

Table Grace creates space for life-giving transformational conversations, story-sharing, and resourcing. Participants in **Table Grace Partner Conversations** will clarify where they have been, where they are now, where they want to go, and who they want to be. The result is greater clarity of next steps with a purposeful commitment to abundant life for all.



Series Introduction: Originally written in January 2024 for the Christian season of Epiphany, the series *Moving Toward Abundant Life* invites reflection and discernment about what leads us in a time filled with new beginnings, new understandings, and new practices. It has been adapted here since the themes and marks of Abundant Life last far beyond any particular season. May these words support your journey toward life in its fullness!

MOVING TOWARD ABUNDANT LIFE: CONNECTION, MEANING, AGENCY, BLESSING, AND HOPE

Jesus said, "I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly."

~ John 10:10b



In recent years, I have been drawn to the promise of Abundant Life given by Jesus in his ministry. From the writings of public health, I have found a helpful definition of Abundant Life as being marked by *connection, meaning, agency, blessing, and hope*. These themes are reflected

in the ministry of Jesus. Through the following reflections, we will explore each of these characteristics in more depth and use them as guides for our journey.

As I ponder this definition and the experience of Abundant Life, it has become evident that it is not a destination but a direction. We move toward Abundant Life in the ways we live with each other. We lean toward Abundant Life in our choices. We explore Abundant Life in our communities. For the next six weeks, I invite you to join with me in *Moving Toward Abundant Life*. Along the way I will share impressions from a recent trip to Thailand that provide nuance to my personal experience of moving toward Abundant Life. You are invited to consider these writings as part of your individual reflection time. Maybe they will serve as a resource for an existing group. Maybe you will find that you can share them as a family or at a meal with friends. However you engage these thoughts, I pray they will invite you to *Move Toward Abundant Life* with the curiosity and persistence and with the openness to new understandings and beginnings that will sustain you in the days to come.



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MOVING TOWARD ABUNDANT LIFE: CONNECTION

I recently returned from a trip to Thailand. The country is over 90% Buddhist with beautiful Buddhist temples dotting the landscape of the cities and rural communities. The spirit of the citizens reflects the Buddhist gentle embrace of life with even their heavy rush-hour traffic moving without horns and with a steady motion and constant merging. Our resident guide shared a story that caught my imagination. He told us about a Buddhist temple and a Hindu temple which share a boundary wall. He said they are good neighbors with each other, they pause to listen to each other's chants and other worship practices, and they live peacefully side by side. His comment was that they understand everyone has to be somewhere, and they are committed to creating space for each community to live fully and freely be themselves.



I was struck by the idea of a boundary wall being seen as a point of connection. Rather than the wall seeking to keep each other out, the wall represents where the two communities come together. The wall we might interpret as a means of separation serves for them as an expression of connection of common experience and an awareness that they do not exist in isolation from each other.

Connection is one of the marks of Abundant Life and, in fact, is critical to our physical, mental, and spiritual health. The energy we put into separation and division leaves us lonely and suspicious of each other. As a result, loneliness has been identified by the U.S. Surgeon General as our #1 health issue. In contrast, human connection grounded in love and compassion leads to healing.

Sharing stories is one means of creating connection. As we tell a story we share what our life experience is like. As we hear a story, we see, hear, and feel what another has experienced. In the process, we develop empathy. As we feel seen and heard, and as we offer this gift of hospitality to another, our heart rates calm, our anxiety is reduced, and our nervous systems settle. We are then better able to listen and to connect in ways that honor each other, even if we may have points of obvious difference or disagreement.

Life expectancy, healing from trauma, and overall stability are enhanced through connection. As we move toward all that brings life, connection leads the way, not as a static condition, but as a posture toward others. As we 'lean in,' as we see ourselves as sharing sacred space, as we commit to the well-being of each other, we are all strengthened for the journey of life.

Reflection:

- 1) Tell of a time when you felt welcomed. Share your story with someone else and ask them to share with you. Respond by saying thank you to each other for the stories you shared.
- 2) What is one act you can take today to express connection with another—a phone call, conversation, email, note, card, text, pausing to listen, looking someone in the eye, an act of generosity, etc.?

Moving Toward Abundant Life: From the busyness of our days, we pause to remember that we are all connected to each other and are stronger when we honor each other with love.



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MOVING TOWARD ABUNDANT LIFE: MEANING

Several years ago, a friend of mine was going through a very rough experience. When I asked her how she was coping, she said, “Every morning I come to the door and I stand and decide which direction I am going today.” She wasn't referencing geography. She was talking about her life choices—which direction she was going in response to the circumstances she was facing, the opportunities ahead of her, and the options she could see.



