

Grace Reconfigured

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Paul Tillich, one of the most well-known theologians of the 20th century, wrote: There are few words more strange to most of us than "sin" and "grace." They are strange, just because they are so well-known. During the centuries they have received distorting connotations, and have lost so much of their genuine power that we must seriously ask ourselves whether we should use them at all ... But there is a mysterious fact about the great words of our religious tradition: they cannot be replaced. All attempts to make substitutions, including those I have tried myself, have failed to convey the reality that was to be expressed; they have led to shallow and impotent talk.

It seems to me that we Unitarian Universalists get caught in this same conundrum that Tillich describes. On the one hand, we are drawn to reject religious language that has been so used and misused, so laden with theological baggage and distortion that it is to us both useless and repugnant. And on the other hand, we are left, after such a rejection, with no language at all with which to capture and describe some of the most salient of human and religious experiences. And so our task, like that Tillich laid out for the liberal Christians to whom he was writing more than 50 years ago, is to resurrect traditional language in ways that have meaning for and are descriptive of our own experiences. We do this so that our religious conversations are neither shallow nor impotent, but rich and fruitful and expressive of what we know, have experienced and believe about ourselves and our world. And so today we take up this word "grace."

Before I begin, however, I want to be up front about the fact that the word grace and all it stands for is, for me, one that gets at the heart of some of my deepest religious experiences and most profound convictions. In other words, for me "grace" is not just a word that needs reclaiming and resuscitation for some idle reason or as part of some heady, theoretical endeavor, but because the word comes as close as any I know to something that gets at the core of what has made and continues to make me a religious person.

Perhaps, then, my experience is as good a place to start as any in looking at this word. So to get at my sense of what grace is, let me tell a personal story.

My senior year in college, I was working on an honors thesis. The thesis, truth be told, ended badly, but by the time it ended, I hardly cared. I had, I knew, gotten out of it what I needed to, and not in any scholarly way. The topic was one only a 20-something filled with hubris could dream up: Platonic thought in Augustinian theology, or some such grand, sweeping treatise. Had I done a good job, I'm sure I'd have the thing published by now ... all six volumes!

So, given the scale of my honors thesis, it will probably not surprise you why, during the spring break of my senior year -- when all my friends were home sleeping 14 hours a day and basking in the love of family, or surfing their way up and down the coast of California -- I was stuck on Stanford's campus at the libraries and in front of a computer. Indeed, I stayed there to slog away on just one chapter of this thesis -- the chapter on Augustine's *Confessions*. "God make me chaste and continent, but not yet": The man who wrote these words was my companion for spring break, and what fun we had!

Well, I won't bore you with all the details of his life, but let's just say that the highlight of his journey from one faith and faith crisis to another is a moment in a garden. There he finds himself spiritually lost and in despair and agitation. And there he hears the voices of children singing as if they were playing some sort of a game, only what they are singing is too strange to be the words of any merriment. "*Tole lege, tole lege,*" they cry out. "Take it up and read it. Take it up and read it." Hearing this command sends Augustine inside his nearby home, where he throws open a copy of the scripture of the faith with which he is currently struggling. It happens to be the Holy Bible. He throws his finger onto a passage on one of the pages to which it has opened, reads the passage and there finds the answer to the very question with which he has been struggling. In that moment he is converted to Christianity, and the rest, as they say, is ancient history.

Well, it was his life's story in which I'd been immersed all week, when I biked to campus, chapter in hand, just one last footnote to find and enter before dropping it off at the department chair's office. My fellow students were back on campus, it was sunny, cool and warm in the way Northern California can be, and I went to pick up my grades. Now, let's just say my grades had been all over the board in college as I wended my way through subjects and varying degrees of commitment to learning. However, by senior year I knew my passion and threw myself into my classes, *actually read all the books that were assigned*, and so it came as a huge surprise when I picked up my grades. After three-and-a-half years, I thought I'd finally found my footing, dug myself out of a place of feeling lost, to a place of purpose and mastery, and this report card said to me that I was *all wrong*. To me, the grades I saw said that I was still lost and second-rate and, truth be told, might always be all those things. What's worse, now I knew I couldn't even trust my sense of myself. It was devastating.

