

SPRING 2021 -- REFLECTIONS ON CONTENTMENT

SESSION ONE: CULTIVATING CONTENTMENT

SESSION TWO: BE AN OPTIM - MYSTIC

SESSION THREE: HAVE A NON-JUDGMENT DAY

SESSION FOUR: IT'S HARD TO BE HUMBLE

SESSION FIVE: WRAPPING UP CONTENTMENT

BY REV. FLOSSIE ERNZEN

Session One: Cultivating Contentment

Rev. Flossie Ernzen

Cultivating contentment – this is the time of year when our hearts and dreams turn to gardens. We begin to think about all the lovely fruits and vegetables that will be cultivated. There are lots of steps to planning, preparing the soil, choosing good seed, and then taking good care of our garden. We also use the word “cultivate” for developing a skill. This spring lets cultivate contentment. In our new series, we have gathered insights, stories, great quotes and even links to short videos. Each evening we will close our gathering with a song that will resonate with our thoughts on contentment. If you are unable to be with us in person, we will recommend a song that you can find on YouTube.

Let's begin by reading in the Tao Te Ching: "Be content with what you have; rejoice in the way things are. When you realize there is nothing lacking, the whole world belongs to you." Isn't this a wonderful intention? It speaks to our deep yearning to be happy with where we are, to be satisfied with what we have, and to rest in the miracle that has graced us with so much.

St. Paul, the great Christian apostle, is on the same wavelength as Lao Tzu when he writes to his Christian communities: "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or want." For him and others who follow in his trail, contentment includes an inner peace that enables them to endure suffering, pain, isolation, and whatever else life throws at them.

If you scan your memories, I am sure you will be able to come up with a time when you felt content, able to rejoice in your life without complaint or comparisons. Our focus for the next 5 meetings will be on cultivating spiritual practices that will keep us refreshed. We will discover or perhaps rediscover ways to savor the wonders all around us. We will celebrate our “everyday abundance.”

What words do you associate with "contentment"? My list includes happiness, joy, satisfaction, presence, and peace of mind. What would you add to this list? We know that religious traditions have a vision of what this spiritual quality means. Listen to these voices from Tibetan Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam:

"When you are discontent, you always want more, more, more. Your desire can never be satisfied. But when you practice contentment, you can say to yourself, 'Oh yes — I already have everything that I really need.' " — His Holiness the Dalai Lama

"Who is rich? One who is happy with what he has." — Ethics of the Fathers

"Riches are not from abundance of worldly goods, but from a contented mind." — Muhammad

Contentment is a precious jewel, far more valuable than possession of priceless properties. It is, after all, what we are really searching for when we pursue our desires. It is a state we are already familiar with. Recall a time when you were feeling happy and mellow and then you got stuck in a traffic jam or a pot boiled over on the kitchen stove. Externally, the situation was upsetting, but internally you still felt good. Or consider an opposite situation: at a party, with people you love, in a beautiful place, when you couldn't cheer up because an earlier fight with a loved one still held you in its grip.

What do such experiences prove? That outer conditions do not make us happy or sad. They do affect us, but our inner predispositions, our subjective states themselves, are the primary determinants of the quality of our experiences. Others do not force us to have good or bad feelings, though they can please or frustrate us. We can choose to be unmoved by pleasing acts of theirs, and we can rise above any frustration. If we can understand and master the forces that create our moods, we can ensure that we are in good moods no matter what. — Robert Thurman in *Inner Revolution*

Contentment is a precious jewel. Think again of a time when you felt contentment wash over you. What did it feel like in your body? Did you feel warmth, did you feel well-balanced and centered? What else comes to mind?

In these next few weeks, you might want to write down words that come to mind when you consider contentment in your life. You might look for a photo that captures the essence of contentment, one that symbolizes contentment for you. Put it on your refrigerator or on your phone and see what it continues to tell you.

I hope you have someone in mind that is a shining example of contentment for you. Several years ago, I enjoyed working in our daughter Julie's, Naturopathic Medicine office as her receptionist. I would look on the schedule with real anticipation when a particular patient was scheduled. I will call her Ms. Lillian. I couldn't wait for her to walk through the door. I would say and how are you today Miss Lillian? And she would say, I am blessed, another way of saying in all things I am content. I am blessed. I could feel

it. She radiated contentment. I knew she was going to say it and I knew that I would feel that wave of contentment washing over me. It was like being caught in the gentle wake of a boat. She rocked my life with her wisdom and her centered way of being in the world. She was in constant pain, she was raising three young grandchildren on her own, to all outer appearances, she had a lot of troubles. She is like Paul writing to the folks in Philippi, in all things I am content. I am blessed. When Miss Lillian left the office, she would remind me to have a blessed day. All these years later I carry her wish in my heart.

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov is one of the great spiritual teachers of the 18th century. He said this: "Let the good in me connect with the good in others, until the world is transformed through the compelling power of love."

Contentment comes from being who we are, in this moment, neither more nor less than our authentic selves. This also means not wanting to be someone else or to desire what they have. Here's a closing prayer from Rebbe Nachman of Breslov that captures this honestly.