That wisdom has stuck with me across the years. In moving toward Abundant Life, a key component is the direction we choose. We refer to this in many ways—our intention, our purpose, our calling. Whatever term we use, what we are describing is the meaning we are making with our lives. The direction we lean reflects our values and our worldview. It portrays our sense of overarching coherence for the world. It reveals the experiences we carry, and more importantly, it shows the stories we are making of our experiences. What we are creating is meaning for our life and for our place in the world.

These choices are critical even as they are mundane. How we internalize the actions of others toward us, how we harbor disappointment, how we build resilience, how we separate our value from the actions of others—all of these are examples of our meaning-making. What we rehearse and what we let go, what we choose to have as our defining moments that we reference and what we shrug off, what we learn from that helps us grow in kindness and compassion—this process of incorporating life experiences into our personal narrative gives us a way to make sense of the world, to hold the pieces together, and to find ways to use the various experiences as a source of information and reflection for our future choices and for the ways we treat ourselves and others.

As you know, I recently returned from a trip to Thailand which included multiple bike rides, longer and more challenging than any I've ever done. We rode on deserted roads that were paved, rough dirt roads with holes and gravel and sand, we rode through traffic. The rides went amazingly well, and I'm extremely grateful for that. However, there were rough spots—setting out smoothly is a challenge for me—and I fell over three times. Nothing awful happened, but there were a few bumps and bruises and scratches along the way.

Life is like that. There are rough spots, there are false starts, there are unexpected terrains and challenges, and there are choices about how to respond. We don't always predict or choose the circumstances. We do have choice about how we tell the story and give it meaning. It matters what and who gives wisdom to the meaning in our lives. Lean in the direction that gives your experiences value and gives you additional resources for the next challenge. Follow the path that leads to deeper connection. Meaning will grow as you take each step. You will gradually get your footing and you'll be amazed at the ride!

Reflection:

- 1) Tell of a time you remember when you needed to bolster your confidence or build your courage. What meaning do you carry from that experience that helps you take the next step?
- 2) What meaning or purpose in life gives you direction?

Moving Toward Abundant Life: May love guide our way so that we use each experience for good and receive life as a meaning-full gift to share with each other.



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MOVING TOWARD ABUNDANT LIFE: AGENCY

In recent years, I've learned a new understanding of the word "agency." I've always thought of "agency" as referring to a business, like an "insurance agency." There's a different definition, though, that refers to the power each of us has to act, to choose, to determine how we will interact with the world. I like this definition and this concept. It reminds me that I have influence, and it reminds me that I have responsibility and opportunity. It helps me value my past experiences and the lessons learned and encourages me to



recognize the resources I have for future choices. Embracing this concept of agency invites me to engage my life as a full participant rather than as a passive spectator. Agency is the power we have to move toward connection and meaning, to be intentional about our choices, and to believe they have influence on ourselves and on others. It doesn't ignore our hesitations or uncertainties, but reminds us we have the opportunities to manage our fears and grow in resilience as we assess a challenge and address it with the wisdom gained from the past. Sometimes that wisdom is realizing that we do not face our challenges alone and can draw on the experiences and knowledge of others.

Agency doesn't make everything smooth. It does not suggest that we become heroic or need to be or that we are to do everything. Sometimes our agency invites us to step back so another can serve. Not every need is our calling. None of us have every gift. Yet each of us can bring our stories, our skills, and our willingness, and in the process become part of something bigger than any one of us. That's what agency does. Agency gives us the awareness and openness to say yes to that which is bigger than we imagined and to pursue that which calls us to a more significant action than we might have ever envisioned. It's not always heroic, but it is generative of life for ourselves and for others. It's looking at how our actions can contribute to the experience of others because we have a sense that our gifts can be used for good or that a higher purpose can be realized by the choices we make.

On our trip to Thailand, on the first day my sister and I ventured to take the long bike route option, we made it through the countryside encouraged by one of the guides. We arrived at our designated meeting spot without incident. After the group break, we gathered our gear and were preparing for the next stretch. I knew we were headed toward the part of the ride that would take us through more traffic and towns. This was totally unfamiliar to me and a level of bike-riding that I was not sure I knew how to do. We had gained some confidence and were ready to continue the venture, but were aware the tricky spots were ahead of us. At that point, the local guide, an excellent cyclist and resident in the area, came by and reassured us to take our time as he was going to be our guide. Following him, we made it through the remaining miles as he led us at a comfortable pace through the towns and intersections and safely to our final destination. He used his agency—his knowledge, experience, skill, and willingness to put that to use for the good of others—to help us succeed. In the process, he strengthened our sense of agency. We were made stronger, gained confidence, were able to manage our fears, and were able to venture again the next two days on the longer routes with better preparation and expertise which he had helped us gain.

