

**Time for All Ages** – This was inspired by Robin Wall Kimmerer’s book, “The Serviceberry.” It’s a lovely little book, but it’s not strictly speaking a storybook. Or maybe it is; it’s about the serviceberry and how people are in relationship to it. The Serviceberry is a small tree, or bush, that grows all over North America. You might know it as sugarplum. It blooms early each year, when the shad — a fish that lives in New England rivers — runs in the rivers, which gives it another name — shadbush. And its sweet, delicious fruit is called saskatoon by the Cree nation in Canada, which is where the city of Saskatoon, in Saskatchewan, gets *its* name. I don’t think I know of any other cities that are named for a fruit. That’s how important and wonderful those berries are. We named a city after them.

People and animals love the taste of the serviceberry. I know someone who calls them “best berries.” And because they flower and fruit so early, they are usually the first sweet fruit available in most areas — giving it another name, juneberry. Not surprisingly, birds and mammals, settlers and the native peoples loved and still love this fruit. The trees are covered with ripe fruit and if you go collecting them, you’ll see all kinds of birds and animals stuffing themselves with the fruit, as well as people. There’s plenty to go around.

It’s nature’s model; abundance. There’s more than enough to go around. You can eat yourself silly, and take home what you can carry to make jam, or pies, and share the wealth even further. And the serviceberry trees ask for nothing in return; they give it away. It’s nature’s free, buy nothing arrangement.

Today, we’re going to take the serviceberry as a model. We’re going to give away what we can. The school year has begun. And because of the way our society and economy work, children, by law, must go to school. And that’s a good thing, on average — kids need education for their own benefit *and* for the good of the society. I see in this one of our Unitarian Universalist values — interdependence. But that’s not what I want to talk about right now. We *require* kids to go to school, but we don’t provide what they need to really get a complete education. We, as a society, do not adequately fund education. So *some* kids go to school without the supplies that they need — paper, pencils, and so on.

Because most teachers have a deep commitment to the job they are doing, they commonly pay for at least some of the most needed supplies, so that kids *don’t* go without. That comes out of *their* pockets. But teachers are seriously underpaid in America. And those donations they’re making are often not even tax deductible.

One of the ways that *we* support our community and try to make things more equitable is to help bridge that gap. We collected school supplies and some of us will help organize those supplies into bundles for kids in our larger community. Generosity, interdependence, and at least a gesture towards equity and justice — all of those being some of our core values as a religious tradition.

## Reading – Ursula K. LeGuin

Receiving an award for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, Ursula LeGuin commented that the physical award was a beautiful reward, and went on to observe;

“The profit motive often is in conflict with the aims of art. We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings.

Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art, and very often in our art: the art of words.

... But the name of our beautiful reward is not profit: Its name is *freedom*.”

## Reading

"Call it democracy, or call it democratic socialism, but there must be a better distribution of wealth within this country for all God's children." —MLK

## Sermon – Tending Each Other’s Needs

In Turkey, there’s an tradition called *Askıda Ekmek*. It works like this: you go to a bakery, buy a loaf of bread — and pay for *two*. When you are paying for your bread, you say “*And one askıda ekmek*”. The second loaf is bagged and hung on a hook together with others. When people come in during the day and ask, “*Is there bread on the hook?*”, they can take a loaf for free. It is a gift of abundance that people give to the world. Just like the serviceberry.

I want to consider the model of the serviceberry, nature, and *askıda ekmek*. I want to do this because there’s a hint about how we might live differently, in ways that are kinder, healthier, and more in accord with nature — rather than in the political system that is both collapsing and being torn down, and in the economic system we call capitalism, which is devouring us all and the planet, as it collapses.

It is collapsing. The American Empire is ending now — in 2025, just as Johan Galtung predicted it would. So is late stage capitalism. There are limits to everything, but like cancer, capitalism believes in unlimited growth. It is hard to imagine what comes next; we have lived inside of it all of our lives. Surely it will go on forever, right?

But nothing is forever. *It's dying*. So it behooves us to *imagine* alternatives, to dream of better ways of living and being that could become the way the future works.