Dear God,
save me from wanting
what is not mine.
Protect me from my own jealousy,
from desiring
the money or the possessions,
the position or the honor
that belong to another.
Let me trust in You
enough to believe
that what is meant to be mine
will come to me.
Let me trust in You
enough to be satisfied
with all that I have today.
— Rebbe Nachman of Breslov in *The Gentle Weapon*

This week spend some time reflecting on these thoughts:

- What words do you associate with contentment?
- What does it look like?
- What does it feel like?

- To get at this another way, find a picture that captures the essence of contentment or sketch an image that symbolizes contentment to you.
- What seeds of contentment would you like to plant in your daily life?

A meditation for letting go in the present moment:

Just be here undefended for a moment and breathe. Sense your feet on the ground and notice how the earth holds you right now without any agenda. DO NOTHING. Just sit here.

What happens if you let your consciousness sink into the vast mystery that holds it all? Holds our planet within the space of our solar system. What holds the space in which you and I and all beings have their life? What holds absolutely everything?

Just like lying back to find that effortless balancing spot of floating in the ocean, feeling the soft membrane of the water cushioning your resting body, you can lean into wherever these questions lead. Simply follow the thread of each seemingly minor felt sense of holding. Recognize every hint of evidence for the loving goodness underlying your life. Then inquire into its origin and finally its even deeper cause, and you can fold back into the infinite holding of pure being itself. Like the ultimate mother that holds you but gives complete space for you to be as you are, you can find yourself naturally imbued in this field of grace that has no beginning and no end.

Everything great and small that you grapple with can come home in this embrace.

All parts of yourself and everyone are welcome.

All fear and stress from the past can unwind.

You can simply rest, be here, wherever you are, knowing that whatever happens this loving goodness is always inherent within your own deepest nature.

You can let go all the way – coming with wholly empty hands unto God.

Song: I made room for grace by Sue Riley <https://youtu.be/yAFjHBRBck8>

A thought to carry with you: Change your attitude from “willful” to “will flow,” and watch what happens. One is full of self and effort, and the other is a joyous letting go.

—Ellen Grace O'Brian

Session Two: Be An Optim - Mystic

Rev. Flossie Ernzen

Be an Optim- Mystic, this is the second in our series on Cultivating Contentment. Isn't this a great word, Optim-Mystic? Wouldn't you like to always function from a positive point of view, perhaps even from a mystical point of view, where you could look out over life and see it from an elevated awareness? But alas, this takes practice, spiritual practice, but that is what we are all about. We know that with practice, we make progress.

We can cultivate contentment.

But, it can be a challenge, especially if we are encountering grumpy, negative, complaining people. Have you noticed that it almost seems to rub off? Perhaps, you have had a negative, complaining neighbor or colleague at work. If you see their name pop up in an e-mail or on your phone, you find yourself shifting into a defensive mode. It can be very challenging, especially if this person is your boss or has some significant influence in your life.

We also live in a consumer culture with its omnipresent advertising pitches designed to make us always want something more, better, or different. Even in times of national emergency, we are told to go out and shop, as if that will make us feel better.

Yet religious leaders have long advised just the opposite. Quaker William Penn observed: "Seek not to be rich, but happy. Riches lie in bags, happiness in contentment which wealth can never give." In our last session, we quoted Paul writing to his friends in Philippi, telling them he had been content in so many different situations, hunger and fullness, freedom and prison.

What is he modeling for us here? When you know that you are loved by God and nurtured by family, friends, and community, you can simply be yourself and be satisfied with whatever comes to you.

In his book, *The Virtue in the Vice*, Robin Meyers, a Congregational Minister, writes: "Contentment is not just a 'peaceful, easy feeling or a way to rationalize laziness. It is a deep, easy-breathing wisdom that knows what can and can't be changed, and more important, knows when to do and when to wait. The contented person watches the world closely but does not stare it down. She enjoys things, rather than trying to possess them or straighten them out."

Wouldn't you love to have this kind of wisdom and balance in your life? I think there is a prayer about that, called the serenity prayer. God grant me the serenity to accept the

things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. How many millions of times has this prayer been prayed? Perhaps you've said it a million times yourself.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to cultivate serenity, courage and wisdom? These are priceless gems. These are all qualities of the Optim-Mystic. When we think of an organization or an athlete functioning at an optimum level, it is a perfect balance of work and training, rest and inspiration.

A person who is an Optim-Mystic flows along positive and purposeful, linked to a spiritual wholeness that is timeless and true. A mystic is someone who has found unity with deep spiritual truths that go beyond what we can know with the intellect.

Paul was showing himself to be an Optim-Mystic when he spoke of being content in all conditions. We sometimes say in Unity that our happiness is not dependent on the absence or presence of anything.

So, first of all do you think that you are an optimist? The Mayo Clinic defines an optimist as a person who believes "that good things will happen to them and that negative events are temporary setbacks to be overcome." Optimism supports contentment. Back in 1910, Charles Larson, one of the pioneers of the New Thought spiritual movement, published a meditation called "The Optimist Creed." It was adopted as the manifesto of Optimist International in 1922. Here is an excerpt from the creed.