Agency—doing what we can to the best of our abilities, contributing to the overall welfare of others with the gifts that we have, growing through our experiences and moving through our fears, moving with a concern and sense of connection to others, acting with intention, meaning, and care—these are the gifts that help us all be at our best and help Abundant Life to thrive for all.

Reflection:

- 1) What experiences have helped you develop a sense of agency? For example, recall and share a time when you reached a goal and what it felt like for you.
- 2) When have you helped someone else succeed? What did that mean for your choices and how you used your agency?

Moving Toward Abundant Life: May we use the gifts life has offered to strengthen and guide our next steps and strengthen others in their next steps. Together may we use our agency to share our love with others.



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MOVING TOWARD ABUNDANT LIFE: BLESSING

In moving toward Abundant Life, “blessing” describes our commitment and capacity to make a difference for good for others.

Blessing calls for a generosity of spirit and practice. It’s our way of acknowledging that others’ well-being matters to us and that in fact, we are all better when each and every one of us is at our best.

While we were in Thailand, we were introduced to a number of the Buddhist practices that organize the community life there. One was an opportunity to provide food for the Buddhist monks. The larger community provides for basic needs on a daily basis, and the monks receive these gifts with humility and gratitude. In response, they share the offerings of the day to care for their whole monastic community, and they offer a blessing for those who have provided that day’s gifts. Their work on behalf of the community is to care for the most vulnerable, the orphaned, the ill, those without family support. The community has found a way to create a circle of support—a circle of blessing—that flows from their concern for all.

Another blessing was offered to our group. We gathered on the morning of January 1, led by an elder in the community, a former Buddhist monk who now serves as a teacher and community leader. It had been a busy and active week, and now we were headed to a new place. On behalf of the community, they offered us a particular blessing. We were handed a large ball of string that we passed through our entire group until we were all holding the intertwining string. A prayer was offered, and then we received individual blessings that included the tying of a piece of string around our wrist and the gift of a jasmine necklace. The words were in Thai, so I don’t know exactly what was said. What we were told was that the blessing with the string was to bind together our spirits because activity and life can cause us to essentially ‘spring leaks’ so that our spirit ‘spills out.’ The small string bracelets were to remind us of this coming back together, restoring us to wholeness.



While Buddhism is not my home religion, and the practices were new to me, I found both of them to be powerful—the first for its compassion and the second for its restoration. I have kept the string bracelet around my wrist. There's something comforting about an image of the community holding my spirit together and holding each other's spirit together. In a time when we often hear that isolation and loneliness are the common description of human experience, here were practices that sought each other out to assure that needs were met, that folks were okay, and that we were strengthened for the next part of the journey.

We've all received blessings from others that have encouraged us along the way. They come when someone is as aware of us and our needs as they are of their own. They come when someone advocates for our circumstances. They come when someone gives us the time to hear our stories and to understand our deepest yearnings and dreams. Blessings come when we are noticed and when we are valued. Blessings are offered when we see the other and value their story. Blessings come collectively when we refuse to dismiss the suffering of another and advocate for possibilities that have been denied or have yet to be imagined.

Connection, meaning, and agency lead us toward blessing as they affirm our interconnection, our commitment to the value of life, and our power to make a difference, even if it seems beneficial for just that moment. Blessing helps us lean in the direction of honoring the other and moving toward Abundant Life. Somehow each step helps to piece us together, one blessing at a time.

Reflection:

- 1) When has someone acted in a way that blessed you? How did that experience affect you?
- 2) When have you been a blessing to someone else? How did that experience affect you?

Moving Toward Abundant Life: May love and mercy create in us generosity and blessing for others.



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MOVING TOWARD ABUNDANT LIFE: HOPE

Hope is a vision for the future, a confidence that what we see is not all there is, action that suggests even the worst of situations can be redeemed. Hope is more than a pipe dream as it draws its strength from connection, meaning, agency, and blessing. They provide the fuel for the vision and the energy to continue on in a direction that may not be immediately evident.

There is a reason this series is entitled “Moving Toward Abundant Life.” As we noted at the beginning, Abundant Life is never static, partly because hope is rarely, if ever, fully realized. Hope is a vision of what can be and is often seen in glimpses. Yet hope is powerful! It gives us a picture of what might be, it stirs our imaginations, and it gets our adrenaline going. It sparks our action and animates our dreams. Hope pulls us forward to the future even as it sometimes pushes us through our present and out of our past. In moving toward Abundant Life, hope becomes more than wishful thinking—it becomes a template for our next steps. Stories of hope often reflect the actions and stories of others in the past, for hope is most powerful when it seems most distant from our current situation. Stories of hope give us the resources to recognize how life has moved in the past and how to take the next step toward life in the future.

