actually work, for individuals who can master it, in achieving a buffer of enoughness, a safety of plenty, a house and car and wholesome food on the table. But it isn't working for us collectively. The habit of entitlement and defensiveness doesn't just protect us from the scarcity outside our control; it creates more scarcity.

I do not deny that forces *outside* our control sometimes (often, even) take away the most basic things we rely on. Or that there is tremendous scope for technical solutions to the problems that arise from natural disasters, bad luck, and the like. Economics can be a good tool for this work. But so often it is used, instead, to justify the behaviors *within* our control that are causing the so-called "natural disaster." The public debate about climate change is just one terrible example. Our nation fights wars in the Middle East and trashes treaties with our own indigenous people for continued access to fossil fuels; and our political leaders have the audacity to justify these actions by appealing to the "need" for low oil prices, as if scarcity of oil is the problem we need to solve. Mass

extinction, the climate refugee crisis, violence in mining areas, and other “natural disasters” put the scarcity of oil in perspective, to those of us paying attention.

As I made my way through my PhD program, attempting to support the dignity and self-determination of rural Kenyans, I found myself in a position to promote market-based distractions to their underlying problems. They were directly dependent on increasingly unpredictable weather for their daily nutrition, and I was assessing whether they should plant even less food in order to compensate for my people's increased carbon footprint. The more time I spent on farms, reading about farm ecosystems, and studying the history of colonialism, the more I understood myself as a guest and a student of the people and land I was ostensibly studying. I could not solve their problems, but I could bear witness and begin to take responsibility for my part in creating them. And I could come home, and get my own people organized in solidarity.

You are my people, along with the 4000 other Unitarian Universalists coming to our city this June for General Assembly, and the thousands of fellow UUs sending them here. I was raised a UU, and I know that our shared values allow us to see across the imaginary lines and through the concrete walls of scarcity, and imagine abundance into being. It's not a simple technical problem, and as a minister, and an economist, I don't have the solution. But I'm here to find it with you.

Listen:

we are each other's
harvest:
we are each other's
business:
we are each other's
magnitude and bond.

[from Paul Robeson, by Gwendolyn Brooks]

If you have ever felt the myth of scarcity overturned in your own body, maybe earlier during our game, where else might you let go of defending your territory, claiming your entitlement, knowing the technical solution, shooting the silver bullet? How might you live a day, or a lifetime, in gratitude and generosity? Take a breath, together, and move into that realm of abundance that has been here all along.

References

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