

**OOS for Sunday, November 12, 2017**  
**James Fisher, Worship Leader**  
**Potatoes are Great: The Economics of Abundance**

**Ringing of the Bowl** - *Invitation to Contemplative Listening*

I invite you to this place of contemplation and worship  
To leave behind the joyful chatter, the news and  
All of our important views  
To merely sit and think  
To feel your breath and share the music  
And prepare for our time together.

**Gathering Music**

Wayne Smith, Music Director

**Welcome & Announcements**

UUCE Board Member

**Ringing of the Bowl**

The Bells **Edgar Allan Poe, 1809 - 1849**  
Hear the sledges with the bells--Silver bells!  
What a world of merriment their melody foretells!  
How they tinkle, tinkle, tinkle,  
In the icy air of night!  
While the stars that oversprinkle  
All the heavens, seem to twinkle  
With a crystalline delight;  
Keeping time, time, time,  
In a sort of Runic rhyme,  
To the tintinnabulation that so musically wells  
From the bells, bells, bells, bells, bells, bells--  
From the jingling and the tinkling of the bells.

**Prelude**

Wayne Smith, Music Director

**Call to Worship**

Thank you for being here.  
Thank you for putting aside the pressures of the week.  
Thank you adding to this room's warmth  
Thank you for finding happiness in winters crystalline delights

Let us celebrate the abundance of the fall  
The brilliant colors, bright blue sky, long, soulful nights  
Let us celebrate the profound quiet of the woods,  
the tenacity of wildlife bracing for winter

Let us feast upon the harvest, the pumpkins, chard,  
Turnips and potatoes.  
Let us feast upon close quarters, deep conversations,  
Our mugs of tea and downeast philosophy.

You are welcome dear friends as we celebrate this abundant feast.

\* **Opening Hymn** #298 Wake, Now, My Senses

### **Chalice Lighting**

As \_\_\_\_\_ lights our chalice flame,  
a symbol of our faith, I offer these words.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said: “One idea lights a thousand candles.”

He also said: “When it is dark enough, you can see the stars.”

The chalice is a comforting middle ground, neither pitch darkness nor blinding glare.

For the imaginative among us, the chalice represents the light of reason, the warmth of community, and the flame of hope. For others it is a focal point to train our attention lest the sermon go long.

The words of our Affirmation of Covenant printed in your bulletin.  
Please join me in reading them aloud together.

**Affirmation** (spoken in unison) words by James Villa Blake

Love is the spirit of this church,  
and service its law.

This is our great covenant:

To dwell together in peace,

To seek the truth in love,

And to help one another.

### **Time for All Ages**

The Potato Show [At the end of this document]

### **Offering**

*Before:* It is said, “The Lord loves a cheerful giver,” yet we’ll accept from a grouch as well. As the ushers prepare to take this morning’s offering, may each of us look into not just our wallets or our checkbooks to see how much we have with us. Let us look into our hearts, as well, and see what is available there—how much love, how much generosity, how much faith, how much gratitude, how much hope—and let us take our offering from that account. If you are visiting for the first time, let the plate pass you by. Your presence is a gift.

*After:* For the gifts which we have received—and the gifts which we, ourselves, are—may we be truly grateful. Yet more than that, may we be committed to using these gifts to make a difference in the world: to increase love and justice; to decrease hatred and oppression; to expand beloved community; to share, and to keep sharing, as long as ever we can. Amen.

### **Joys and Sorrows**

In the life of a congregation there are triumphs and trials for all of us and for each of us. This is the time that we set aside in our service to lift up the joys and the sorrows of our lives. Please stand and take the microphone, introduce yourself and in very **brief words** tell us your joy or sorrow.

For all we have heard and all that goes unspoken in our hearts, we light this candle.

**THE OLD FARMERS PRAYER**

June 4, 2012 / Steve Watkins

Time just keeps moving on  
Many years have come and gone  
But I grow older without regret  
My hopes are in what may come yet.  
On the farm I work each day  
This is where I wish to stay

I watch the seeds each season sprout  
From the soil as the plants rise out.  
I study Nature and I learn  
To know the earth and feel her turn  
I love her dearly and all the seasons  
For I have learned her secret reasons.

