

Grace (Part 1): Journey through the Valley

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Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

HYMNS: Vine and Fig Tree; This Little Light of Mine, Come and Go With Me to that Land

SPECIAL MUSIC: On the Rock Where Moses Stood, by A.P. Carter, played by Ross Hammond

SERMON

Have you had moments when things just fell into place?

When a right word or brilliant idea came to mind, or a helpful person came into your day?

The author David Richo is a spiritual teacher and a psychologist. Last month I attended a workshop he led at our UU church in Walnut Creek.

He asks, have you ever said anything like the following:

“Suddenly the perfect solution just popped into my mind?” “I don’t know where I found the courage, but I spoke up.” “I have practiced my art since childhood, but I know there are moments when I go way beyond my skill level.” “I felt as if I were somehow guided to this decision.” “Finally, without even trying, I met just the right [person].”¹

In his book *The Power of Grace*, Richo says: “We have all said things like this. And have wondered where that ‘special gift’ came from.” Richo doesn’t call it God. It’s not any being separate from us, but it’s a presence that stays with us, no matter what. He calls it grace.

This sermon is the first in a sermon series about *grace*. I’ll give more in the coming months, unless this one is an unqualified catastrophe. But you know, sometimes I’ve given a sermon that I

knew was a stinker, the kind of sermon after which most people shake my hand in the receiving line and move on quickly, unless they can slip around me without notice. But even on a bad sermon day, there’s usually somebody who says, “I heard just what I needed to hear in that sermon. Thank you.” Perhaps that is grace...at least for that one person. Sorry for the other 249 of you who had to sit through it.

Sometimes a person will tell me a sentence they found most helpful in a sermon of mine. As they are thanking me, my mind goes back over that sermon text. *Huh? I don’t remember saying that.* Indeed, there’s no record that I said those words. But the person heard what they needed to hear. Things came together in a moment, without effort.

Grace. Often people get the grace they need here in the music that precedes the sermon or follows it, or in the words of welcome or the reassuring flame of the chalice. I’m sure much reassurance comes from the friendly greeting shown to folks as they arrive, and over a warm cup of coffee after the service, or grace comes through a warm smile, maybe *your* smile.

David Richo refers to grace as the free-gift aspect of human living. Grace is not a reward for good behavior. It’s not a guarantee. While effort and will are important for many good things in life, grace comes without willing it, without grasping. He calls it the “gift dimension of life.”

He says: “Our forward move on life’s path does not seem to be based solely on our accomplishments, [our] merit, or our sense of worthiness. Something seems to be helping us, an empowering force around us that yet seems to be within us.”

Richo invites us to open ourselves a little bit more to the gifts of life and the gifts of grace. He urges us to bring more grace into the world by our ways of acting, speaking, and sharing with others who share this world with us.

One thing I gleaned from his workshop was an encouragement to take some time to reflect, notice, and give thanks for those gifted aspects of

¹ Richo, David. *The Power of Grace*. Shambhala (Boston, 2014), Foreword, p. xi. All quotations are from this book.

our journey through life. To let go of our hold on the daily demands just for a few minutes a day, or a few times a week, to appreciate those moments we've had that were "not the result of our choice, effort, or expectations," but were merely free gifts.

He says: "That special assistance, unearned, unforeseen, unplanned, often unnoticed, is a description of grace."

It's easy to accept this idea when we think about the times of beauty, ease, satisfaction, and good fortune. But how can we trust there is a "gift dimension to life" in times when we are not feeling content, but confused? When we are suffering, and the way ahead is not clear?

When we feel alone or lost, what stays with us? During a time of wandering or confusion, what sustains us?

Such questions are what the Passover story is about.

Just a few days ago this yearly Jewish festival concluded. Passover commemorates the Hebrew peoples' escape from slavery under the Pharaoh of Egypt, thanks to the leadership of Moses. In a ritual dinner called the Seder, friends and family gather around a table to tell the story, recite prayers and eat symbolic foods: bitter herbs to remember the hardship of bondage, salty water to symbolize the tears of the oppressed, drops of red wine to remember the sacrifice of the first born of the Egyptians. Instead of yeasty bread, there are flat crackers, made of matzoh dough. The dense dryness of matzoh reminds us that the Hebrews had no time to let their bread rise when Moses called for them to flee.²

The Passover story features the 10 plagues on Pharaoh's Egypt, the Hebrews' exodus out of slavery, and the parting of the Red Sea—all very dramatic. But then, it gets tedious and tiring, at least for those wandering Hebrews. According to the Book of Exodus in the Hebrew Scriptures, they journey through the wilderness *40 years* in search of

their promised land. Forty years is long time, a lot of walking in circles and losing your way. Looking at a Google map, I estimate it shouldn't take more than a month to walk from Egypt to Israel, even if you trek only 8 hours a day. But it likely is not a literal number in the Bible, but a symbolic number.

