

Abundance
When there's More than Enough to Go Around
By
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Dr. Bryce Sandlin was my Church Doctrines and Old Testament professor in college, and he had the stern demeanor that one might expect from a professor who taught these subjects. He wasn't the most approachable person and was quick to call out anyone or anything he disapproved of. He also wasn't always the most captivating lecturer, and I made the mistake of once yawning in his early morning class, doing my best to suppress it by keeping my lips closed. Dr. Sandlin caught it anyway, quickly asked me a question I could not answer, then chewed me out in front of the class for not paying attention. That was the last time I ever yawned in his class, even with my mouth shut.

As harsh and as intimidating as he could be, his students, including me, had great respect and affection for Dr. Sandlin. We loved him, and he loved us. I stayed in touch with him for many years after he retired, and I had graduated. He always looked forward to my calls and remains among the few positive father figures in my life.

With this as background, there was period following summer break that Dr. Sandlin returned a changed man after having attended a Christian retreat. He had become warm, friendly, and tolerant of his annoying students, explaining the transformative retreat helped him realize his fear of others had developed his harsh demeanor to protect himself from being hurt or let down. Good for him, but he just didn't seem right and many of us missed the Dr. Sandlin we knew. Nobody had ever heard of "trigger warnings" in those days and we weren't treated like paying clients purchasing a degree. We were paying for classes and that was it. Graduating was our responsibility alone, not the University's and certainly not that of our professors. So, all our professors were free to make us feel uncomfortable in class. And, as mostly rambunctious young men, we wanted and needed a little Old Testament wrath now and then to keep us in line.

You can imagine how relieved I was when, during one of New Dr. Sandlin's classes, a particularly annoying student began droning on and on and on regarding something he felt enlightened about. He was one of those know-it-all types who acted as if he had everything figured out and wanted to grace the rest of us with his perennial wisdom. It was painful to watch New Dr. Sandlin, patient Dr. Sandlin, warm and fuzzy good Christian Dr. Sandlin, tolerate this takeover of his class. But after we all had about as much as we could stand, he stretched out his hand, palm up, like some mighty Hebrew prophet, and uttered but one word, "Enough!" The student abruptly stopped talking and the entire class fell silent, many of us feeling relieved to see our beloved professor returned to us.

For in that moment, Dr. Sandlin hadn't merely had enough of his student's blathering, but enough of his own fake, warm and fuzzy, approachable persona. For better or for worse, it

just wasn't him. Whatever had made him who he was in life, made him who he was, and this, too, was going to have to be enough. And, like many of his students, except, perhaps, for a couple of know-it-alls, he also had had quite enough of being Mr. Nice Guy.

I begin with this story because I want to contrast the feeling of having enough with the idea of abundance. Abundance means having more than we need, but it is not the same as consuming more than we need. It doesn't mean wasting resources or using far more than we have to. What it does mean is not having to worry about meeting our basic needs because there is plenty more than is necessary—an abundance. Having more than enough just for ourselves when there isn't enough for others isn't abundance either. If there isn't enough for everyone, then we're talking about scarcity, even if some among have far more than they can ever possibly need. If there could be enough for everyone, were it not for some taking far more than they need, then we are talking about greed and inequality. But when there is more than enough to meet the needs of every person and every being on Earth, then we are talking about abundance.

The latter probably seems like an impossibility to most of us, that we are ever going to be able to fashion a world without poverty, greed, and inequality, let alone a world where there is more than enough for everyone. Today, like Bryce Sandlin, we want to hold out our open palms and shout, "enough!" We've had enough extreme heat, and fires, and smoke, and drought. We've had enough police killings of unarmed men and women. We had enough mass shootings in our schools, concerts, nightclubs, workplaces, streets, and churches with no meaningful response from our legislators (unless, apparently, the shooting happens on a movie set where real bullets are not to be tolerated). We've had enough gridlock in Washington. We've had enough partisan gerrymandering of our democracy. We've had enough voter suppression laws. We've had enough with multibillion dollar corporations not paying their fair share of taxes while the infrastructures ordinary taxpayers fund to help make them successful are failing us all. We've had enough of underfunded public schools, the skyrocketing costs of higher education, decades of flat earnings for ordinary working men and women, and rising healthcare costs that are breaking us all. We're tired of an emerging housing crisis that is forcing more and more working Americans to live in tents and automobiles on the streets of what we are told is the wealthiest nation on Earth. We've had enough of the incivility, the demonization of our neighbors, and enough of the unsound, unfounded, and ungrounded delusional thinking that abounds in our societies on both the Right and the Left. We've had enough of watching our freedoms succumb to the oppression of self-righteous politicians who think they know what's really best for us, and to an intolerant, uncritical, irrational populous that wants to force everyone of us to enable their collective madness by keeping our mouths shut. We've had enough of all of this and so much more. We have had more than enough.