All that will live is in the bosom of Earth  
She is the loving mother of all birth  
But all that lives must pass away  
And go back again to her someday.  
My life too will pass from Earth

But do not grieve, I say, there will be other birth  
When my body is old and all spent  
And my soul to Heaven has went.  
Please compost and spread me on this plain  
So my body Mother Earth can claim  
That is where I wish to be  
Then Nature can nourish new life with me.  
So do not for me grieve and weep  
I did not leave, I only sleep  
I am with the soil here below  
Where I can nourish life of beauty and glow.  
Here I can help the falling rain  
Grow golden fields of ripening grain  
From here I can join the winds that blow  
And meet the softly falling snow.  
Here I can help the sun's warming light  
Grow food for birds of gliding flight

I can be in the beautiful flowers of spring  
And in every other lovely thing.  
So do not for me weep and cry  
I am here, I do not die.

## **Musical Reflection**

### **Responsive Reading – Reflections on the 7 Principles** by Michael E. Sallwasser

**We, the member congregation of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote:**

#### **The inherent worth and dignity of every person**

We promote the first and most honored principle of our Association by opening our pulpit to all. We affirm the dignity of every person when we value their thoughtful and heartfelt opinions enough to provide a forum to express them.

#### **Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations**

When our speech challenges the injustice and inequity we see and experience in the world, we are called to do so with compassion for the oppressor as well as the oppressed.

#### **Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations**

It is often through words that we demonstrate acceptance or rejection of someone else's spiritual journey. By choosing our words carefully when expressing our individual beliefs, we can encourage others on their chosen path by intentionally acknowledging the multiplicity of spokes to the spiritual center.

#### **A free and responsible search for truth and meaning**

How better to affirm and promote a free and responsible search than to provide a marketplace for those who are searching to share the fruits of their quest?

#### **The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large**

Free speech is the cornerstone of democracy. When repressive regimes seize power, speech is the first freedom they crush. When people rise up, it is because they are emboldened by speech that is free.

#### **The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.**

This is our challenge: to broaden the sphere of our influence, to build a community of those outside these walls. If today strengthens our convictions, then we have done well.

#### **Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.**

We are intimately connected and profoundly dependent on one another. Not the least of what we need from one another is the infusion of new ideas, new ways of thinking, that help us to better understand each other and ourselves.

## Readings

### **From the first chapter of Thomas Malthus *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798)**

“I say, that the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man.

Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio. A slight acquaintance with numbers will shew the immensity of the first power in comparison of the second.

By that law of our nature which makes food necessary to the life of man, the effects of these two unequal powers must be kept equal.

This implies a strong and constantly operating check on population from the difficulty of subsistence. This difficulty must fall somewhere and must necessarily be severely felt by a large portion of mankind.”



### **From the Third Epistle of Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man***

Hope humbly then; with trembling pinions soar;  
Wait the great teacher Death; and God adore!  
What future bliss, he gives not thee to know,  
But gives that hope to be thy blessing now.

Hope springs eternal in the human breast:  
Man never is, but always to be blest:  
The soul, uneasy and confin'd from home,  
Rests and expatiates in a life to come.



### **Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Essay on Compensation***

I was lately confirmed in these desires by hearing a sermon at church. The preacher, a man esteemed for his orthodoxy, unfolded in the ordinary manner the doctrine of the Last Judgment. He assumed, that judgment is not executed in this world; that the wicked are successful; that the good are miserable; and then urged from reason and from Scripture a compensation to be made to both parties in the next life.

The legitimate inference the disciple would draw was,--'We are to have such a good time as the sinners have now';--or, to push it to its extreme import, --'You sin now; we shall sin by and by; we would sin now, if we could; not being successful, we expect our revenge to-morrow.'



### **Meditative Hymn #154 No More Auction Block For Me**

**SERMON** “Potatoes are Great: The Economics of Abundance” Dr. James Fisher

The whimsical title of my sermon “Potatoes Are Great: The Economics of Abundance” is probably familiar to dedicated listeners of public radio. The phrase “Allahu Akbar” which translates from Arabic as “God is Greater”, is occasionally misquoted as Alu Akbar, or potatoes are great.

Understanding Islam is important, but will only play a small part in my sermon this morning. Rather, I will use my time with you to consider the ways that potatoes are great, as any Mainer should, but that potatoes are more than just a metaphor for the challenge of sustaining the abundance of our world. As we put our gardens to rest and fill our kitchens, garages, freezers and canning jars with the fall bounty, we are conscious that this abundance is transitory and that we have a moral obligation to help others and to walk a path that will sustain this fragile planet for future generations.