In our time in Thailand, I was drawn to the sense of “enough” that seemed to permeate the small communities and the residents of the country. There was a lightness to their humor, a pleasant nature to their interactions. The extremely heavy traffic in the cities was almost without honking even as it was filled with constant merging. The entry and exit from public transportation was calm and orderly. Even the dogs we rode by on rural roads were quiet and ambling. It was a picture of contentment that gives me hope for the future. Needs were met, not elaborately, but comfortably.



Beauty was appreciated, and health and activity were anticipated and enjoyed. In some ways, it was a vision from the past. Yet, it was a reminder of what a sustainable economy and environment may include. Hope and possibility become more available when there is a picture, even when the path is not identical or the next step completely revealed.

I never get tired of hearing stories of innovation, and I have great confidence in the gifts of humanity to accomplish incredible tasks and to demonstrate phenomenal creativity when we have a shared vision and commitment. Abundant Life is one of those visions, and stories of those who value connection, meaning, agency, blessing, and hope are prolific when you begin to watch and see. I encourage you to tend to these stories whether in magazines, on TV programs, on the internet, or in the experiences you share with friends and family. Hope is generated by the stories we let nourish our imaginations and the actions we take in response. Choose carefully what you give space in your heart and mind—and take hope in the possibilities that are in our hands for our future. May *Moving Toward Abundant Life for All* be your guide.

Reflection:

- 1) Share a story of a time that you “came out on the other side” of a challenging situation. How did that experience give you hope?
- 2) What is a favorite story of Abundant Life that you hold in your heart and mind to give you hope?

Moving Toward Abundant Life: May connection, meaning, agency, blessing, and hope guide our choices and our way of being in the world.



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MOVING TOWARD ABUNDANT LIFE: WISDOM FOR THE JOURNEY

As our group gathered and began our orientation in Thailand, the first thing we were taught was how to greet one another. The custom is to hold one's hands together in front of one's heart and to bow to each other. This act is an expression of honor for each other and for all that each person brings. What I



learned and appreciated most is that the hands are not pressed together with flat palms. They are folded in such a way to create a cupped space representing an openness and welcome to the other. This gentle greeting carries the elements of Abundant Life as it honors the other, acknowledges value in the encounter, gives opportunity to welcome, opens the possibility of generosity, and creates space for what is to come. What a fitting posture and starting place to move toward Abundant Life—much left to be determined, yet from the beginning a desire to foster connection, meaning, agency, blessing, and hope.

To this experience, I add words from two who are careful observers of life and artists with language, Parker Palmer and Maya Angelou. Palmer is a writer, speaker, and activist who focuses on issues in education, community, leadership, spirituality, and social change. Angelou was a poet whose use of language and imagery captured so much of the human spirit and longing. Both speak to the precious nature of this life journey and both acknowledge the power we have to influence our own experience and that of others for good or for ill.

The invitation of these reflections has been to acknowledge our possibility to participate in bringing life, even as we carry the painful awareness of our capacity to bring harm and death. I offer the insights of these two souls as

“wisdom for the journey” as we draw on connection, meaning, agency, blessing, and hope to move intentionally toward Abundant Life for all.

First from Parker Palmer in *How to Heal Our Divides*:

The challenge for those of us who want to be agents of healing is clear. This co-creative process will be life-giving only if we are attentive and purposeful at every moment of inner-outer exchange. We must know what's inside us, shadow and all, and be thoughtful about what we put into the outer world. We must be aware and thoughtful about how we take in and process whatever the world sends back. (p. 57)

And finally, this excerpt from the conclusion of the poem *A Brave and Startling Truth*, written by Maya Angelou in 1995 for the 50th anniversary of the United Nations:

*When we come to it
We, this people, on this wayward, floating body
Created on this earth, of this earth
Have the power to fashion for this earth
A climate where every man and every woman
Can live freely without sanctimonious piety
Without crippling fear*

*When we come to it
We must confess that we are the possible
We are the miraculous, the true wonder of this world
That is when, and only when
We come to it.*

Reflection:

- 1) Share a time when you were part of making a choice for good for yourself and others. What was it like to take the long view and broader understanding of your power to make a life-giving choice?
- 2) How will you choose life and move toward Abundant Life? How will connection, meaning, agency, blessing, and hope be reflected in your choices?

Moving Toward Abundant Life: May we have the wisdom to see that which takes us away from the abundance of life and choose to live in such a way that our neighbors near and far, the very earth we stand on and all creatures within it, and our descendants for generations to come, may live in peace with one another.



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