So, on this gorgeous spring day, I sat down in the center of campus, at the steps of the student center, with people walking by and laughing, the sun shining, and I started down a spiral of self-loathing and fear and despair. There I was in the center of campus, tears streaming down my face. It was only basic pride that convinced me to try to get myself together and get home and have my mental breakdown somewhere more private. So I tried to stop crying. I told myself: Just find that last footnote, fill it in, hand in the chapter, and go home and face this alone. Just open the book and find that footnote. Take it up and read it, *tole lege*.

So I reached into my bag to pull out my weathered, well-annotated copy of the *Confessions*, to find that last passage that needed a citation. But when I pulled out the book, there was, lodged in its binding, a pencil that I had tossed in after the book when I

packed that morning. Opening to the page where the pencil had lodged, looking for the passage I needed to cite, I began reading the only highlighted passage on those two pages, and my skin started to tingle.

It was as if the passage I read was a line-by-line response to the monologue in my head that had sent me down into the depths of despair: "This, at least, is my own opinion of myself," it began, "but I may be wrong. For the powers of my inner self are veiled in darkness which I must deplore. When my mind speculates upon its own capabilities, it realizes that it cannot safely trust its own judgement, because its inner workings are generally so obscure that they are only revealed in the light of experience; and, besides this, during this life, which may be called a perpetual trial, no one should be confident that although he has been able to pass from a worse state to a better, he may not also pass from a better state to a worse."

It wasn't very Unitarian Universalist, perhaps, but it lifted me right back into the sun, and put all my despair in perspective. Life is a trial -- not *only* a trial, for it has moments of great beauty, too, but it is also a trial. And we do hardly know ourselves, and then only through and by experience. We will go from better to worse and worse to better again and again, and it's by no fault of our own, just the cycle of a life with its struggles. There was comfort for me in all of this and still is.

And then came the final line of the passage. It felt like a benediction -- a farewell and a blessing -- and it was this: "Our only hope, our only confidence, the only firm promise that we have is your mercy."

Now, in other days I would have rejected that blessing. No hope? No firm promise? Only mercy, with its pity-like care? Who needs that? But in this moment, I knew this mercy first-hand and I knew it to be a gentle and yielding kind of love. This wasn't a Presence (a God) who promised to make the world safe or forefend danger or stave off life's loss or hurt, but one that softened the blows, and promised to catch you. And that felt, to me, like something whose mercy was firm promise and hope enough for me.

I don't know if it was Roy Rogers or Albert Einstein (what a choice!), but one of them said that the most important decision a person has to make is whether the universe is a friendly place. Grace, for me, was about knowing that the universe and whatever moved through it was, at its core, friendly.

Paul Tillich has a wonderful passage that I wish I had read to you this morning. In it he describes his sense of what grace is. He believes grace is all around us all the time, but that oftentimes we are only open to it in moments of great hardship or despair. In such times, he says, when grace breaks in, it is as if a voice is saying one simple thing to us. It is saying, "You are accepted," accepted by that which was greater than you, the name of which you don't even know. It is the experience that changes everything while changing nothing. It is the experience that reconciles you with Life itself.

I think about what a powerful experience it is to know that you are accepted and that the world is a friendly place. I think about all the ways that get communicated to us and would invite each of you to think about how powerful and how comforting it is when we are the recipient of that message.

I think about every time a child here at church comes up to me and asks to talk or hugs me and how, for me, that is a kind of grace. I think about how nature and animals communicate the same thing to us. I remember the time, for instance, when I stood on a hill back behind the land where my grandfather's family had settled in West Virginia, and looked out over this beautiful expanse of land. I think about the bay mare that grazed on the land and came up behind me to smell me. You have to know, my grandfather raised racehorses for a while, and so I was taught not to trust a horse that comes up behind you because those racehorses were wild and would bite -- and hard! Well, this big bay mare came up behind me, sniffed my hair, and lifted her huge head over my shoulder, resting it against my chest, then gently leaned her enormous body against me, and I stroked her long face. It felt like hours, though it was probably only minutes, but this too was a moment of grace for me, for all of a sudden, here too, the world seemed a friendly place, with kindness at its core, and acceptance as its way of being for humans and animals.