The way we've thought about the ecology for decades is rather... puritan. We are urged to have as small a footprint as possible — or none; to leave no mark, to be painfully frugal. But nature doesn't work that way. Nature is wildly abundant and generous. The serviceberry is an example, but there are so many more. In providing a rich offering of fruit each year, serviceberries — and peaches, tomatoes, and nearly everything else — feed clouds of birds, wandering squirrels, bears, other animals, and human beings. The berries that aren't eaten fall to the ground to rot and *enrich* the soil.

In return for this gift, what do the plants get? Animals wander off and deposit the seeds of those trees (often with a nice rich bit of fresh fertilizer), helping serviceberries spread elsewhere; making sure that there are even more trees and berries in the future. It's a virtuous cycle; every creature in it is busily making things better for all the others. And it's not *work*.

No one is hoarding all the berries nor even trying to. There's no one chiding the birds and the bears to only pick and eat only what they need.

Nature is abundant — *profligate* — in its generosity.

The economy we live in **isn't**. We call it capitalism, but it isn't really — it's what Adam Smith described when he invented *capitalism*. In fact it lacks most of the key features of Smith's theoretical capitalism. Whatever this is that we call capitalism, it *is* **contrary** to nature; antithetical to it, really. Nature is abundant and generous; capitalism *isn't*. It rewards and celebrates hoarding. Nature shares; capitalism is stingy, and greedy.

That's just the way it is, right?

As LeGuin pointed out, capitalism isn't a natural law; it's a thing that we made up. Like the divine right of kings. Capitalism is busy making *tiny* groups of people so absurdly rich that they have more than they know what to do with, more than they can *spend*, or even imagine spending, while most of us struggle to make ends meet, or to have *enough* to **eat**.

We tossed the the divine right of kings a while ago. After many centuries of pretending that idea was reality and the will of god, we stepped back, acknowledged that it's nonsense, a *fantasy*, and we went looking for better ways of organizing ourselves.

We need to do the same with capitalism. The economist David Graeber wrote;

"Capitalism is not something imposed on us by some outside force. It only exists because every day we wake up and continue to produce it. If we woke up one

morning and all collectively decided to produce something else, then we wouldn't have capitalism anymore."

Now, I'm not going to try to define a new and better model. That's a huge undertaking and won't fit in a sermon. But I can tell you about a general economic system that humans all around the world have used — and often still do. It's not one we can just adopt now; the forms of it we know of seem best adapted to smaller communities (not necessarily tiny ones, but smaller than our modern nations). Economists and anthropologists call it the gift economy.

And we all understand it, really. In fact, so do some other creatures, like crows.

Let me explain. When you're given a *gift*, it's free, right? Just like the trees offering fruit to all comers. Here it is, a free gift for you. And there are no strings attached — that's what makes it a gift, right?

But if I come up to you and just give you a gift, how do you feel? Well... surprised, probably. And kind of delighted. And then... we feel an obligation. We want things to be somehow balanced. We see that in gift *exchanges* at the holidays. It's somehow important that we *give back*. People who make friends with animals often find that there's some kind of gift economy at work. Leave out food offerings for the crows, and they'll take that freebie. But once they realize that it's not just something that they found and scavenged, but a *gift*, they start giving gifts back. Shiny stones or coins, or other things. They're grateful and want to establish that balance, to be gift-givers as well as gift-receivers. To keep the gift moving back and forth, to fuel abundance and joy.

If you follow the news you might have seen reports that orcas — killer whales — have been recently offering people gifts. A salmon they caught, or a dead seal, or something. We don't fully understand (or think we understand) what's going on or why, but it looks like they are trying to engage us in a relationship of gifts. As we sing "From you I receive, to you I give." People with cats often experience this — their cat will bring them gifts, small things they've hunted and come back and offer us — dropped on our doorstep, or more horrifyingly onto our beds. Oh... thanks.

But we've all given and gotten gifts that weren't really what people wanted. That's not the point.

The point is that there's a deep, natural economic relationship of giving and receiving. And in many societies in the past (and some now) there are complex gift economies that rest on these fundamental understandings. Those who have lots give it away to others, particularly those who *need* those gifts — *askida ekmek*, or some form of direct gift, and we honor that. Those givers earn or achieve a higher level of respect, or status. That's part of the gift economy too — givers earn honor and appreciation.

