

**“Searching for Abundance in Uncertain Times”  
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Amos 8: 4-6 “Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring ruin to the poor of the land, saying, ‘When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the Sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling only the husks of the wheat.’”

Back in the eighth century BCE, the prophet Amos called it like he saw it. He angrily denounced the way that the rich and powerful of his own country had taken advantage of the innocent and the poor.

Amos bemoaned that fact that the greed of the wealthy and powerful trumped all their other obligations. Greed overtook their religious obligations, with wealthy merchants impatiently waiting out the holy days so they could get back to market and make more money.

Greed overtook their moral obligations to the public. Wealthy merchants cheated the poor out of the money they deserved. Back in Amos’ times, there were no standardized coins, so the price of goods was determined by scales. Amos tells us that the wealthy and powerful practiced “deceit with false balances” by using inaccurate weights in order to ratchet up prices.

The general population incurred enough debt to put them at the mercy of the powerful, to the point that the wealthy were “buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals.” So little regard did

the wealthiest businesspeople have for the common people that they patently deceived the public by selling them the mere husks of grain as though it were the grain itself.

Two thousand, eight hundred years later and not much has changed. We trusted other human beings, other fallible human beings, to prudently handle money and the power that comes with money. Well, it turns out that they were using false balances. Turns out that they were selling husks and calling it grain. Our country now finds itself in a financial crisis that has spilled out into the world.

In the past few weeks we have seen strange new developments. The bursting of the housing bubble has left average people facing foreclosures and dwindling home values. Huge reputable companies have gone belly-up. Banks in Europe and the United States have virtually stopped lending to each other. People are watching the value of their retirement savings and other investments plummet. Our government has passed a 700 billion dollar bailout package and is now talking about injecting money directly into the banks that need it most. This past week was the worst week at the New York Stock Exchange in at least 75 years, and the market remains weak as investors continue to sell off stocks. A prominent hedge fund manager described the mentality behind this rush to sell as people “crawling into a bunker and pulling an iron sheet over their heads because they think the sky is falling.”

What is going on here? Is the sky falling? Who can I believe? How will it impact me and the people I love? What does the future hold? How can I hold on to what I've got?

Walking out of my home each morning, things appear to be pretty much the same in the world. The shelves at the grocery store are stocked and prices haven't shifted much in the past few weeks. People appear to be going about their business as usual. As far as I can see, Davis looks just like it did a month ago.

Then I turn on the radio, or I talk with a friend or colleague, and it's a different story. Fear and anxiety about the future is creeping into our psyches, and into the collective psyche of our nation and our world. From Wall Street in New York to Fifth Street here in Davis, people are searching for security to save them from scarcity.

When fear of scarcity encroaches, we tend to tighten up and hunker down. In our search for security, we pull inwards and steel ourselves for the storm ahead. This steeling of the self can induce a sort of paralysis. Franklin Roosevelt described this phenomenon in his 1933 inaugural address. Many of us are familiar his proclamation that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself." But even more compelling is the rest of the sentence. He goes on to describe this fear, calling it "nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance."

There was once a little farming community that struggled with this kind of nameless, unreasoning fear and its paralyzing effects. The community was called...Mavis. Mavis, California. Fear hadn't always gripped the people of Mavis.

In fact, they used to love each other's company and they used to loved helping each other out. Their children used to play together at the farmer's market, they used to fix each other's bicycles, and they would help each other sort the recycling. Back in those times, the community of Mavis was lucky enough to have all different kinds of fruits and vegetables growing year round. In the summertime, the lemon farmers would help the peach farmers bring in the harvest. In the wintertime, the peach farmers would help the lemons farmers with their haul.

Then, one year, there was a terrible drought in Mavis. That year, the farmers didn't need each other's help because the harvest was so small. The drought continued into the next year, and the next year, and the people became hungry and scared. They wanted to carefully guard everything they had, so they shut their doors, closed their blinds, and spent all day long looking at their bank statements online. They hoarded the little food they had and hid it even from their friends and neighbors.

One day, a traveler passed through town. The wind was blowing so hard and the dust from the drought made it so difficult to see that she had to stop in the little town of Mavis for the night. The traveler was very hungry and she looked and looked for a place to eat dinner and couldn't find a single restaurant that was open. She was so hungry that she finally mustered up the courage to approach someone's home and ask for food.

The traveler walked down the street and came upon a cul-de-sac. She knocked on the door of the first house. An old man answered the door. The traveler asked whether his family could spare some food for dinner.

