

**Learning Grace
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Back when I was in high school, my family and I attended a large Presbyterian church. Even at that point I was a Unitarian Universalist at heart. When confirmation loomed, the time when teens were supposed to confess our beliefs, I remember barraging the ministers with questions about God and the church. I wasn't convinced that I believed in most, or any, of it, but I appreciated their honest and non-defensive answers.

I ended up getting confirmed, mostly because I liked and respected the people there, and because they were religious progressives I felt I had wiggle room theologically to feel comfortable. They knew of my more Unitarian persuasion, and seemed okay with it.

Eventually I went to college, and the church remained in touch. The ministers would take me out to lunch when I was back, I would receive the monthly newsletter and occasional inquiries about how I was doing. I thought it was nice, of course, but didn't give it much thought, assuming that's what most churches do for their young people. And they had gotten wind about my interest in the ministry, which I'm sure garnered special attention.

I would disappoint them quickly however, after I started attending a Unitarian Universalist congregation right after college, becoming a UU religious educator and then finally entered divinity school. At the same time, my parents stopped attending the church and took their pledge along with them.

And yet, those Presbyterians hung on and stayed in touch. It was quite remarkable. Every time I moved, they made sure I received the newsletter and church updates. To this day, I have no idea how they always found my address. I've moved from Minnesota to Florida to Illinois to Massachusetts and now back to Wisconsin, and they have never failed.

I've spent a lot of time, especially now that I'm a minister, wondering about why, after more than 12 years, this church still sees me as part of their ministry. I feel a mix of surprise at their persistence, impressed by their abilities to find me, and touched that they care enough to do so. Just the other day, I got an email asking if I wanted to get lunch. They do it even when they have nothing to gain from it. They know I'm a Unitarian Universalist minister and even a humanist. They aren't the save your soul type of Christians. I don't give them any money. And they have 600 members, so you'd think they'd have their hands full. Why would they bother?

The only thing I can think of is that they do it because they genuinely care about the people who come into their church. Not because they have something to gain from them or because they are interested in growth or because their ministers have nothing better to do, but because that's how they understood ministry and church.

This is the month of grace here at our congregation. And I can't help but remember that my old Presbyterian church talked a lot about grace too. It was even in their mission statement: "the church does not live for itself," it proclaimed, "we are to be an instrument of grace." They lived it out through their selfless outreach to me, knowing that their work was not about them, but about serving and caring for others.

Grace is a hard word for Unitarian Universalists to wrap our heads around. In part, I believe this is because we have struggled to experience the word apart from its Christian origins. Most broadly, it can be understood as a gift from God that offers salvation. But of course, grace has never been static, never been entirely agreed upon. Grace was a prime point of contention during the reformation, when followers of Luther challenged church teachings that suggested people must earn God's grace. These Protestants suggested instead that people were saved by faith alone, they are offered grace not through any work or accomplishment, but through God's benevolence and mercy.

In our own tradition, grace has an important role to play as well. The Universalists continued along the Protestant path, arguing that grace was not given only through faith, but unconditionally, to everyone. God was too loving, too kind, too generous to withhold blessing. Grace was offered no matter how confused we were, no matter how many mistakes we made, no matter what we believed or did.

Within Unitarian Universalist circles today, we don't all believe in God, or in a God that bestows grace from on high. Grace apart from God can be hard to fathom. But it's still a vitally important idea for us. We might not see grace as emanating from a deity, but most of us would agree with our Universalist forbearers that everyone has inherent worth and dignity, our first principle, that there is good in every person, and that through love, we can be transformed. It's why we have worked so hard for human rights, and fought for causes of equality and justice. It's why we try to welcome those who might not find

welcome anywhere else. Because we want people to know they belong and are worthy of love.

This is the ministry of grace. It is the giving of love, the work of the church, a faith that reminds us that grace remains even if we screw up, or fail or disappoint. And our job, as people of grace, is to extend this love to others, to remind and assure them that it is unconditional and universal.

This is easier said than done. In theory, the idea of universal grace and love sounds great. But let's not kid ourselves. There will be times when it will feel inadequate, even naïve. It's all well and good to talk about unconditional love for each and every person, of our inherent worth and dignity, but the world makes it difficult sometimes. We see people who are cruel and violent, prejudiced and hateful. People who genuinely seem unworthy of grace, who represent or support something truly terrible and wrong. I suspect that many of us feel that way after the decision in Ferguson. There was a miscarriage of justice, a blatant display of racism and injustice and inexcusable apathy. It was painful to witness.

