

S U M M E R

Where I live, summer's keynote is abundance. The forests fill with undergrowth, the trees with fruit, the meadows with wild flowers and grasses, the fields with wheat and corn, the gardens with zucchini, and the yards with weeds. In contrast to the sensationalism of spring, summer is a steady state of plenty, a green and amber muchness that feeds us on more levels than we know.

Nature does not always produce abundance, of course. There are summers when flood or drought destroy the crops and threaten the lives and livelihood of those who work the fields. But nature normally takes us through a reliable cycle of scarcity and abundance in which times of deprivation foreshadow an eventual return to the abundant fields.

This fact of nature is in sharp contrast to a human nature, which seems to regard perpetual scarcity as the law of life. Daily I am astonished at how readily I believe that something I need is in short supply. If I hoard possessions, it is because I believe that there are not enough to go around. If I struggle with others over power, it is because I believe that power is limited. If I become jealous in relationships, it is because I believe that when you get too much love I will be short-changed.

Even in writing this essay I have had to struggle with the scarcity assumption. It is easy to stare at the blank page and despair of ever having another idea, another image, another illustration. It is easy to look back at what one has written and say, "That's not very good but I'd better keep it, because nothing better will come along." It is difficult to trust that the pool of possibilities is bottomless, that one can keep diving in and finding more.

The irony, often tragic, is that by embracing the scarcity assumption, we create the very scarcities we fear. If I hoard material goods, others will have too little and I will never have enough. If I fight my way up the ladder of power, others will be defeated and I will never feel secure. If I get jealous of someone I love, I am likely to drive that person away. If I cling to the words I have written as if they were the last of their kind, the pool of new possibilities will surely go dry. We create scarcity by fearfully accepting it as law, and by competing with others for resources as if we were stranded on the Sahara at the last oasis.

In the human world, abundance does not happen automatically. It is created when we have the sense to choose community, to come together to celebrate and share our common store. Whether the "scarce resource" is money or love or power or words, the true law of life is that we generate more of whatever seems scarce by trusting its supply and passing it around. Authentic abundance does not lie in secured stockpiles of food or cash or influence or affection, but in belonging to a community where we can give those goods to others who need them – and receive them from others when we are in need.

I sometimes speak on college campuses about the importance of community in academic life, one of the most competitive cultures I know. On one such occasion, following my talk, a man stood in the audience, introduced himself as occupant of the "Distinguished Suchand-Such Chair of Biology," and began what I thought – given his rather pompous self-introduction – would surely be an attack. Instead, he said simply, "Of course we must learn to live in community with each other. After all, it is only good biology." Biology, the discipline that was once driven by anxious metaphors like "the survival of the

fittest,” and “nature red in tooth and claw,” now has a new metaphor – community. Death has not ceased, of course, but now it is understood as a legacy to the community of abundant life.

Here is a summertime truth: abundance is a communal act, the joint creation of an incredibly complex ecology in which each part functions on behalf of the whole and, in return, is sustained by the whole. Community not only creates abundance – community is abundance. If we could learn that equation from the world of nature, the human world might be transformed.

Summer is the season when all the promissory notes of autumn and winter and spring come due, and each year the debts are repaid with compound interest. In summer it is hard to remember that we had ever doubted the natural process, had ever ceded death the last word, had ever lost faith in the powers of new life. Summer is a reminder that our faith is not nearly as strong as the things we profess to have faith in – a reminder that, for this single season at least, we might cease our anxious machinations and give ourselves to the abiding and abundant grace of our common life.

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(Yes, there really is a typo in it)