Promise Yourself :

To be so strong that nothing can disturb your peace of mind.

To talk health, happiness, and prosperity to every person you meet.

To make all your friends feel that there is something in them.

To look at the sunny side of everything and make your optimism come true.

To think only of the best, to work only for the best, and to expect only the best.

To be just as enthusiastic about the success of others as you are about your own.

To forget the mistakes of the past and press on to the greater achievements of the future.

To wear a cheerful countenance at all times and give every living creature you meet a smile.

To give so much time to the improvement of yourself that you have no time to criticize others.

To be too large for worry, too noble for anger, too strong for fear, and too happy to permit the presence of trouble.

To think well of yourself and to proclaim this fact to the world, not in loud words, but in

great deeds.

To live in the faith that the whole world is on your side, so long as you are true to the best that is in you.

— Christian D. Larson in *The Optimist Creed and Other Inspirational Classics*

On a scale of 1 (pessimist) to 10 (optimist) where would you place yourself most of the time? What kinds of things change your optimism level?

Is there one of these promises that you could think of a specific place where you could practice it this week? Perhaps when you arrive at work or home you could try it out even for a few minutes and then observe how you experience it.

The Optim-Mystic cultivates optimism and generosity that is rooted in a deep spiritual connection with the source of all life.

I heard a story this week about a teacher who was going through a dark time in his life. So he went to nature for solace, I find a lot of insight and peace in nature. He went off to a place in the mountains of Colorado where he could stretch out on a rock in a wooded area and look up at the trees. They were giant and soared up into the sky. Gradually he thought about what gave them the power to be so strong through all kinds of weather. It was their root system, they had spread their roots deep and broad, they actually supported themselves and each other.

This is also true of an Optim-Mystic – they cultivate optimism, but they also cultivate their deep spiritual connection with the essence and source of life.

Sometimes the best way to convey a concept is through a story. Anthony de Mello, a Jesuit priest and spiritual master, was especially good at using stories to get us to think about alternate ways to be. This story is called: Give away a diamond.

This is a story of a guy who is moving out of his village in India, and he sees what we in India call a sannyasi. The sannyasi is the wandering mendicant. This is the person who, having attained enlightenment, understands that the whole world is his home, and the sky is his roof, and God is his father and will look after him, so he moves from place to place the way you and I would move from one room of our home to another.

Here was this wandering sannyasi, and the villager, when he meets him, says, "I cannot believe this."

And the sannyasi says, "What is it you cannot believe?"

And the villager says, "I had a dream about you last night. I dreamt that the Lord Vishnu said to me, 'Tomorrow morning, you will leave the village around 11 o'clock, and you'll run into this wandering sannyasi.' And here, I've met you."

"What else did the Lord Vishnu say to you?" asks the sannyasi.

And the man replies, "He said to me, 'If the man gives you a precious stone he has, you will be the richest man in the whole world.' Would you give me the stone?"

So the sannyasi says, "Wait a minute." He rummages in his little knapsack that he had. He asks, "Would this be the stone you're talking about?" And the man couldn't believe his eyes because it was a diamond — the largest diamond in the world.

He holds the diamond in his hands and he asks, "Could I have this?"

And the sannyasi says, "Of course, you could take it. I found it in a forest. You're welcome to it." And he goes on and sits under a tree on the outskirts of the village. The man grasps this diamond, and how great is his joy.

So, the guy has the diamond. And then instead of going home, he sits under a tree, and all day he sits, immersed in thought. And toward evening, he goes to the tree where the sannyasi is sitting, gives him back the diamond, and says, "Could you do me a favor?" "What?" says the sannyasi.

"Could you give me the riches that make it possible for you to give this thing away so easily?"

— Anthony de Mello in *Rediscovering Life*

What do we learn about contentment from this story? What comes to your mind? What are your deep roots of contentment?

Imagine that you are the sannyasi. What riches — ideas, attitudes, behaviors — would you offer the man?

What if we could cultivate optimism and mysticism and come to a place of knowing that we are connected to a deep source of supply. We will have the ideas and the energy we require to generously share our talents and blessings with each other. As we cultivate these, we truly become an Optim-Mystic.

Consider some experiences in your own life that you can draw on like the man in Colorado who stretched out on the earth and connected with the deep roots of the trees. We have these moments of “wonder” that nourish our spirits. It might be a bird song in the morning, a beautiful wildflower along a woodland trail, or the shadows the moonlight makes in the yard. These are the moments of “mystery” that echo within us. They help to shore up our contentment and connection with deeper truths that sustain us.

Meditation:

As we relax into this precious moment, consider what is holding you now?

Open your awareness to recognize and receive the holding that is unarguably present and has been for your entire life. You might feel it right now as the holding of the earth below your feet, the chair you are sitting on as you read this, the life-giving oxygen inherent in each breath you take, the nourishing goodness pouring out of every tree, the love that gives rise to the warmth of your friendships, inspired writings, sufficient food to eat and so many blessings of ordinary life.