I remember watching Facebook blow up following the announcement that the police officer who shot Michael Brown would not be indicted. The emotions were intense. They were hurt and forlorn, angry and accusatory. Others were absolutist, even rageful. Some defended the ensuing violence, one argued that there was a place for hatred in Unitarian Universalism, if it were directed at racists or bigots. Almost all these reactions came from a place of deep disappointment, even despair, at some deep, entrenched, dangerous injustice. Action must be

taken, a call to arms must be sounded, the battle must be won.

Like many of you, I was saddened by what happened in Ferguson. We have a problem in this country, and it's been a problem for a very long time. Its part of why it's so tragic, and frustrating. So much inequality, so much disparity and unfairness, such terrible legacies of violence and poverty and discrimination.

Talking about grace and love is harder when something we really care about is threatened. It's harder when we look at others and see people with blinders on, who don't seem to care about racism, or violence or a death of another human being. We are rightfully appalled and then inspired to do what we can to make it right.

And yet, I struggle with how we talk about it. It's not my place to judge or critique another's feelings or the words they use, but I didn't see a lot of grace on those Facebook feeds. I didn't see our commitment to the inherent worth and dignity of all people, or a generosity of heart.

We can't have it both ways. We can't be Unitarian Universalists who proclaim that all people are worthy of love, worth and dignity, and then revoke it once people predictably act in ways that we find reprehensible. Those are fair weather values, convenient grace. When things are comfortable or safe or distant, we talk a good game about love, and respect and forgiveness. But what does it say about us, and our faith, if we abandon them when things actually get tough?

The mistake I know I make is to assume that those who talk about embracing love in the face of injustice don't

understand what's really at stake. That they simply don't care enough, or haven't suffered enough, or don't really understand, or are just naïve. But that's a false paradigm and it lets us off the hook. We only have to look at history to see that this isn't true. It's full of people who faced tremendous suffering and were instruments of grace anyway. People who resisted being polarized and judgmental and unkind. They did it even though the prejudice they fought was just as real as on the streets of Ferguson. No doubt they had equal reason to feel sadness, anger, and rage.

We can think of folks like Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr, or even Jesus himself. Staring down the Pharisees and the Romans, and preaching about love, was he naïve or uncaring or confused? "You have heard it said," he told his disciples, "love your neighbor and hate your enemies. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...if you love only those who love you, how good are you? Do not the tax collectors do the same?" Jesus challenges his disciples. Even in his dying breath, he implores them, to head the gospel of love and grace, "Forgive them," he says, "they know not what they do."

What would our Facebook feeds look like if they reflected these teachings? Jesus' words are so difficult to follow, so counter-cultural, it's almost hard to believe he is being serious. But they are the logical extension of Universalism, of the faith we share. Love no matter what. Love even when it is hard, even when our hearts ache, love without excuse or condition. That's what it means to be an instrument of grace. It means hearing the words of reformer Dorothy Day when she wrote: "I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least."

We can't turn our backs on our highest values simply because we feel like a particular situation is appalling. We can't forsake our calling to see the good in each person simply because they are on the other side of the political aisle. We're called to be better than that. And together we can face perhaps the greatest challenge of history: to see each other for who we really are, all the light and all the darkness, and to love each other anyways.

This kind of religion isn't easy, but good religion rarely is. Universalism, the gift of grace, our service to love, matters only if it calls us to something greater than ourselves. It doesn't mean we have to sacrifice our passion or our commitment to justice. Jesus never did, nor MLK, or Gandhi. From their lives, from our own history and theology and faith, we learn we don't have to either. Our time on this earth can mean many things.

We can work for a better world, we can be agents of change and justice and equality. But if we stay true to these convictions, as the Christian scripture reminds us, we can, even in the end, say with confidence that "we have fought the good fight...we have kept the faith." For us, as Unitarian Universalists, this means caring, passionately throwing our hearts into the world and hands to progress. We will be burned and hurt and ache at our brokenness, but it will not shake us: our faith in each other, in the goodness of the world, and in the love that transcends all difference and heals all divides. May it be so, and Amen.