In 1979 Donna and I were fortunate to be stationed high in the Andes Mountains of Ecuador to assist the Ministry of Agriculture as extensionists. Our villages, Pinguili and El Rosal, were classic Andean highland communities where farmers scratched out a living growing crops 10,000 feet above sea level, including apples, cherries, onions, cabbage and a variety of potatoes. We were living in the birthplace of the potato. They came in many sizes and shapes from the large, white varieties we call Idaho’s, so small red mellocos and long, white and red uqa.



Potato lovers should read the Smithsonian Magazine article “How the Potato Changed the World”. I will share my cribbed notes from this and a few other sources.

Wild potatoes evolved in the high, thin air of the Andes mountains. They are members of the solanaceae or nightshade family with tomatoes, eggplants, peppers, tobacco and a number of deadly nightshades such as belladonna. This family of plants contain varying levels of toxic alkaloids solanine, tropanes, atropines, addictive nicotines and the heat-inducing capscicum that scorch your mouth when eating chilies and habaneros. Early wild potatoes contained relatively high levels of the toxic alkaloids. Vicuñas, relatives to llamas, adapted to eating wild potato stalks and tubers by alternatively licking clay that would bind-up the toxins. People learned to do the same, and potatoes were consumed after dipping in a gravy of edible clay.



Plant breeding eventually isolated varieties of potatoes that were not toxic and did not require edible clay, but also resulted in plants that were more vulnerable to frost, insect pests and fungal diseases. Subsistence farmers still grow some of the more toxic varieties which are hardy, and add to the genetic diversity of potatoes.

The first expedition of Francisco Pizarro to South America “discovered” Indians eating potatoes, followed by the export of tubers to Europe. Most countries in Europe viewed the potato with suspicion. In 1775 Louis XVI lifted price controls on grain creating a rapid increase in the price of bread. Antoine-Augustin Parmentier, the potato’s Johnny Appleseed, campaigned on behalf of the potato, introducing the prolific tuber to a population at the brink of starvation. Historians have identified 40 nationwide famines in France between 1500 and 1800 and 18 regional famines in England between 1523 and 1623. When potatoes gained widespread acceptance they doubled caloric production in Europe and largely eliminated famine. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century potatoes were a staple in Europe. The 1800’s might be considered a time of caloric abundance for Europe. But there was trouble in paradise.

The traditional integrated farms of Europe and the United States involved a blend of pasture, row crops and animal production. The move to larger scale production of potatoes pushed aside the integrated farm.

Like all crops, potatoes give only what they receive. They are heavy feeders of nutrients like nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium. To sustain high yields in the absence of farm animals, guano of exotic birds like boobies was mined from remote Peruvian Islands and shipped to Europe. In 1856 the US Congress passed the

Guano Island Act authorizing our country to seize islands that contained guano without paying the Peruvian government. Intensive use of fertilizer was thus a consequence of the great potato.

Reproduction by planting tubers, as opposed to seeds, is a form of cloning. The resulting plant is identical to its parent plant. While the Andes had and continues to have a wide variety of potatoes, European farmers were working with a few varieties and created the world's first large scale monoculture.

The guano and the tubers brought with them insects and diseases. A water mold called *Phytophthora infestans* or late blight surged into Europe in 1845 destroying crops for six years, killing more than 1 million in Ireland alone, and leading to migration of more than 2 million from Ireland primarily to the United States, reducing Ireland's population by half.



A colorful water beetle, now known as the Colorado Potato Beetle, migrated or we might say invaded from Mexico to the United. The beetle population, that was dependent hitherto on scattered buffalo bur exploded with the advent of potato monoculture.

Almost by accident a farmer discovered that paint that contained arsenic and copper killed the beetles and controlled the water mold. Paris green, or Copper Acetoarsenite, made up of these two lethal chemicals gained widespread use to maintain the monoculture, thus introducing the first widespread use of chemical pesticides on the almighty potato. The water mold and the beetle have been adapting ever since. If even a very small percent of the beetles or blights prove resistant to chemicals, they can reproduce creating successively larger generations of resistant strains. Farmers now use cocktails of pesticides and frequent applications hoping to manage resistant strains.

