

## Grace

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January 28, 2018

This past week, I was at the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association Institute for Excellence in Ministry. The planning committee went out of their way to welcome parents of young children to the conference, so our daily worship services included some of the same delightful sounds of life that I so treasure about congregational worship. There were always four or five babies being bounced in carriers or crawling up the aisles to get a better view of the choir. I was reminded of the days when my own kids were still in their cribs.

When our (now seven-and-a-half-year-old) twins were newborns, people used to tell us, "Sleep when the baby sleeps," which would have been good advice if they slept at the same time. At around six months old, we decided that they and we were ready for sleep training. That means we practiced putting the babies down in their cribs, telling them good night, and leaving the room.

I'm sure you can imagine how popular this was with the babies at first. The first night, we went through cycles of crying, reassurance, and calming for an hour and a half. After that, both babies stayed asleep for about ten hours. The next night they settled down somewhat more quickly. The third night involved only half an hour of objections. It wasn't long before we all got used to the routine and neither the babies nor the adults did much crying at bedtime.

Once they were asleep, we had blessed peace. We knew they were getting what their bodies needed. The adults could sleep. Or get some work done. Or try to get some work done and accidentally sleep. It felt like heavenly serenity, achieved with some struggle. In the morning, the twins didn't appear to resent or even remember the betrayal of the night before. They were glad to see us.

Starting over, well resourced, residing in the present moment with joy rather than dwelling on negative things from the past; this is an experience of grace. Like the sleep of medium-sized babies, the experience of grace is itself one of ease, yet we may struggle a bit with the disciplines that help open up our perception of grace. To me, grace is a force of the universe that is always there, an assurance of the acceptance of the Source of Love, a resource for reconciliation, and a model of how we can live in connection with one another. Grace is the truth that sets us free and the re-alignment of right relationship. To open ourselves up to its power, we practice forgiveness, self-compassion, and covenant.

## Forgiving Others

Forgiveness is one path to perceiving grace. We're winding up a month with the theme of forgiveness, so I just have a bit more to say before we move on. Forgiveness is about retaining the memory without continuing to feed the feelings of anger and disappointment. Forgiveness can lead to making amends, reconciliation, and a stronger relationship, especially when more than one person is engaged in the process. Occasionally, forgiveness means letting something be in the past and finding a way to love someone from afar, because the hurt is too deep and the harmful behavior is too persistent for closeness. For everyday injuries, may we practice forgiveness in ways that are healthy for ourselves and life-affirming for all.

Our story earlier, "Mussa and Nagib," is an allegory that illustrates this. The story was written by Julio Cesar de Mello e Souza, an early twentieth century fiction writer and mathematician from Brazil, writing under the pen name Malba Tahan. He set the tale in a place far away from his personal experience to give it a legendary quality.

In the story, hurt was written in sand, but selflessness was chiseled in rock. Writing in sand doesn't take much time. It's OK to remember mistakes and learn from them, but don't dwell on judgments. On the other hand, engraving kindness in stone takes some focus. Writing thank-you notes or recording the act of kindness in a journal can help us hold on to those feelings of connection and gratitude.

Sometimes resentments are attempts to prevent being hurt in the same way twice. But grudges do not necessarily offer protection, and they have their own drawbacks. Addressing the incident directly—saying what happened, how you feel, and what requests (if any) you would like to make to the other person—is one way to reduce the risk of being hurt again.

In a sense, Mussa's act of writing in the sand where his friend Nagib could see it was a form of direct address. He called attention to the hurt, the incident itself, without any theories about what it meant or labels for his friend's character. It is so easy to jump from "ouch" to "you don't care about me" or "you are a bad person" in a moment of anger. Reflect on facts first. Notice your feelings. Figure out what you really need. Then decide how to respond.

Direct address is not a guarantee, but I think the benefits outweigh the risks. Carving a negative experience in stone takes a lot of time and effort, and then you have this heavy rock you have to carry around. It may be that some distance is necessary for physical

safety. Honor your own well-being and boundaries, yet also account for what is lost when a grudge takes the lead.

When an event is far in the past, you can hold on to the wisdom you gained from that experience and the memory of the strengths you showed in navigating through it without pacing continuous circles of resentment and judgment. Whether something is drawn in the sand or engraved in the stone depends on how much time and energy you devote to committing the facts, feelings, and inferences to memory. Choose consciously. Forgive when you can.

## **Self-Compassion**

For some of us, forgiving others is easier than forgiving ourselves. A proportional, productive response to our own mistakes doesn't necessarily come naturally. Perhaps we have too much information from inside our own heads, too intimate a knowledge of the guffs and muffs that other people didn't necessarily notice. Another challenge is that, unlike conflicts with other people, we don't have as many options for putting temporary distance between ourselves and ourselves while we reflect on what we need. Of the options we do have, few of them are healthy for very long. Self-compassion helps us to continue to do the work of reflection in moments when we doubt ourselves, or when other people doubt us. Self-compassion reminds us that we have value, no matter what setbacks occur.