With each aspect of holding that you perceive, you can inquire deeper into where this holding is coming from. What causes there to be life-giving oxygen inherent to sustain your life? What causes the tree to manifest and bring its shade, beauty, transforming our carbon dioxide into clean air? What causes the warmth of your friends to manifest in your life? What gives rise to the blessing of your children? Of your partner or dearest friend? The sweetness of your pet? The light that manifests as daytime?

What’s holding all of that?

What happens if you let your awareness sink into the vast mystery that holds it all? Holds our planet within the space of our solar system? What holds the space in which you and I and all beings have their life? What holds absolutely everything?

Just like lying back to find that effortless balancing spot of floating in the ocean, feeling the soft membrane of the water cushioning your resting body, you can lean into whatever these questions lead. Simply follow the thread of each seemingly minor felt sense of holding. Recognize every hint of evidence for the loving goodness underlying your life. Then inquire into its origin and finally its even deeper cause, and you can fold back into the infinite holding of pure being itself. Like the ultimate mother that holds you but gives complete space for you to be as you are, you can find yourself naturally imbued in this field of grace that has no beginning and no end.

Everything great and small that you grapple with can come home in this embrace.
All parts of yourself and everyone are welcome.
All fear and stress from the past can unwind.
You can simply rest, be here, wherever you are, knowing that whatever happens this loving goodness is always inherent within your own deepest nature.
You can let go all the way – coming with wholly empty hands unto God.
Rest now, and when you are ready, share your gratitude for this time of remembrance and move peacefully into your day or evening.

A song to share: You Can Relax Now by Shaina Noll
<https://youtu.be/INIV1KDVUE>

Session Three: Have A Non-Judgment Day

Rev. Flossie Erzen

We continue our series on cultivating contentment. We have explored wisdom from many spiritual and enlightened traditions. We have considered the practices and approach embraced by the Optim-Mystic. Now, let's go a little further with our cultivation practice.

Listen to this wonderful quote:

A Zen master was once asked, 'What is the key to happiness?' He answered, 'Good judgment.' 'How do I gain good judgment?' he was questioned. 'Experience,' was the reply. 'How do I get experience?' the student further probed. 'Bad judgment,' were his final words.- Christina Feldman, *The Buddhist Path to Simplicity*

We have all had experiences with bad judgment. Perhaps more than we would like. Hopefully, we have learned from those experiences. In this session, we'll explore what life would be like, if we regularly had a "non-judgment day." I once saw a car with a bumper sticker that read: Non-Judgment Day is Near. I would have loved to have a chat with that driver. Alas, they just kept rolling along.

Do you think that you could have a day when you allowed all things to be as they are? Hugh Prather has a prayer in his book, [Shining Through](#), and it goes like this:

Today I will allow all things to be as they are. I will judge nothing. I am willing for the weather to be whatever it is. I am content to take part in each encounter that is to come, experiencing without resistance the circumstances in which I am placed. I will let my friends act however they will. I will release my attention from censure to rest on this gentle moment. I will allow the members of my family to be what they are, without defining what they are. I will attempt to see my children as they are, without interpretations drawn from my experience and free of motivations I have attributed to them. I will not assign my partner's role or function or attitude toward me. I will not cherish a wish for a shift in personality or habits, nor will I try to push anyone in a particular direction by moderating my joy or withholding my normal responses. I will let all people be just as they are today. And within the stillness this brings, I will ask how the Divine is able to love each one, a love so intimate that we are transformed into the children of God. — Hugh Prather in [Shining Through](#)

After reading this I wondered if Hugh Prather was a monk and lived in a solitary hut in a monastery, but no, he actually had a wife and children. Imagine a day without judging anything, the weather, family members, crazy drivers, government officials and most of all perhaps ourselves. Perhaps we should start with a particular time of day for example when we leave for work or arrive home. My friend Dr. Paul Welter calls those moments the most dangerous times of the day, just like flying. The take offs and landings are where the most crashes take place. So, just imagine if we could leave home and arrive at the end of the day with no judgments at least for a few moments.

In this reading from Hugh Prather, he seems to be suggesting that our contentment is influenced by our relationships, especially whether or not we are trying to change people. Have you found this to be true? Have you had much success changing people? Me neither.

Wouldn't you love to be like Lao Tzu? To be content with what you have, rejoice in the way things are. When you realize there is nothing lacking, the whole world belongs to you."

So, how can we cultivate this kind of contentment? I found some affirmations and a special meditation practice we can use to work with having a non-judgment day.

- Because God is with me, I am content to be wherever I am.
- Learning to respond to now is all there is to learn.
- I am established in harmlessness.
- Gentleness of thought is my way Home.
- My mind is cradled in the peace of God.

Imagine taking one of these into your prayer time and letting it rock back and forth inside. This creates a space to have a non-judgment day, or at least a few non-judgment moments.