But again, this feeling of being fed up, of having had more than enough, does not stem from having too much, but too little. It emerges from a feeling and mindset of scarcity, the fear

that there isn't enough to go around, that resources might run out, so we better take as much as we can for ourselves right now, while we still can: enough wealth, enough power, even enough toilet paper if that's what it takes to ease our anxieties over scarce resources. It's not that we are heartless and don't feel sorry for those who have less, but this, we have come to believe, is the nature of the world, the nature of reality, and our first priority is making sure there's enough for ourselves, our family, our loved ones, our identity group, our country, because the sad truth is, as Jesus himself admitted, "The poor will always be with us." That's just the way things are, we think, so who can blame us for competing in a world of scarcity so that we don't end up among the inevitably poor. Once we have more than we need, we can always give some away to the charities and causes of our choice, or imagine that enough of it will trickle down to those in need. But first things first, making sure our needs are met and that our futures are secure in this dog-eat-dog world.

So all of these injustices, inequalities, and cruelties in our world, the things we are fed up with, that we've had more than enough of, are not really the result of greed and indifference toward one another. The same phenomenon that leads many of the wealthiest among us to hoard far more than they can ever need or spend also causes some of the poorest among us to go to Walmart and grab as much toilet paper as they possibly can—the fear of living in a world of scarcity and the uncertainty we have about what tomorrow might bring. Better to grab up what we can now so we don't run out. So, it is this scarcity mindset, not greed, that is the root of most the failings and problems in our society. If we didn't have to worry about not having enough to pay our mortgage or rent, or to graduate from college without becoming an indentured servant, or what happens if we get laid off, or how we can afford to pay for medical care, or the ramifications of an environmental apocalypse, or another global pandemic and supply chain bottleneck, and all the other concerns of modern life, none of us, rich or poor, would feel the need to gobble up as much as we can for ourselves before it is too late.

And it's not just modern fears, many of which are justified, but also ancient instinctive fears, that no longer are, that lead us to act out of a scarcity mindset. We live in a modern world in which human innovations and technologies have radically improved our lives in many ways, including improving our overall health, extending our lives, greatly reducing global poverty and hunger, better disaster preparedness, greater literacy and education for both boys and girls, less war, and so forth. Yet we still have bodies that evolved to always be on the lookout for danger, bodies designed, not for our sedentary lifestyles, but for cautiously venturing out into unknown fields and forests where deadly serpents and predators might be lying in wait. Our amygdala, connected to our hippocampus, the emotional part of the brain, that are responsible for fear, anxiety, and defensiveness, keep us hypervigilant, always on the lookout for unknown dangers. And, as, evolutionary psychology's Evolutionary Threat Assessment Systems theory (ETAS) suggests is true, according to Cognitive Therapist, Paul Gilbert, "the most important question faced everyday by all animals, including humans, is whether their immediate environment is dangerous or not."¹ In short, the first thing any of

us does when entering a new situation, consciously or not, is to determine if we are safe or not. So, again, the scarcity mindset is not just a matter of modern realities but is something that is neurologically hardwired into our brains, this innate sense that we should remain alert and be prepared for the unknown dangers ahead.

But modern concerns aside, legitimate and many as they may be, if we can pry our eyes open just a little wider than our instincts and biology usually allow, we might begin to see the true nature of the world is abundance, not scarcity. I wish Jesus had never said that the poor will always be with us—in fact, I doubt that he did, for this unusual statement contradicts the mindset of abundance he more often expressed. Jesus was himself perfectly happy to remain a penniless and homeless itinerant who taught his disciples to live the same way. “Do not get any gold or silver or copper to take with you in your belts,” he told them. “No bag for the journey or extra shirt or sandals or a staff, for the worker is worth his keep. Whatever town or village you enter, search there for some worthy person and stay at their house until you leave.”² And he asked us not to hoard more than we need, and to pray only for our daily bread, saying, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.”³ Why should we not worry about what tomorrow brings, because Jesus looked to the workings of nature, to the empirical realm outside of our hypervigilant brains, saying, “Look at the birds of the air”⁴ and “consider the lilies of the field.”⁵ The birds do not sow, harvest, or store away, yet they are fed. The flowers do not toil or spin, yet they are clothed. Jesus is also reported to have said, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”⁶ Whether he actually said this, or it is a Gospel writer’s attempt to summarize his teachings, it certainly jives with the spirit of his abundance mindset.