When we are born, we are dropped into the middle of a complex and beautiful creative process. Real life assumes trial and error. Scientists know this. Making hypotheses—educated guesses—and discovering that they are actually wrong is part of the scientific process. One of the challenges is to avoid thinking that our worth as a person depends on being right or perfect. The universe needs more from us than perfection. The universe needs us to move and interact and grow.

For instance, astronomers and physicists had to come around to the understanding that they were wrong about the composition of the stars thanks to the work of [Cecilia Payne](#), who was known later in life as [Cecilia Payne-Gaposchkin](#).

Cecilia Payne was born in Wendover, England, in 1900. ([She was a Unitarian](#) and [belonged to First Parish Lexington, MA](#), as an adult, but that's not important for this story.) Payne arrived at the brand new observatory at Harvard University in September of 1923 for graduate study.

In her doctoral work, Payne suggested that stars have a high abundance of hydrogen and helium when compared with planets. We accept this as a basic truth now, but it

went against one the assumptions that guided astronomy at the time; namely, that planets must have the same composition as stars. Her mentor, Henry Norris Russell, talked her out of highlighting this controversial finding in her dissertation. She followed his advice. Her thesis was signed off in May 1925 and she earned the first ever PhD in astronomy (previously astronomers received degrees in physics).

Soon after that, Russell went to visit another former student who was studying the solar flash spectrum. He saw the light, so to speak, and in 1929 Russell published a paper in which he argued for the abundance of hydrogen. At the very end of his paper, Russell gave credit to Payne's 1925 conclusions, neglecting to mention that he had originally disagreed.

Scientists, it seems to me, have to be more loyal to the scientific method and to their identity as researchers than they are to being right. Cecilia Payne certainly experienced obstacles and discouragement before arriving at Harvard. I can only imagine the persistent confidence in her quest that kept her going, even when her theories were wrong, and especially when they were right but not accepted. Similarly, Russell was a good enough scientist to change his tune eventually, although one would wish he could have trusted Payne in the first place. Mistakes are part of the process.

I wonder how it would be if we approached emotions, spirituality, and human communication with a scientific openness to mistakes. Our worthiness as people is not dependent on being correct or accomplished or productive. Your mission in this life, whatever you determine that to be, is larger than any individual setback. Beating up on ourselves for our current situation or for the choices we've made in the past does not help our mission. Acknowledging our mistakes and figuring out what we can learn from them does.

Be gentle with yourself. Have compassion for the previous version of you, who had to make decisions without all of the information or resources or support you might have needed. Remember that you are made of stardust, one with the Spirit of Life, and that the journey leads onward.

### **Covenant: Anticipating Grace; or: The Freedom to Fail**

Practicing being open to grace as we forgive ourselves and each other is a little easier in a covenanted community. Unitarian Universalist congregations like this one are covenanted communities. What holds us together is not creed or personality or even a appreciation for acoustic guitar, but the sacred promises that give us our foundation.

Here at UCH, some of those promises are spoken and some are unspoken. We can disagree about ideas without rejecting people. We bring our whole selves into this room, fully present, accepting all the aspects of identity that make our companions who they are. Whoever you are and whomever you love, you are welcome here.

If we forget for a moment to be kind or to do the work of active acceptance, we'll talk about it; individually if possible, or in a group if we need to do that. Coming back to the table when a promise has been broken is also part of covenant. Covenants can be sacred because they are capable of embracing human imperfection. The sacred has avenues for healing.

Committing to a covenant is an obligation. It's work. Being connected means we voluntarily give up on some of our freedom. On the other hand, being in a covenanted community also gives us freedom. It gives us the freedom to fail and to come back from failure. Covenant offers the freedom to be broken, to have our brokenness recognized, and to be appreciated for the entire picture: broken and whole, flawed and fabulous. That's grace.

A covenant that promotes kindness and forgiveness makes it possible for people to be authentic and vulnerable. Committing to dismantle oppressions like sexism and racism and ableism increase the safety of sharing real life experiences. Trying things is easier when people have the freedom to fail.

Knowing that there is room in this circle for the entirety of life, may each person know the freedom to lay out all the challenges, anxieties, works-in-progress, gifts, and talents they bring with them into this community. Volunteer to usher, or for a Saturday breakfast with Gather the Spirit, or for the maintenance team. Say what's really on your heart in your Covenant Group. Make something daring for the Stewardship Potluck on February 9. I look forward to receiving your RSVP by this Friday. Have confidence that you are welcome in this covenanted community. There is grace here.

## **Conclusion**

I hope that transforming our perception of the world so that we can understand the grace among us is as easy as a medium-sized baby waking up in the morning after ten hours of sleep. Let us awaken to the possibility of starting over. Retain the lessons of the past without putting energy into bitterness. Forgive when you can. Let us awaken to the assurance that we are one with the universe, and to the knowledge that our quest is bigger than whatever causes us to doubt. Be gentle with yourself. Let us awaken to the power of covenant as we form a community of sacred resilience. The bonds of

congregational life bring the freedom of authenticity. The Source of Love is in us and among us always. Cultivate the awareness of grace.

So be it. Blessed be. Amen.