

Rev. Linda Simmons  
Nov 13, 2022

During one of our many classes and workshops here, I once asked during check in: If you could have any kind of superpower or spiritual power, what would it be? There were all kinds of wonderful answers. There were the wishes to fly, to be invisible, wishes to be able to understand human difference so that conflict could be avoided, to create the capacity in all people to really hear each other. Others wished to time travel so that when those they loved needed them, they could be right there, right away.

I was the last to go so I had time to dream up this awesome super duper spiritual razzle dazzle abbra cadabra power in my head that went something like: the ability to fly, time travel, and be invisible so I could know everything and then never make another mistake, while at the same time, maybe doing some good. My life-long goal actually.

But when it came to me at last, I looked around at all the dear faces around the table looking back at me and I took a breath, and these words came out instead:

If I could have any super/spiritual power it would be that when I was listening to someone who was suffering, I could remove all my needs and worries and desires and perspectives and solutions and really know what they were feeling in my bones.

It is from this memory flooding me while on one of my Ram Pasture runs that the word Grace came to me, as it often does. I don't often talk about it from the pulpit though because I really don't know how to define a non-christian grace.

In Western Christian theology, grace has been defined as "the love and mercy given to us by God because God desires us to have it, not because of anything we have done to earn it." And "The benevolence shown by God toward the human race." It is understood by Christians to be a spontaneous gift from God to humanity "generous, free and totally unexpected and undeserved" that takes the form of divine favor, love, clemency. It is an attribute of God that is most manifest in the salvation of sinners. In this definition of grace, all we need do is believe in this god and Christ, and we will be forgiven, redeemed, saved.

Our world as UUs is not as straight forward. Beliefs do not always heal, and miraculous redemption is for us not miraculous but the result of the grinding, painful work of making amends and being accountable.

Grace for us, is, well, less graceful. I have come to understand grace as what happens not through belief but that which arises between us when we attune ourselves to the languages of others. Okay, that's kinda obtuse. You see what I mean about defining grace without god!

Learning the language of another is not so simple and may not really even be possible. We are in the way, our beliefs and frameworks and assumption and ego needs and desires to be good and right and seen and affirmed. So much noise it all is. A veritable racket.

How do we learn to make a space for another, a quiet space for another to be so we can imagine their story while using words from our own? And if this a criterion of grace, why bother with it all? Sounds like a lot of work. Might be easier to convert!

I lived for India for a year in my 20s, and I eventually found work in a small school started by Gandhi in the Western Ghats above what was then Bombay and is now Mumbai, in a small village called Panchgani.

I had a little hut there with a tin roof and a dirt floor. The monkeys would dance on the roof in the morning, the milk man would ride up from the valley on his old, rusted, bike, his thin legs bringing him up from the valley to our village on top of mountain, and ladle milk in a container and the rest of those in the village left on their stoops for him, from a big aluminum container he had strapped to his back. It had to be boiled before drinking.

I remember the children of my classroom. They would yell and scream and fight and never listen to me. The other teachers told me over and over again that if I did not punish the children, they would never respect me. I just couldn't bring myself to slap the hands with a ruler of these village children, children of that milkman, children who walked miles to come to school on sandals that were duck-taped together. And they knew this. And they carried on and on. So I would yell at them to stop. Really, I would yell. One time the principle was driving past the classrooms with some dignitaries, and she was so proud to tell others that I was their American teacher, and when they pulled up, I was yelling and the kids were totally out of control.

The other teachers said, if you just punish them once, just hit one of them, they will stop this, and then you can teach without yelling. I was 21 years old. It was 1981. I couldn't do it. And one day when I was supposed to take the kids to the field for our gym time, so to speak, which really meant chasing a ball around, and the kids convinced me to take them to another place, much farther than the field where we were supposed to go, and we climbed up and up to the highest point in the village. From where they took me, we could look down and see the Krishna River snaking through the towns way below our mountainous Western Ghat village. And we gazed that living water that traveled around those villages in a wide blue snake body.

And we sat there and ate rice and dahl with our fingers out of tin lunch pails, and I asked them questions and they listened and answered. And no one was out of control or wild or causing upset for anyone else. We just watched the river and laughed and talked and listened.