In this time of Valentine's Day, it is worth mentioning that the love between lovers or friends can also communicate all these same things. Love, after all, isn't about chocolate (though that too has its place), but about radical acceptance. As Roy Croft wrote in a poem I often read in weddings:

I love you
For putting your hand
Into my heaped up heart
And passing over
All the foolish, weak things
That you can't help
Dimly seeing there,
And for drawing out into the light
All the beautiful belongings
That no one else had looked
Quite far enough to find.

Love that accepts not only our beauty and strength, but finds beauty in places discarded and rejected, is an incredible kind of love. In a world of pain and loss, and a life that passes from a better state to a worse state and back again and again, if the only firm promise we have is *this kind of love*, accepting, always there to catch us, it's enough for me. And in moments when we experience that kind of love, that too is an experience of grace.

Recently someone lent me the book *Expecting Adam* by Martha Beck. It's a story written by a woman about the time when she and her husband were both graduate students at Harvard and got pregnant with their second child. Only this child has Down syndrome

(and their decision not to end the pregnancy is not well-received among their peers), and the mother has an illness that makes her pregnancy almost completely debilitating. By the end of her pregnancy, she's getting IV fluids every two days because she cannot eat or drink, and her husband is gone for weeks at a time for work, and she is trying to make it through this all by herself. One day, when she is so sick she cannot get off the floor, someone knocks at the door. It is a woman she has only met a few times before, a woman who came by on a whim to visit, and finding Martha sick, proceeds to feed and care for her and her toddler. The matter-of-fact way that Sibyl does this is overwhelming to Martha, who needs this help so desperately. It is a moment of grace, but later in the book, there is another story of grace that is the one I really want to share with you.

A week after Sibyl's first visit, she returns and brings another mutual friend, and both of them come to help care for Martha. While this other woman, Deirdre, and Martha are chatting away at the table, Martha starts to cry. "I'm sorry," she says, half-smothered by embarrassment, "I just ... I don't know how to thank you. I can't figure out why you and Sibyl are doing this. I didn't do anything to deserve it."

Deirdre watches her for a moment in silence and says, "I don't know how much Sibyl has told you about me," and then begins to tell her story. She tells Martha about the time when her marriage to a troubled man drove her out of her home, pregnant with their first child, about how the emotional strain put her in the hospital. And then she tells about an experience of grace that explains why she is there to help Martha.

"It was late, after visiting hours, I had an IV in my arm, which was a good thing, because I couldn't even try to eat or drink ... And I couldn't stop crying. Sometime around midnight, a nurse's aide came in to mop the linoleum in my room. She was a little woman -- couldn't have been more than 5 feet tall -- with gray hair and dark brown skin. She could have been Mexican or Filipina or Egyptian, for that matter. I don't know. But she didn't speak English. She kept looking at me as she mopped, watching me lie there crying. Then she said something in a language I didn't understand. She put her mop in her bucket, went into the bathroom, and came back with a basin of warm water and a clean cloth. And then she began to wash me ... She cleaned my face, then my hands and arms, and then lifted the blanket to wash my feet. The whole time, she kept talking to me in this language I didn't understand. But I knew what she was saying ... That's why I'm here," she said, "I have a debt to repay."

To me, that story is another story of grace. Grace, a blessing administered by a stranger, whose name you don't even know. An act of love and acceptance unearned and unbidden that heals her broken spirit, lets you know the world is, at its core, friendly and merciful. It wasn't an act of God, for grace need not be an act of God. It is whatever reaches out across our despair or loneliness to tell us we are not alone. It is whatever blesses us and reaches out to catch us when we fall too far and tries as it can to soften the blows of human hardship and struggle, and tells us we are still loved.

I'm not willing to give up that word. It gets to too much of what keeps me going, renews my faith in life and courage for living. It is what reminds me of what and how I should

offer myself to others and be open to myself. It may have centuries of baggage that cloud its meaning, but I am willing to do the work of wholesale renovation of that word, just as we did for this sanctuary because of what it offered and made possible for us. It is worth it to me to do all of this so we have the freedom and the power to express what is *too important* to lose in our common discourse about what it means to be human and religious in this world.

So may the grace that breaks in from unknown and unnamed sources be yours and mine, and may the grace we make and give be ours, too. May grace wash over you every day. Amen.