At the very least, Jesus’ teachings prove this idea of abundance is ancient, certainly not as ancient as our biology, but a mindset he and others tried to live by, and encouraged the world to live by, eons ago. If we look, we can see nature’s abundance all around us too. This year, like most, the small concord grapevine growing on our back fence, where it has thrived for many years quite on its own, produced its usual abundance of the most succulent fruit you can imagine, despite our summer of extreme heat. There was so much, far far far more than we could ever make use of, that we put out a sign inviting anyone who wanted them to help themselves. We had neighbors and strangers coming by for weeks filling up buckets full of grapes, and there was still plenty left over that will soon fall to the ground and replenish the earth. That’s just one grapevine growing along about twenty-five feet of fence line, satisfying the desires of an entire neighborhood. That’s the miracle of sharing what we have, a few fish, a few loaves of bread, a grapevine, and having enough for everyone.

That’s how nature works. Ours is a world of redundancies, a world that naturally makes far more than it can ever use, then recycles what it doesn’t. The human male produces around 100-million sperm cells per ejaculation, even though only one will be used to fertilize but one of an adult female’s approximately 350,000 eggs. Humans, like grapevines, and all the

other creatures of the Earth, produce an abundance—more than can ever possibly be used—of the stuff of life.

In his book, *Antifragile*, Nicholas Taleb tells us that, “Layers of redundancy are the central risk management property of natural systems.”⁷ That may not sound as poetic, but it is just as profound as Jesus telling us to look at the birds and the flowers. *Layers of redundancy are the central risk management property of natural systems.* Abundance, that is, is the nature of our world. Taleb points out that even our own bodies have a few redundancies, like an extra kidney, and “extra capacity in many,”⁸ like our lungs, neural systems, and our arterial apparatus.

Today we live in a world of energy scarcity because it’s based on the limitations of carbon emitting fossil fuels, yet, as Peter Diamandis and Steven Kotler remind us in their book, *Abundance: The World is Better than You Think*, “there’s over five thousand times more solar energy falling on the planet’s surface than we use in a year.”⁹ Talk about abundance—more free green energy than we can ever possibly use, so much that we shouldn’t even have to think about it, let alone worry about hoarding it for a rainy day.

Likewise, when we look at the unprecedented and disastrous impacts of global warming on places like California, including extreme drought and fires, we think scarcity. There’s no longer enough water. Where are they going to get enough to drink, let alone to feed a gallon to every one of the billions of almonds their produce every year? Are they going to try to take it from us? If so, we better start protecting what we have. But the abundance mindset says, wait a minute, California is backed up right against an entire ocean where there’s more water than the entire country could ever need. As with solar energy, we need technologies to help us make use of this resource by desalinating it, but such technologies already exist and are becoming more efficient every day as our species adapts to the changing climate. That’s the abundance mindset. Diamandis and Kotler say, “abundance is about creating a world of possibility: a world where everyone’s days are spent dreaming and doing, not scrapping and scraping.”¹⁰

A couple of years ago, during Singularity University’s annual Summit, Executive Director Will Weisman began the event by saying, “I’m here because like so many of you I believe in my core that an abundant world is possible in the not too distant future, and I want to do everything that I can to help bring that to fruition. To me that looks like a world where we feed everyone, where we educate everyone, where we shelter everyone, a world where people feel safe and they feel they have a fair shot at living a good life, a world where there are mechanisms to help curb our deficiencies and overcome our most base impulses.”

Admittedly, he was speaking to a lot of technologists and industry leaders in the heart of Silicon Valley, telling them, “With so many technologies that are emerging and converging to help us eliminate disease, address climate change, and transform scarcity into abundance

across the globe, we have but one thing to do, the very thing we've assembled here to do, create the future." But such hope isn't based upon technological advances, not upon a techno-utopia, but more fundamentally upon restoring our human connection to nature, from which the idea of abundance stems. "You understand that we have disconnected ourselves from nature and failed to understand that we are inextricably connected and depend on each other's wellness to thrive as a whole," Weismann said. "So, everyone must do well if everyone is ultimately going to do great." You see, in a world of abundance, the notions of rich and poor become meaningless. A person amassing as much money for themselves as possible would be as ridiculous as trying to hoard the ocean or the sun all to themselves, when they are right there, like sunlight, and seeds, and free u-pick grapes awaiting us all.

So if, like Dr. Bryce Sandlin, you're feeling fed up, like you've had more than enough, maybe it's time to embrace the Way of nature, the Way of the entire Universe, the Abundance mindset in which there's so much to go around that the word "enough" becomes meaningless.

¹ Flannelly, Kevin J., and Galek, Kathleen, *Religion, Evolution, and Mental Health: Attachment Theory and ETAS Theory*, *Journal of Religion and Health* (2010) 49-337-350, Published online, March 17, 2009, Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, 2009, p. 340.

² Matthew 10:9-11

³ Matthew 6:19

⁴ Matthew 6:26

⁵ Matthew 6:28-29

⁶ John 10:10

⁷ Taleb, Nassim Nicholas, *Antifragile*, Random House, New York, NY, 2014, p. 44.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Diamandis, Peter H., Kotler, Steven, *Abundance: The Future is Better than You Think*, Free Press, New York, NY, 2012, p. 6.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 13.