The principle was not pleased to learn that I did this without letting others know. I understood and we all realized that maybe teaching Indian children in a small Indian village was not my calling.

I left soon after and went and lived in a Christian convent with Indian Christian nuns a city near Mumbai called Poona. For several months, I woke early and prayed with the nuns and worked in an Indian orphanage that the convent ran where my job was to feed the children who were too maimed to feed themselves. It was good work, the right work for me.

And what I learned teaching in Panchgani and praying with the nuns at dawn and working in the orphanage is this-it is so hard to know anything about another human being because we can only hear their stories in the logic of our own, using our words and images and phrases and judgements and frameworks of belief to make sense of who they are.

Some UU Ministers wrote a book called, *Not for Ourselves Alone*. Victoria Safford, a renowned and gifted UU minister writes of the quote by Douglas Steere, a Quaker teacher, "What am I?" Victoria writes that this inevitably leads to a deeper question, "Whose am I?"- because there is no identity outside of relationships. You can't be a person by yourself. To ask, "Whose am I?" is to extend the questions far beyond the little self-absorbed self and wonder: Who needs me? Who loves me? To whom are you accountable? To whom do you answer? Whose life is altered by your choices? With whose life, whose lives, is your own all bound up, inextricably, in obvious or invisible ways?"

Love that quote. It reminds me that maybe the point is not to know what it is another is feeling so well that we can feel it in our bones. Maybe it's to respect another's story to be as logical and reasoned and sound as our own. Maybe it's to recognize that this is the work of grace, to know that leaning in to the truth that we are only human in relation to one another and to love, whether we understand or not.

I think grace is only possible to know in relationship with each other; I mean in active relationship, one that can never really understand anyone but ourselves but one that demands we remain students of those linguistics none the less, those linguistics written with letters we do not know how to decipher and with words that get stuck on our tongues, and before which we must bow as students, as learners, as apprentices of the soul.

When I first came here, my goal was to learn how to be so good, so kind and thoughtful that I would never need to apologize again because I would never do another thing wrong. Reasonable expectation right? It was finally my chance to realize my childhood dream of being a nun, well to be kind of a funky, weirdish, crazy haired, donkey laugh kind of nun.

Of course, that all fell apart the first time I came to board meeting with a migraine after taking immitrex and an Excedrin migraine. Oy vey!

I remember every board job evaluation I had for the first 3 years all said the same thing at the end of whatever else was there: we want you to relax now and feel comfortable in your ministry with us.

Dang that it took me the rest of my ministry to understand those words. Because when someone is relaxed, they can find peace, and when someone can find peace, they can restore themselves. It was a sentence of love. I never knew that 'til recently.

And here's what you have taught me: I don't have to be a nun to be loved, I just have to be authentic and human and accountable and present.

Instead of teaching me how to be more holy, you taught me how to be more human.

And in all of this that happened here for me and between us, the most beautiful part of it is, really, that it is not really about me or you. It's what's possible when we show up and open our hearts as people of faith and let it happen.

Religion means to bind but it does not mean to bind in a rope so strong it cannot be unloosed. It means to bind with the desire to be seen and to see, to hear and to be heard, and to do offer our best translation of what is outside of us that grace allows.

Grace is not about being offered salvation, despite our humanity, because we are loved by a mysterious force that loves more than we can ever love. Grace is about being saved right here and now, by each other, because when we gather, a love that is bigger than all of us gathers in the spaces between us and calls out to us to give more of who we are, to respect another that is not us, to grow, to gather enough courage to feel peace.

Grace is right here when we allow ourselves to be human together and give each other the space, the time, the opening, the self silence to hear, to imagine, to give presence.

Our faith as UUs invites us into the possibility of heaven right here and now.

Gary and I say a kind of grace before each dinner and we always, we always include our gratitude for our time here and all of you. Thank you for showing up, thank you for your wisdom, your sorrow, your fear, your love, your hope, your anger, your questioning, your faith.

You have blessed my life, and I would do it all over again, all of it, but maybe with a better hairdo and less desire to be a nun and more desire to just be.

Bless you all. Amen.