I would like to share a story with you that I have been carrying around in my heart for quite a while. I heard it from Rabbi David Ingber in a class he gave on the work of some of the wonderful Hasidic teachers including the Baal Shem Tov. The Baal Shem Tov taught in the 17th century and he breathed fresh spirit into Jewish life. He encouraged joy and dancing and a lightness of being and he believed and taught that everything was holy. Everything had the potential for divine light to shine through. This story reminds me of how heavy judgment can be.

Listen and see what your thoughts are.

The Tale of the Sigh and the Sneer

Once, the Baal Shem Tov arrived in the town of Chemelnick in Podolia early in the morning, stood in the street in his rough peasant clothes, lit his pipe and began to smoke.

Soon, as two women passed by on their way to the market, he asked them a few questions and engaged them in conversation. Then he began to tell them a story, followed by another, until a few men overheard that he was telling stories and walked over to hear; soon there was a large crowd gathered around him. Then he told this story:

In a certain town, there lived a poor man with a wife and many children, who made a hard living as a Porter. He knew how to recite the prayers, although he didn't know the meaning of the Hebrew words. Every morning he rose before dawn, ran to the synagogue, quickly recited the prayers, then rushed off to a day of backbreaking labor to earn enough for a crust of dry bread for his hungry children. In the evening, he always went to the synagogue to pray, but was usually late to arrive. His prayers were often disjointed and incomplete and, exhausted by his labors, he would doze off standing or sitting. Then he returned home, physically broken and crushed, only to be pained by the sight of his family's suffering.

In the same neighborhood, there lived a young Torah scholar who studied full-time. He received a weekly stipend from the community to sit and study and had no financial worries. When he came to the synagogue in the morning he prayed slowly, as proper, with full concentration, then sat down for his regular morning session of in-depth Talmud study. Afterward he went home for a meal, and then returned to study more Torah with an untroubled mind. He was always early for Minha and Maariv, which he recited carefully and slowly.

Every day after the evening prayer, the Porter and the young Torah scholar met on the street as they walked home. The Porter, who walked bent over, with sloped shoulders, let out a deep sigh when he saw his neighbor, the Torah scholar. He thought to himself how his neighbor spent his day under the yoke of study of the holy Torah while his day

was spent bent under the yoke of heavy burdens. How he wished he could pray and study Torah like his neighbor like a Jew should.

Meanwhile, the young Torah Scholar, who walked erect with an arrogant bearing and a sense of his own dignity, cast a dismissive glance at the Porter. On his lips was a contemptuous sneer, as he thought of the chasm that separated him from his ignorant neighbor as if to say, what do I have in common with you?

Days, weeks, months, and years past, until both the Porter and the Scholar left this world. When the Torah Scholar appeared before the heavenly court, he came before the bench with head held high and confident steps. Heavenly judges! He said, I studied much Torah, I prayed with concentration, I was careful to do all the mitzvot, the light as well as the heavy. The judges were satisfied with his deeds and about to pronounce a favorable judgment, but at the last moment an angel appeared and asked for their attention. Without speaking further, he put on one side of the scale of judgment all the oversized and heavy Talmud books that the Torah scholar had studied and the large siddur from which he prayed. On the other side of the scale, he placed only the contemptuous sneer that used to pass over the scholar's face as he looked at the Porter when he would pass the Porter neighbor -- and it outweighed the other scale.

After him, the Porter appeared before the heavenly court with bent head and weak knees. He approached the bench and said, righteous judges I am ashamed to come before you. I wasn't able to study Torah and didn't pray as I should have; my prayers were often shortened and incomplete. Almost all my time every day was spent carrying burdens, to support my wife and children... But even before he could finish speaking, an angel came and put on the scale the sigh the Porter emitted when he saw his Torah scholar neighbor -- at not being able to study and serve God like him -- and that sigh weighed down the scale of judgment to the side of good.

What I take from this story is that the burden of harsh judgment is very heavy, it weighs us down and it constricts our hearts and our life. It separates us from empathy and glimpsing the unity of all of life. We can train our minds and hearts to respond with empathy and forgiveness for others and ourselves.

As we move toward closing this session on having a non-judgment day, I would like to share with you another simple meditation practice. Consider this suggestion for a few moments.

It's called: I want to be here.

The Sufi master Hazrat Inayat Khan describes happiness this way: "The one who is really happy is happy everywhere: in a palace or a cottage, in riches or poverty, for he has discovered the fountain of happiness which is situated in his heart."

Call it happiness, peace of mind, or contentment, Buddhist teacher Ajahn Brahm finds it through meditation. Even if you don't have a meditation practice, you can practice wanting to be here.

To Practice she suggests this: Throughout the day, stop and no matter what the moment is like, say to yourself, "This is good enough; I want to be here in this moment, right now." She adds: "It doesn't matter what you're experiencing; what matters is whether you want to be here or somewhere else."

This creates an interior stillness, and the stillness gives us space, and in that space, we can decide how to respond from our best self, not the fearful self or the critical self.

