

How We Set Our Table

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This month's theme is Abundance. We've looked at that in several ways. We commemorated our Beloved Dead and the Abundance of wisdom and love we have inherited from them. Last week we considered what it meant to be a people of Abundance. It takes first – a recognition of abundance in our lives and in the world and the universe. Then, we call on the abundance of what our ancestors have given us. Third, it takes imagination. If we can't imagine the future world we hope to live in, we will not be able to bring it forth.

And finally, to do all of these things requires that we take care of ourselves and make sure that we have a practice of Sabbath in our lives. A time when we rest, reflect, renew, refresh. Because exhausted people – people who are physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually exhausted – cannot bring about the change desired. Remember, "rested people are dangerous." We have enough and we are enough, right here and right now, when we remember these gifts of abundance and the practice of Sabbath.

Today, we are celebrating Thanksgiving together with a Bread Communion.

We had a wonderful Thanksgiving meal here last night.

We sat in one of the most intimate places we can – at the table – sharing our abundance of food, fellowship and love.

The table is a powerful place. Let's hear a poem about this from Joy Harjo, a poet, author and musician and member of the Mvskoke Nation here in the US.

Perhaps the World Ends Here

The world begins at a kitchen table.

No matter what, we must eat to live.

The gifts of earth are brought and prepared, set on the table.

So it has been since creation, and it will go on.

We chase chickens or dogs away from it.

Babies teethe at the corners. They scrape their knees under it.

It is here that children are given instructions on what it means to be human.

We make men at it, we make women. We make adults.

At this table we gossip, recall enemies and the ghosts of lovers.

Our dreams drink coffee with us as they put their arms around our children.

They laugh with us at our poor falling-down selves

as we put ourselves back together once again, at the table.

This table has been a house in the rain, an umbrella in the sun.

Wars have begun and ended at this table. It is a place to hide from the shadow of terror.

A place to celebrate the terrible victory.

We have given birth on this table, and have prepared our parents for burial here.

At this table we sing with joy, with sorrow.

We pray of suffering and remorse.

*We give thanks.
Perhaps the world will end at the kitchen table,
while we are laughing and crying, eating of the last sweet bite.*

It's easy to think of this congregation as being that kind of table. A table of birth and death and everything in between. A table where the most important and the least important things of life take place. A table of dreams. A table of plenty. A table of justice.

So, if we are a people of abundance, here at this table of Unitarian Universalism together, how do we set our table, this table? What does it look like? What's on the table? And perhaps most important, who do we invite to be here?

In your application for developmental ministry, the application that brought me here, you described your dream congregation this way:

Our aspirations are to develop a vibrant, innovative and exciting church environment that attracts and retains young and older persons, including families, persons of color, those of diverse ethnic backgrounds, gender identities and sexual orientation. We envision a congregation that fosters the connection of those persons with each other and the community at large to carry out dynamic programs that exemplify our Unitarian Universalist values to transform our local area and the world at large.

To be this dynamic, vital, diverse UU congregation is obviously to be people of abundance. An abundance of diversity of all types. An abundance of vital active programs that embody our UU values and principles. An abundance of opportunities for transformation for ourselves, our community and the larger world.

And this vision of our congregation demands that you set the table of this congregation ***lavishly***. With an abundance of spiritual, mental, physical and emotional nurturance. With a huge and real welcome to people of all kinds.

The Reverend Broderick Greer, who is a priest at the Episcopalian Cathedral of St John's in the Wilderness in Denver, Colorado, writes about this process in his essay, *Creating Tables of Our Own*.

Greer begins by talking of how his Grandmother always invited a neighbor, known as Sister Jackson, over for Thanksgiving dinner. This was because Grandmother was concerned about Sister Jackson's living conditions and how her family neglected her. As Greer explains:

People like Grandmama, who have been excluded from others' tables, often do the work of creating their own.

These exclusions from our tables, he notes, are often *rooted in racism, sexism, white supremacy, transantagonism, heterosexism, or some other form of boundary-drawing.*

Greer goes on to say:

One needs only a casual relationship with the Gospels to notice that Jesus was more concerned with tables than with the Temple . . . the Gospels contain story after story of Jesus eating with people the establishment understood as undesirable, as social and religious liabilities.

There is, in Jesus's building of communities around tables, a sense that this is precisely how God will usher in a new era of justice — not in the centers of power and prestige, but at the periphery, at the tables

adorned with leftovers.

*When Jesus feasts with outcasts, he is engendering the way the reality of Divine Love breaks into **our** reality: by defying every book of etiquette. Jesus demonstrates that God does not appear in the world in neatly wrapped packages, but in the middle of chaotic dinner parties, the fragility of a teenage pregnancy, and the mess of the general human experience.*

[This], says Greer, is what eating together, sharing a table does. It expands our social and theological imaginations, ushers in a new way of relating to each other, while bringing our origin stories to bear in tangible and transformative ways. And it brings to mind all those who won't be seated at tables with their loved ones anymore, due to state-sanctioned violence exacted upon them during a chance encounter with police or because they've been banished from their family of origin due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

We're reminded that [Jesus'] way of life, that God's way of creating, loving, and setting us free, is defined by those with whom we share food, at the tables and altars we create and feast at in our famished times.

And I believe this is true for us as UUs, too. The way we live our Principles and connect with the Spirit of Life, however we understand it. Will be seen and defined most clearly by those whom we invite to our table here. Because if our table here is not radically welcoming to all people, if our table is not open, **truly** open to all kinds of people, then we are not fully living our Principles and Covenants.

And this is especially true in these times that can feel so famished. When it is too easy to forget the true Abundance that is all around us and also waiting to be created by us.

In the coming months, we are going to dive into our developmental goals more deeply, including our Welcome goal. How can we become even more radically welcoming to everyone who comes here? How can we set our table so that visitors are immediately and richly made to feel wanted here? How can we set out table so new members truly are included here without going through some kind of probation period? There will be a lot to explore and experiment with together. And it will be fun!

I close with these words from the Reverend Deanne Vandiver
*When we see that our days are replete with abundance, we are less afraid.
When we are less afraid, we connect more.
The more connections we see in our lives, the more abundance we notice.*

So may it be for all of us together.