Perhaps it only *seems* like 40 years to Moses, as the complaints of his impatient followers wear him down. Indeed, merely six weeks out of Egypt, they're complaining of hunger. They doubt the choice they made, doubt their leader, doubt their God. "Oh, why didn't the Lord leave us there in Egypt," they cry out. "We had roasted lamb to eat; we had a warm place to sleep. This journey of a slow death is too much to bear! If life were fair, God would have let us die in comfort, back in Egypt."

In their unhappiness, they can't admit how much they used to suffer, working back in that oppressive system year after year, generation after generation. Call it... a case of selective memory. Understandably it's been brought on by current stress, confusion, pain and uncertainty about the road ahead. I've had those moments myself. Over the years, I've looked back... on hometowns left behind, relationships ended, or an earlier career concluded. When I'm lonely or uncertain, I tell myself I miss the good old days. "Oh, why did I leave? It wasn't that bad, was it?"

Selectively, I forget the earlier dissatisfactions. I fail to recall those urgings of the heart and mind that led me toward a decision to change, those promptings of the spirit that led me to end one phase and start out again.

Regret and nostalgic feelings are common to most people. And they are common to groups of people, according to Dr. Brene Brown, a therapist, author and a professor of social work. Brene Brown is famous for her research on vulnerability, shame, and courage. In her book *Daring Greatly*, Brown says that our nostalgic recollections may *or may not* be accurate. But in any case, nursing our nostalgia distracts us from the possibilities before us.

Brown labels nostalgia as a type of scarcity thinking, an attitude of scarcity about the present. "Oh, things have gone downhill since the years of

² When I served a UU congregation in the Bay Area several years ago, we organized a Seder potluck dinner and ritual as an all-ages event. Perhaps after we move back to our UUSS home base, we could hold such an event in our own space.

so and so or such and such.” OR... “We really let something great slip through our hands, and things have never been the same.” Of course, people can always learn from the past, but merely dwelling in regret and nostalgia will rob us of noticing the ordinary blessings of the days we are given.

It is nostalgia for the security of Egypt that keeps the free Hebrews from appreciating their freedom. They grumble about Moses as their leader. And their stomachs grumble.

A frustrated Moses climbs up into the hills to confer with God, to ask for help from the One who called him to take this journey. Standing on a rock, Moses calls out: “The people don’t trust me. They’re murmuring among themselves. They’re longing for Egypt and losing their faith. And they’re just plain hungry.”

According to the story, God gives Moses a reminder of the blessings they’ve enjoyed so far, and sends him back down with a promise of more food. Soon, the people wake up in the morning to see small grains covering the ground like an overnight frost. It’s manna from heaven. Every morning, they collect the manna, grind it and make their daily bread with its flour. Every evening, migrating flocks of quail fly overhead, and some of the birds fall to their deaths near the camping area. The Israelites cook the quail for supper.

The journey will have more ups and downs along the way. But for now they are fed, and they are grateful.

The Passover story shows many life lessons. For one, it’s an example of making the most of a situation you find yourself stuck in, but would rather not be in. The Hebrews don’t know at first what manna is; they’ve never seen it. Yet they figure out how to ground it and bake it for eating. With Moses’ help, they learn to *improvise* with manna, to ask questions about it. As a matter of fact, in the Hebrew language, the literal meaning of the word *manna* is a question: “What is this?”

Perhaps their *first* reaction is more like: “What IS this white stuff? Looks awful!” But the key to their survival is their curiosity about it. “What is this?”

When we feel adrift, lost, or confused on our own journeys, perhaps we can find some clarity through curiosity, by asking questions. “What’s really going on here? Have I been through something like this before? What’s right in front of me? How am I reacting? What other choices might I have for how to respond and act in this situation?”