As you move through your week, you may want to choose a simple practice that we have explored in this session and incorporate it into your days. You might want to make a little sign on a 3 x 5 card that says simply: Non-Judgment Day is Near. I am sure that will bring a smile.

We can cultivate contentment. We can live each day with more peace, kindness and compassion for one another.

We are sharing a link to a beautiful song by Michael Gott, sung by Karen Drucker, "There is Only Love."

That is what it all boils down to.

Song: <http://youtu.be/qhMTfIRrB7o> - There is only love – Michael Gott sung by Karen Drucker

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Session Four: It's Hard To Be Humble

Rev. Flossie Ernzen

We have been enjoying cultivating contentment together. We hope that new sprouts of contentment have been appearing in the garden of your life. Let's keep them growing by nourishing them with wisdom teachings, heartfelt practices and encouragement from one another.

It is a blessing to explore contentment with friends. Contentment shows up in small things, brief moments that we might sometimes miss, but through this program perhaps we are more aware and on the lookout for them. We have looked at contentment as not just a "peaceful, easy feeling" or a way to rationalize laziness. It is a deep, easy-breathing wisdom that knows what can and can't be changed, and more importantly, knows when to do and when to wait. The contented person watches the world closely but does not stare it down. She enjoys things, rather than trying to possess them or straighten them out. This is quite a balance to achieve.

In this session, we will take a little time to look at contentment and humility. I am sure you remember the song, "Oh Lord, it's hard to be humble, when you're perfect in every way." Humility is a quality that is sometimes overlooked and undervalued. Humility is all about walking lightly upon the earth. The words "humility" and "human" both come from "humus" or earth. With humility, we accept our place as one among many others. When we recognize that we are no more important than anyone else, we take no more than our small share. We approach even the most menial tasks joyfully. We accept that we are only here to be of service to God's great creation.

Many of the great spiritual masters practiced what could be called "downward mobility." Jesus, for example, encouraged his disciples to create a community of equals. Do you remember hearing about the day the disciples were arguing about who among them was the greatest? After they finished their argument, Jesus knelt before them and washed their feet. Washing feet was the most subservient job in the household. Jesus modeled humility. "I am among you," he said another time, "as one who serves." We can strive to create the conditions in the world that will lead to this kind of community. In daily life, this means working to break down the barriers that separate people and put the rich over the poor, the able-bodied over the disabled, the literate over the illiterate, and the strong over the weak.

In what ways do you think of humility as an ingredient in happiness and contentment? Humility helps us to avoid the unnecessary distress of having to have more, more,

more. My dad was a humble man. He devoted his time and talents as a blessing in the community in which we lived. The community honored him by naming an elementary school for him. For many years, our family participated in a ceremony at his school where the students chose the 6th grade girl and boy who best exemplified what it meant to be a good citizen. The school embraced core values that included service and kindness. It has been an honor to meet these young people and to know how much my parents appreciated humble service in the community. One of my favorite quotes is: "Loving, self-forgetting service is the surest, shortest, safest way to God." Don't you love it, the surest, shortest, safest path.

Humility naturally abides in inner freedom. The humble person has nothing to lose and nothing to gain. If she is praised, she feels that it is humility, and not herself, that is being praised. If she is criticized, she feels that bringing her faults to light is a great favor. Free of hope and fear alike, the humble person remains lighthearted.

Humility as an attitude is also essentially focused on others and their well-being. Studies in social psychology have found that people who overvalue themselves present a higher-than-average tendency toward aggression. These studies also highlight the relationship between humility and the faculty of forgiveness. People who consider themselves superior judge the faults of others more harshly and consider them to be less forgivable. In our last session, we shared the story that the Bal Shem Tov shared of the sigh and the sneer. Remember what a weight the deep criticism carried.

Humility and forgiveness are challenging thoughts to consider. Mother Teresa spoke about forgiveness and humility in this way. She said: "We need lots of love to forgive, but we need much more humility to ask for forgiveness."

Paradoxically, humility promotes strength of character; the humble person makes decisions on the basis of what he believes to be right and sticks by them without concern for his own image or the opinions of others. This resolve has nothing to do with obstinacy and stubbornness. It arises from the clear perception of a meaningful goal.

Consider this message from Swami Adiswarananda. "The mark of true knowledge is humility. An enlightened person knows the limitations and the insufficiency of the ego."

A few years ago in our Monday night study group, we read Seven Whispers by Christina Baldwin. The fifth whisper is to ask for what you need and offer what you can. She speaks about how we are all in a dance of unavoidable reciprocity. We are spiritual traders of life's energy, time, abundance and interrelatedness. For me humility is recognizing our inter-connectedness. We are all connected in so many deep and

mysterious ways. We share the same air and the same water. Humility helps us to step more deeply into our awareness of our interconnectedness. Humility is our awareness of our dependence on a vast intelligence.

And so, in this vastness we see such blessings and in the present moment we feel the blessings.

Some thoughts for reflection or discussion: In your experience, do people respect humility? When you meet a "humble person," do you value this quality in him/her? Why or why not?