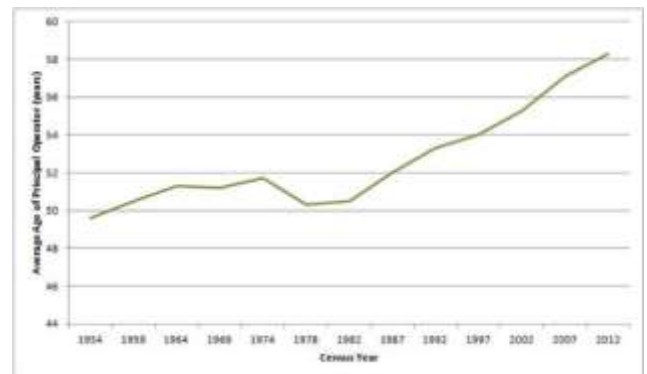


This story holds true for food production generally. Many of our staple crops, corn, beans, wheat, beef, pork, poultry, blueberries and potatoes are produced at an industrial scale that has produced abundance on the one hand and environmental degradation on the other. It is very difficult to see how these practices can be sustained. Further, economic globalization of agriculture has resulted in unimaginable challenges ranging from price competition to worker and product safety.

Our farmers, only 2% of the US population, are running on a treadmill that is moving faster and faster, favoring a broader array of chemicals, genetic engineering and cultural practices to meet our expectations of abundance.

The high cost of large-scale, mechanized, industrialized agriculture on the one hand and the low-financial returns of small-scale organic agriculture on the other are conspiring in this country to a rapid aging of the farming population.

Census data indicated that the average age of US Farmers increased from 50 in 1984 to 58 in 2016.

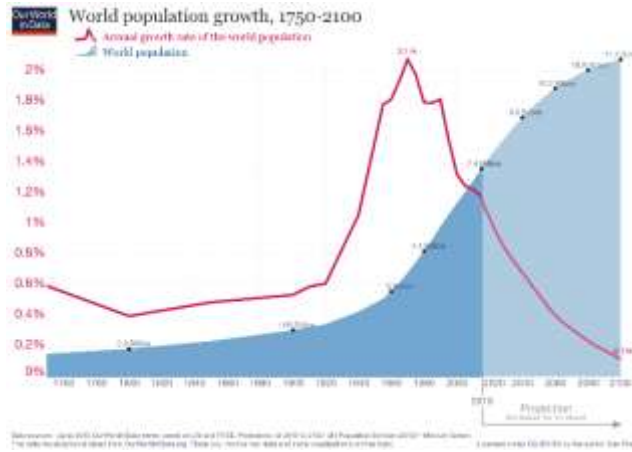


Economics is a dismal science, and economists are no more welcome in polite company than the Colorado potato beetle. However, economics is a diverse field, and I believe we can find some light in our path to an economics of abundance.



**1) Six Sources: Humanist teachings which to heed the guidance of reason and the science and warn us against the idolatries and spirit.**

Thomas Malthus predicted that human would ultimately outstrip the supply of food produced in the world. His predictions were the green revolution, exemplified in our the potato. The world has thus far managed an adequate supply of food, though in many have failed to distribute it adequately. There today in many parts of the developing world.



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Malthus posited that population could not exceed the supply of food without “positive checks” to raise the death rate, such as misery, famine and war, or “preventative checks” to lower the birth rate, such as delayed marriage and birth control. As the net economic value of children has fallen, particularly in developed, urban economies, so too have birth rates fallen. The continued effort to reduce unwanted births is a necessary, though not sufficient condition of sustainability. The world population growth rates have declined from 2% in 1960 to 1.1% currently.

Unfortunately the population doubled in that time, so the population adds about as many people now as then, or about 150 people per minute. I believe that the practice of family planning is an affirmation of the inherent worth of every person. We acknowledge that each woman should have the freedom of reproductive choice. We pray that each child will live free from hunger.

**2) Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations**

A second conclusion is that we must also increase the supply of food and do a much better job with the quality and distribution of food to meet the needs of all people.

The concentration of wealth in America as in the world is a great concern to economists. The 2016 survey of consumer finances finds that 3 individuals in the US now control more wealth than the bottom 50% of the US population, or 160 million persons. 30% of African-American families have zero or negative net worth and suffer higher levels of food related chronic diseases.