The old man shook his head, "Times are very hard here and we certainly don't have enough to share with a stranger," he told the traveler. "Better keep moving on."

"That's fine," said the traveler. "I will just make myself some delicious chalice soup."

The traveler pulled a large pot from her car and filled it with water from a nearby drinking fountain. Right there in the middle of the cul-de-sac she built a fire under the pot. Then she removed a small ceramic chalice from her purse and dropped it into the water.

“I certainly love my chalice soup,” the traveler said in a loud voice. “It has a most delicious flavor. In fact, the only thing that could possibly make this soup taste better would be a head of cabbage. Of course, there is no hope of that in these difficult times.”

Suddenly, a little boy emerged from his house carrying a small head of cabbage. “Take this,” said the boy. “All I ask is that you let me have a taste of your chalice soup.”

“Of course!” cried the traveler as she dropped the cabbage into the pot. “In fact, I would be honored if your entire family ate with me. I am just sorry that I could not offer you chalice soup with beans. Now that is truly delicious!” With that, a young mother approached the traveler and she was carrying a large can of beans.

“Here,” she said, placing the beans into the pot. “All I ask is that you let my children eat some of your chalice soup.” “Of course!” said the traveler. “But you must try it yourself. It is really wonderful.”

And so it went -- through potatoes, onions, carrots, mushrooms, and so on -- until all of the people from the neighborhood gathered around the pot. When the chalice soup was ready, there was enough delicious food for everyone. The people of Mavis struck up conversations with each other and were soon chatting and laughing as they had in earlier times.

“What a miracle!” said the people of Mavis as they ate. “To think that such delicious soup could be made from a simple chalice!” When the traveler left, she gave the people her chalice as a gift.

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The brave traveler in this story found a people frozen by fear and showed them the abundance that springs from cooperation and generosity.

This abundance occurred on two levels: On a material level, each person's contribution meant that the group got to enjoy some delicious soup in a time of hunger.

There is also a deeper level to the abundance introduced by the traveler in the story: By bringing people together, the traveler cast out the petrifying forces of fear. When fear is cast out, people can stand side-by-side in community and get the emotional and spiritual sustenance that they really need. By fostering community, the traveler made room for love to take root and thrive.

Making room for love is at the core of our Universalist heritage.

The Universalists were our forebears who believed in a God who loved its people so much that no one could be sent to hell. As Unitarian Universalists, we are rooted in a tradition that refused to accept a God who would create fundamentally bad people and then damn them eternally. Instead, they believed that God loves these precious, fallible beings called humans and that *we* should strive to embody such an encompassing love. Our heritage is one that envisions a greater love, a greater unity, and tells us that it is our job to teach and live this truth. Today, in these times of fear and trepidation, it is our charge as Unitarian Universalists to usher in a reign of greater love.

This greater love starts right here, with us. In these times of insecurity and anxiety, we must GIVE. The next time that you feel your blood pressure rising at the latest headlines, or you discover that there was less in your account that you thought there should be: Give. The next time you open a bill and wonder how it's going to get paid: give. When you plan to tighten your purse strings to keep more of what

you've got: give. Give *something*. Give your time to someone you love. Give a compliment. Give a hug. Send a card. Contribute to a cause that matters, something greater than yourself. If Unitarian Universalism has made a difference in your life, support our Association during the offertory this morning. Somehow, give of yourself.

Where exactly should we direct our generosity? At the end of the day, who really matters to you? What really matters to you?

When we're generous in the parts of life that really matter to us, we are reminded where our real investments are. These are our investments of the heart. They are exceedingly valuable. And they need your contributions now more than ever.

Our real investments are in our loved ones, the communities where we find joy and support, and the worthy causes that never fail to move us. Generosity in these investments may even increase their value. Time invested in calling an old friend or playing catch with a child can bring even more abundance into our lives: abundance of love, abundance of joy.

We don't know what's coming. We live in a world that has again gotten snagged on greed and false balances. Every day, the strange and alarming headlines are changing.

In these times, we must keep our hearts warm and our vision clear. When fear stiffens your heart, loosen it up with the salve of generosity. While our economic and political times may be frightening in very real ways, we must not be frozen by despair and sinking hopes. In these times, we are needed. The world needs us to hold fast to a Universalist vision of a greater love. May this greater love be in our hearts and in our deeds as we navigate the uncertain terrain of today and tomorrow.

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