Which of the reasons for why humility leads to happiness/contentment given in the reading do you most identify with? Who in your religious tradition, your community, or your circle of family and friends is a model of humility?

To Practice: Humility comes naturally to some people, but it still needs to be practiced. Some simple gestures can remind us of our place in the world. One is to kneel; try kneeling when you are praying, talking to a child, or even playing with your pet. Another is to step aside and let someone else go ahead of you; try this at an elevator, entering or leaving a building, or in a line.

Meditation:

"The humble soul's vista is shimmering with peace." Thomas a'Kempis

As we rest in this moment of perfect peace, we take a breath and we let go. We let go of fears, anger and rush – inhalation leads to inspiration.

Notice the moment; what do you hear? What do you feel in the place where you sit or stand? Take some moments to notice at a deep level. Peace is all around.

Be quiet and listen. Pause, be quiet and listen.

Bow to this day. Make yourself available to be a humble servant to life today. Listen for guidance and then follow it to the best of your abilities.

A parting wish for you:

May you be fearless and tender

May you be fearless and tender. May you enjoy the warm sun on your face and the flow of wind and water on your body. May you love the beauty of the world, its flowers and

trees, the mountains and flowing streams, the movement of all living things. And may you know the music and the rhythm of nature and the drama and poetry of human creation. Above all, may you know the comradeship of good friends and the meaning of generosity and compassion, the love of many and the love of one above all others.

-by Algernon Black

A song to share with you today: This is what I know by Jan Garrett and JD Martin

[https://youtu.be/ F9JclKm7wl](https://youtu.be/F9JclKm7wl)

Session Five: Wrapping Up Contentment

Rev. Flossie Ernzen

Equanimity – I am centered in the peace of my soul.

We have been savoring this time of cultivating contentment. We are working with contentment as a spiritual practice. We are expanding our contentment index. We explored becoming an Optim-Mystic; an optim-mystic sees into the depths of the good at hand. We embraced the idea of having a non-judgment day or at least a non-judgment moment each day. We spoke of using humor and humility and being of service in the world, taking what we need and offering what we are able. Paul said, "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation".

When I put together a series, I love to draw from the resources of many religious and spiritual traditions. Some of the strategies we have talked about will be more appealing to one person than to another. For example, for some contentment may come when you don't do something — don't covet, don't have expectations, don't make comparisons, don't judge. Others may make an attitude shift — being optimistic or humble, wanting to be here, reframing, rejoicing in someone else's happiness. Some may cultivate contentment through service, gratitude, knowing what's enough, or through a classic practice such as meditation, contemplative prayer, or equanimity.

In recent years, we've seen the gap between spirituality and science lessen, and now many scientific studies affirm the value of such spiritual practices as meditation. Now we learn that science offers us another way to cultivate contentment.

Rick Hanson is a neuropsychologist and meditation teacher. In Buddha's Brain, he explains how you can reprogram your brain so that you more easily and quickly feel contented. But since the brain has a built-in negativity bias, we need to do practices to emphasize positive experiences, memories, and intentions on a day-by-day basis. Rick has a practice for "taking in the good." This practice will create new neural pathways in your brain, release dopamine, and stimulate oxytocin to deepen your sense of connection.

Rick calls it internalizing the positive.

Here's how, in three easy steps:

1. Turn positive facts into positive experiences. Nurture compassion for yourself. Good things keep happening all around us, but much of the time we don't notice them; even when we do, we often hardly feel them. Someone is nice to you, you see an admirable quality in yourself, a flower is blooming, you finish a difficult project — and it all just rolls by. Instead, actively look for good news, particularly the little stuff of daily life: the faces of children, the smell of an orange, a memory from a happy vacation, a minor success at work, and so on. Whatever positive facts you find, bring a mindful awareness to them — open up to them and let them affect you. It's like sitting down to a banquet: don't just look at it — dig in!
2. Savor the experience. It's delicious! Stay with it as long as you can. Make it last by staying with it for 5, 10, even 20 seconds; don't let your attention skitter off to something else. The longer that something is held in awareness and the more emotionally stimulating it is, the more neurons that fire and thus wire together, and the stronger the trace in memory.

Focus on your emotions and body sensations, since these are the essence of implicit memory. Let the experience fill your body and be as intense as possible. For example, if someone is good to you, let the feeling of being cared about bring warmth to your whole chest.

Pay particular attention to the rewarding aspects of the experience — for example, how good it feels to get a great big hug from someone you love. Focusing on these rewards increases dopamine release, which makes it easier to keep giving the experience your attention and strengthens its neural associations in implicit memory. You're not doing this to cling to the rewards — which would eventually make you suffer — but rather to internalize them so that you carry them inside you and don't need to reach for them in the outer world.

3. You can also intensify an experience by deliberately enriching it. For example, if you are savoring a relationship experience, you could call up other feelings of being loved by others, which will help stimulate oxytocin — the "bonding hormone" — and thus deepen your sense of connection. Or you could strengthen your feelings of satisfaction after completing a demanding project by thinking about some of the challenges you had to overcome.

