

Redesigning Grace – The Call for Universal Grace in Challenging Times

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Mr. Dellaria was my earth science teacher in my freshman year of high school. Now, let me tell you a little bit about my freshman year of high school. The year was 1973 and I have to say, that school came in a distant second to my cool bell bottoms, long hair and hanging out with the girls in the theater department. Without detailing that picture much deeper, let me just say, I was fairly uninterested in Mr. Dellaria's class and ended up with a "D" grade my first semester. Actually, at this stage of my life I look back and remember very few details of those days. That was 36 years ago this year and the details seem a long way away. What I do remember, and will never forget is Mr. Dellaria. You see, Mr. Dellaria never gave up on me. I remember he met with my parents, he worked with me on my work habits, he cared for me as a human being and if I remember the story right, I got an "A" the second semester of that class, at least that is how I remember the story.

It is hard to say what motivated him as a teacher and unfortunately I believe that he is long passed so I can not ask him, but whatever motivated him, I now believe that he showed me a deep and abiding sense of grace.

Grace is a lovely word, let me say it again, grace.

Let's look at just a few of the possible definitions of grace. Grace could refer to elegance or beauty of form, manner, motion, or action such as "that ballet dancer is so graceful." Another could be a pleasing or attractive quality such as how I was graced with a shiny, follically independent head. It could be a manifestation of favor, especially by a superior, like the gracious act of Mr. Dellaria, such as "It was only through the Mr. Dellaria's grace that I wasn't tossed from high school." And of course there is this one, torn from today's headlines, grace can be an allowance of time after a debt or bill has become payable granted to the debtor before suit can be brought against him or her or a penalty applied: as in, "The mortgage is due today, but we have 31 days' grace period." Finally, there also is to grace an occasion with one's presence such as you have all graced me and each other by coming here this morning.

Those are some of the common every day uses, but what makes grace such an important term in the life of our religious communities? If you look it from a theological perspective, which we can only do briefly here since it is such a huge theological topic, but if you look at this theologically, it can be very complicated especially when you are about to use ideas and definitions that will use the word "god" 7 times in a Unitarian Universalist congregation – not 6, but 7. I cite these in part for purposes of contrast, for us to have a broad understanding of where the concept comes from but also to discuss later how I believe this concept can evolve.

There are some broad concepts associated with the theological meanings of grace: the freely given, unmerited favor and love of God; the influence or spirit of God operating in humans to regenerate or strengthen them; virtue or excellence of divine origin, the condition of being in God's favor or one of the elect.

An example from one of our American mainstream denominations, the United Methodists define prevenient grace as, "...the divine love that surrounds all humanity and precedes any and all of

our conscious impulses.” Well that sounds pretty Universalist to me, but then there is a hook in the explanation, “This grace prompts our first wish to please God, our first glimmer of understanding concerning God's will, and our 'first slight transient conviction' of having sinned against God. God's grace also awakens in us an earnest longing for deliverance from sin and death and moves us toward repentance and faith.”

Now these are not concepts that our Universalist forebears embraced as the reason for the freely given love of God. Our Universalist heritage informs us about grace through the concept of Universal love, the belief that all are loved and capable of giving love without any conditions. So if this thought of Universal love is extended to the concept of grace, one might say that Universalists believe that all are capable of giving and receiving grace.

We can also look to our principles and purposes to help us with our thoughts on grace and we don't have to look very far. The first principle, the very first one, so often quoted says, “that we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” That is not just a principle, it is an action. It is something that we must strive to do in our words and in our deeds. We as Unitarian Universalists are active in our striving for dignity in this world, it is not something that is just written on a paper.

Clarence Russell Skinner is a particular favorite of mine in Universalist history. He was a major voice of prophetic religious liberalism as Professor of Applied Christianity at Tufts College (now Tufts University) from 1914 to 1945. In his manifesto, *The Social Implications of Universalism* (1915), he said, “There are two alternatives, and only two, before us. First, which is unlikely, is that we unscramble our modern interdependent culture, returning to separate and isolationist lives. . . Such a world would not demand greatness. The other alternative is to so expand our spiritual powers that we vastly increase the range of our understanding and sympathy. There is no middle way.” There is no middle way. We are at a time in this world that demands greatness. We are at time to vastly increase the range of our understanding and sympathy. We are at a time that tests us, tests our faith in our institutions, test our love for those who are different and tests our ability to give and receive grace.