The gift economy can become quite structured and ornate. Some of the gifts can be things that people have made that have no real use — and may be too large and heavy to even move. But if you *own* those things, you can give them to someone else. Maybe to put them in a sort of state of gift obligation to you, or to repay a great gift that they've given you.

Societies like the Amish, where people gather to do barn raisings, are a part of this. They're not paying each other. Someone in their community is building a new barn and the word goes out and people show up. People do a lot of hard work building that barn and cooking food to feed everyone that shows up. The gifts are going back and forth, and when it's done, the people with a new barn don't have to pay for all that labor — but trust me, they *feel* that fundamental need that humans and other creatures feel to return the favor. To show up to the next barn raising and help out. And the next one. And the next one, too. Because what a gift economy does is to create networks of obligations where the “debt” is never really paid off. Everyone just keeps giving and receiving back and forth, and because there's honor, respect, and status in being giving and generous, even those who have little to give, who can't do much heavy work, are also cared for and fed. And whatever it is that *they* can do for their community and for others, they *do it*, so that they too feel like full participants in that economic and social relationship.

It **works**. It has worked for tens of thousands of years, probably hundreds of thousands. Maybe longer — I mean, after all, the crows are involved. It's likely that our relationship with dogs evolved out of this, because there was a complicated arrangement between wolves and crows and humans in the past, where crows would help hunters find the creatures they were hunting. And then the crows got to pick over carcasses when the humans left. And wolves do that too. All these creatures with large brains figure out ways to work with each other that are beneficial to both sides — and that becomes a part of a gift economy.

And many of us are still part of gift economies. You probably have heard of Buy Nothing — which isn't a boycott of buying. It's a community swap system where people list things they have that are free to anyone who wants to come get them. Maybe a couch, or some cans and jars of food someone's not going to use. Or clothing. Or an exercise bike. Or books. Or a *really great box*. My wife, Barbara, was really active in the local buy nothing network back in New Hampshire, and not only did she get to give things away that she didn't want or need — but others did — and got things she wanted, she also made social connections and met people. Some of them became friends.

That's a gift economy and it's running in this country, in community after community.

It gets people things they want and need, it keeps stuff from being sent to the dump. And it *connects* people. You meet people who are interested and excited

about something you're giving away — and maybe you make a new friend. Capitalism doesn't do those things; it *wants* stuff sent to the dump and for you to **buy** what you want and need. **IF** you can afford it. And if not, too bad. It doesn't make you new friends either — your interactions with people in it are just transactional; make your purchase and move along — and who's next? With buy nothing, people who sometimes can't afford that thing find they can get it for free, a gift from someone who no longer needs it.

I don't know how to develop a gift economy system for our very large populations. *Maybe* that it's not possible. But I don't think we tried. I suspect that we could find creative ways to make it work. It's such a powerful part of nature — from the serviceberries onward — It models how *we* can and should be among ourselves. Kind, generous, abundant, and giving. And **also** willing to accept and receive as well.

It's a gracious and non-puritanical model for how living things can and do interact. The plant world gives us oxygen, and we give back carbon dioxide. The gift economy is fundamentally a life-giving relationship. And note that there are no oxygen or CO2 billionaires hoarding all the resources that others need to live.

As we look at an economy that is dying — sometime soon, because it's fundamentally defective and can't be sustained — we need to be creative. And hopeful. That's an observation that's not new — Gene Roddenberry's vision of the world of Star Trek stepped beyond capitalism and developed an economy that was abundant and generous. It didn't rest on money — but was futuristic, and pluralist. Where there is vision, there is possibility. We will not build what we do not dream of. What we imagine can become real. And vision offers hope. And we are told that hope fuels resistance and rebellion.

It *is* scary now, living — trapped — in a system that we can see and feel is starting to die. But nature tells us that when the dinosaurs die, new possibilities open up, new species and ecologies can and do arise.

We are in the midst of transformation, and it's hard to see clearly; it's too close. The old world and old ways are dying and a **better** world *is* possible. and if we're attentive we can catch glimpses of what we might build and grow instead. Arundhati Roy wrote “Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.”

May we find new ways of doing ancient things that encourage generosity and interdependence. And in doing so, find better, more equitable ways of living. Load those dreams into *your* backpacks — and dream boldly and hopefully.

May it be so.