Imagine or feel that the experience is entering deeply into your mind and body, like the sun's warmth into a T-shirt, water into a sponge, or a jewel placed in a treasure chest in your heart. Keep relaxing your body and absorbing the emotions, sensations, and thoughts of the experience.

— Rich Hanson and Richard Mandius in *Buddha's Brain*

It can be very helpful if you have known someone who had a deep sense of contentment. If you can write down a description of them, you may be able to take in those qualities and absorb them into your own life.

Philip Gulley is a Quaker minister in Indiana, and he writes about his mother-in-law Ruby, a very contented woman. Ruby Apple says this:

"My greatest blessing," my mother-in-law, Ruby Apple, tells me, "is that I have always been content."

She tells me this often, so I know it must be true. She never says, "My greatest blessing is that I have enjoyed good health," or "My greatest blessing is that I married well." Though she appreciates her good health and marriage, she is most grateful for contentment, knowing it's a rarer bird.

It's tempting to think there's a correlation between material abundance, ease of life, and contentment, but that's not the case with Ruby. She was born into a poor family and moved from home at the age of fifteen to work as a housekeeper and attend high school. She's lived in the same small house since 1941, raised five children, worked alongside her husband on a patch of Indiana ground, was widowed while the children were still home, and describes her life with words like "fortunate" and "happy."

Where I see hardship, difficulty, and suffering, she sees strokes of good luck and blessing. If I didn't know her better, I'd think she wasn't right in the head, but she's saner than anyone I've ever met.

I've known Ruby twenty-five years. Once, during the early years of our association, I was seated at her kitchen table. Ruby was washing dishes, and I was reading a magazine article about happiness. It contained a quiz readers could take to gauge their well-being. I decided to test Ruby, so I read her the questions, and marked her responses. According to the quiz, she was supposed to be miserable. The man who wrote the quiz was a Doctor of Psychology, so I know he must be right. I keep expecting Ruby to face reality and be depressed, but she stubbornly insists on being cheerful.

I'm not the jealous type, but I envy Ruby her contentment. I'm always aiming for some elusive happiness and missing. Like most Americans, I'm guilty of thinking more stuff will make me happy, so I'm a vigorous gatherer of things that give me pleasure — chairs, books, and pocketknives. I'm most content when I'm sitting in a chair, reading a book, with a knife in my pocket. But the pleasure is fleeting. As soon as I get out of my chair, I'm prone to discontent.

Every month or so, I drive the hundred miles south to Ruby's home and take her to lunch. She lives in a remote part of the state where the local restaurants are unremarkable, but to Ruby it's all white tablecloths, silver, and crystal.

She orders the same thing no matter where we go — a chicken sandwich and "a clear soda." In all the years we've done this, she's never been displeased.

"How's your sandwich, Ruby?"

"Delicious."

On our way home, she talks about the sandwich and recounts her long history with chickens. "We'd get two hundred baby chickens at Corydon every spring. Kept some of them back for laying hens, but we ate most of them.

"Yes," she says, on our ride home, "chickens have been awful good to me."

I once asked Ruby the secret of her contentment, and she looked at me, thoroughly mystified. Secret? What secret? She smiled and went on about her day.

Why are folks who think the least about contentment the most content?

I suspect Ruby's "secret" is low expectations. She grew up in hardship, assumed most of her life would follow that pattern, and so was surprised and grateful when good came her way. Too many of us approach life in the opposite manner. We believe the world owes us a great deal, are disappointed when it fails to deliver, and think ourselves deprived. If life were mashed potatoes, we'd see the lumps and Ruby would see the gravy.

Perhaps our headlong pursuit of happiness is the enemy. Since Ruby never believed the world owed her happiness, she's found it in small ways, in the slightest things, cultivating the wise habit of seeing the silver lining and not the cloud.

This is a great irony — people who have every reason to be content seldom are. Though happiness is their aim, it seems always out of reach. I wonder if gratefulness is the bridge from sorrow to joy, spanning the chasm of our anxious striving. Freed from the burden of unbridled desires, we can enjoy what we have, celebrate what we've attained, and appreciate the familiar. For if we can't be happy now, we'll likely not be happy when.

— Philip Gulley in Porch Talk

So, for now, we wrap up contentment and we find ourselves wrapped in contentment. We consider the blessings in our lives, so many blessings, pressed down, heaped up, overflowing, and running over.

For reflection:

Is there a practice that we have explored in this series that you plan on continuing to use?

Is there a positive experience that you are savoring today?

A Closing Prayer:

Dear God,
save me from wanting
what is not mine.
Protect me from my own jealousy,
from desiring
the money or the possessions,
the position or the honor
that belong to another.
Let me trust in You
enough to believe
that what is meant to be mine
will come to me.

Let me trust in You
enough to be satisfied
with all that I have
today.

Every moment is a golden one for him who has the vision to recognize it as such.

— Henry Miller in Frederic Brussat's Twitter Collection

Music to carry you – enjoy this video and song from Karen Drucker – In the Stillness of this Moment -

<https://youtu.be/UHxfM4PnRb8>

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