In times that test us, it is not only about who we are as Unitarian Universalists, but who we are as human beings. In times that challenge our nation, it is not about who is wrong and who is right but how we can act on our values of universal love and dignity. In times that threaten the planet, it is not about arguing the merits of the theories on global warning, but how we begin to live as sustainably as possible, and in times of strain on our families, our finances and our communities, it is about how we offer and practice this concept of grace. The chance and the need has arrived for us to redesign the meaning of grace. Today, today, we have the opportunity through the depths of the grace that we offer to each other to model for the world the world we would like to see through our gracious actions.

It is possible that at one time in history we would have been considered heretics if we sat in a place of worship and reframed the meaning of grace to be something other than God given, but whatever your beliefs, our Universalist heritage, our belief that deeds take precedent over creeds, the depth of our commitment to the inherent worth and dignity of each and every living being on this planet, lays the foundation for us to assert that grace comes from the divine in all of us. And if there is a spark of the divine in all of us, then each and every one of us has the ability

to receive and offer grace, each of us has the right and I might even say responsibility to support the offering of grace in our society. What I am saying is giving grace can be a conscious act and perhaps broader than that, a possible shift in how we live our lives. Somewhere at some time, giving and/or living grace is a decision, not always an easy decision, not always a popular decision, not always a comfortable decision, but an important and deeply meaningful decision.

Earlier I mentioned that grace can be an allowance of time after a debt or bill has become payable granted to the debtor before suit can be brought against him or her or a penalty applied. There are millions suffering today with these issues and whatever the cause of these issues we will leave to discuss for another day. But this trauma to our financial system has brought up actions that I feel a need to note.

Recently, both the Sheriffs of Cook County in the Chicago area and Wayne County in the Detroit area made these kinds of decisions. They have both halted some actions on the eviction and sale of foreclosures in their respective jurisdictions. According to an Associated Press story Wayne County Sheriff Warren Evans said, "Foreclosure sales through the Wayne County sheriff's office are being halted until qualified homeowners have a chance to exhaust a federal program designed to keep them in their homes. The Congress-approved Troubled Asset Relief Program, known as TARP, pre-empts Michigan's foreclosure law and allows sheriff's departments across the state to stop foreclosure sales says Evans. "I cannot in clear conscience allow any more families to lose their homes through foreclosure sale until I'm satisfied they have been afforded every option they are entitled to under the law to avoid foreclosure," Evans said. The moratorium does not prevent lenders from foreclosing on homes. The sheriff's office just won't sell them, "The sale is what pre-empts the person from having an option later to renegotiate the mortgage," he said.

In this day and age it is clear, that there may be many unclear reasons for this decision. Was it easy? Was it politically motivated? Was it legal? Was it even a responsible way to handle these situations? I think time and history will tell, but for now, I will view it through my grace colored glasses and hope that these individuals in authority heard that divine spark that lives within all of us, a spark that calls us to do the right thing, a glow that helps us all take a step in the right direction. I will hope that these two public servants have helped to evolve the notion of grace.

Grace is in need of evolution, grace is in need of redesign. Grace must burst the banks of the rivers of tradition.

In his book *Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC's of Faith*, Frederick Buechner, gives some insight into the receiving side of this redesigned grace. These are not the academic sounding theological words I spoke of earlier, these are words of compassion, words of love, words of connection and words of kindness. He writes:

"Grace is something you can never get but can only be given. There's no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth. A good sleep is grace and so are good dreams. Most tears are grace. The smell of rain is grace. Somebody loving you is grace. Loving somebody is grace. Have you ever tried to love somebody? He goes on to say, that "There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can only be yours if you'll reach out and take it. Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too."

Maybe 36 years ago, young and foolish, I was smart enough or lucky enough to reach out. Maybe, just maybe, and I would like to believe that it is true, these two sheriffs have decided to give the grace that so many are in need of right now in this country. I hold in my heart that we all can live each day offering grace where it is needed, accepting grace where it is offered. Somebody loving you is grace, loving somebody is grace, loving yourself is also grace.

May we extend our love where we can, may we receive love more openly than ever. May we give, may we evolve, may we redesign, may we remove barriers, and may we work universally, like drops of cleansing rain, to spread grace beyond these walls to ourselves, each other and all who are in need.

Blessed Be, May it be so and Amen.