Last week’s revelation of the Paradise Papers leaked from the Cayman Island Applebey Law Firm suggest that wealth is even more concentrated than we thought, and much of it is hidden in off-shore account doing little to help this nation and particularly those that are struggling to meet basic needs.

Quality of food is particularly important in western, developed economies. Perhaps I am singing to the choir, but in the United States we have adopted or perhaps adapted to a diet and lifestyle that is as unhealthy as it may be abundant. Processed foods, many of which are simply chemical combinations of extracts from corn, palm oil, potatoes and salt, are driving an epidemic of obesity and chronic disease. Just one of these chronic diseases, diabetes, affects or may soon affect approximately 80 million Americans (nearly a quarter of our population) costing approximately 322 billion dollars per year, or about half of our defense budget. This is not to say that potatoes are inherently unhealthy, but they have been coopted to be so.

**3) Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.**



An economy of abundance should not be confused with a momentary sugar high. Many of our natural resources are finite and must be conserved. If we want potatoes, we will need nitrogen, either organic or chemical. The use of natural gas to generate electricity will ultimately reduce our ability to make urea, or nitrogen fertilizers. It's a choice. Small scale, integrated systems may provide a more sustainable model for food production, but are challenged by the enormity of demand.

Malthus foresaw the economic concept of diminishing returns. In our little villages in Ecuador diminishing returns was evident as farmers attempted to plow and plant on steep slopes, causing unsustainable soil erosion and water degradation. Sustainable abundance will mean finding better ways to manage our limited farmland sustainably.

Alexander Pope's famous lines:

Hope springs eternal in the human breast: Man never is, but always to be blest:

And Ralph Waldo Emerson's critique of compensation in the afterlife, present for me a fundamental dilemma that is captured in economics as a "discount rate" or our *time preference for money*. If we apply a high discount rate, we will value more the immediate returns – the sugar high. If we apply lower rates, we will need to look further into the future and deal with a lot of uncertainty about what will happen. Parenthetically, Islam discourages charging interest on loans, suggesting that rather than lend, those with resources should be investors that will share in the returns, good or bad, rather than demand returns when an investment fails.

The potato has had a remarkable history and for many years provided sustenance for much of the world's population. It has not been a sugar high, but a technological change that enabled the world to radically increase food production, thus keeping ahead of population growth. In short, the potato has paid very long-term returns on investment. Late blight and Colorado Potato Beetles are inevitable.

We must consider as we embark on our era of genetic engineering, advances in "crisper" technology, designer cocktails of GMO seeds, herbicides, fungicides and insecticides, whether we are charting a course that is sustainable for the long-haul. For this we will need all of our sources of our living tradition, direct experience, prophetic, world's religions, Jewish and Christian, earth-centered and I think particularly humanist. May it be so.

\* **Closing Hymn** #128 For All That Is Our Life

### **Benediction Excerpts from Prayer and Potatoes**

<https://www.legendarydartmoor.co.uk/prayer-potatoes.htm>

Reverend JT Petties

An old lady sat in her old arm-chair  
With wrinkled visage and dishevelled hair  
And hunger-worn features;  
For a few days and for weeks her only fare,  
As she sat there in her old arm-chair,  
Had been potatoes.

But now they were gone; of bad and good  
Not one was left for the old lady's food  
Of those potatoes;  
And she sighed and said "What shall I do?  
Where shall I send, and to whom shall go

For more potatoes”?

And she thought of the vicar over the way,  
The vicar so ready to worship and pray,  
Whose cellar was full of potatoes.  
And she said; “I will send for the vicar to come:  
He’ll not mind much to give some  
Of such a store of potatoes.

And the vicar came as fast as he could,  
Thinking to do the old lady some good,  
But never for once of potatoes:  
He asked her at once what was her chief want,  
And she, simple soul, expecting a grant,  
Immediately answered “potatoes.”

The vicar was troubled; knew not what to do;  
‘Twas very embarrassing to have her act so  
About “those carnal potatoes.”  
So, ending his prayer, he started for home;  
But, as the door closed behind him, he heard a deep groan,  
“O give to the hungry potatoes!”

And would you, who hear this simple tale,  
Pray for the poor, and praying “prevail,”  
Then preface your words with alms and good deeds:  
Search out the poor, their wants and their needs:  
Pray for peace, and grace, and spiritual food,  
For wisdom, and guidance for all these are good,  
But don’t forget the potatoes.

## **Postlude**