Curiosity shines a light on possibilities we hadn’t noticed before. If we are too stressed in the moment for the practice of curiosity, we can ask for help. We can invite people we trust to help us think through our options.

For me, sometimes grace appears when I can invite someone to tell me what they see in my situation: “What am I missing here? What possibility am I not noticing?” Sometimes grace appears even when I don’t invite their help, but they offer it. They might say, gently: “Could I ask you a question?” OR... “Would you mind if I told you what I’ve noticed?”

Openness and curiosity are two of the values this congregation has chosen to affirm in our formal statement of Mission and Values. Openness and curiosity are spiritual values--and practical ones.

The Passover story shows Moses finding help and good ideas by climbing a hill to put some questions to his God. He goes up the mountain. To be sure, a vigorous walk might do him good. And some time away might clear his head.

But another benefit of climbing up a hill is that it helps to see the big picture of the situation. Standing on a rock up high gives Moses a broader perspective than being stuck in the details down in the valley. He may not yet see the destination, but he can see how far they’ve come.

Then he goes back to his folks down in the valley, and shares his widened perspective. Rhetorically, he asks them: “What have we accomplished? What snares have we come through? *Look what you have done, what we have done, together.* Congratulations!” Well, instead of these words, Moses probably says something like, “The hand of God did this, and *blessed be the name of God.*” But by whatever words he speaks, Moses

points out the grace that has brought them safe thus far. He assures them, *grace will lead us home*.

In the midst of our own times of trial, we may not see or feel any grace. But perhaps later, in reflecting over the journey we've made, in looking at the big picture, we can see some grace. We can appreciate those moments of truth, those flashes of clarity and courage we had, some gestures of kindness and hope from others that led us forward or that helped us through.

There's one more lesson I take from the Passover story that I'd like to tell you about. The journey of life can be hard, and confusing and unclear. For this reason, don't go out alone. Don't go on a challenging journey without having learned from others who have gone that way. Don't go out in an unmarked wilderness without companions for wisdom and encouragement. Of course, in 21st century North America, it's so easy to think we must go it alone, must survive on our own merits and efforts. But for most of human history, people have survived by the simple practice of sticking together and sharing the journey. The Passover story reminds me of the need for community. It helps me to give thanks for the grace and the goodness to be found in communities like this one right here.

So, the Hebrews are still in the wilderness. Given that more hardship will come their way, given more uncertainty and confusion to come, the next *big-picture questions* of the Hebrews are these questions: "Now that we're a free people, how do we live? Now that we're in a strange place and headed for an uncertain future, how do we survive?"

Survival no longer means avoiding the lash of the slave masters or their swords. Survival means cooperation. It means covenant. This is why, up in the mountain, God gives Moses the Ten Commandments. Moses comes down from the rock and delivers this new covenant, and recites it to his people. Here is my own heretical summary of the Ten Commandments and their purpose. Moses is saying something like this:

Now that we are free, this is how we must live together. We must remember how far we've come. Let us take the time to remember the gifts of life, and say and sing our gratitude, out loud.

Moses says: our survival together means not killing and not stealing. No codes of revenge-taking anymore, no grudge-keeping anymore. Our survival means not coveting others' good fortune, or their family or possessions. Survival means cooperation and sharing. Living together calls for kindness, respect, patience and courage.

These are good lessons whether travelling in the wilderness far from our destination or feeling stuck in pain and confusion, or seeking clarity and courage for the steps that lie before us.

These are good lessons for us. Take time for noticing and reflecting on your journey of the past years, or the past day. Give yourself credit for the wilderness moments you crossed through in the past, for the dangers and difficulties you have come through. Give thanks for the unexpected gifts of grace, for the blessings that arrived without grasping or trying too hard.

On the journey ahead, try to practice the values of openness and curiosity. Share time with others, and seek their insights. Remember that others have a hard journey sometimes; they may need support, or they may have lessons to share. Ask for encouragement. Offer encouragement. Give thanks. Say and sing our gratitude out loud.

May we be grateful for grace, for that mysterious "gift dimension of life." In our gratitude, let us do our part in sharing the gifts of life. By our ways of acting, speaking, and sharing with others, let us bring more grace into this world.

So may it be.