

The Power of Grace

Rev. Roger Jones ~ August 9, 2015
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #159, This Is My Song (in memory of August 6 & 9, 1945); #118, This Little Light of Mine, insert of the song “Rivers of Grace,” #126, Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing.

Reading: Daily Dedication by [David Richo](#) from *The Power of Grace* (p. 153).

Sermon

The great 19th century environmentalist John Muir writes that he was climbing on Mount Ritter, to the southeast of here in the Sierra Nevada.

“[At] an elevation of 12,800 feet, [he] was trying to scale a rock face when his mountaineering skills failed him. [He] became unable to move.

“My doom appeared fixed. I must fall... to the glacier below.... But this terrible eclipse/ lasted only a moment, when life blazed forth again... I seemed suddenly to become possessed of a new sense.... [My] trembling muscles became firm again... and my limbs moved with a positiveness and precision with which I seemed to have nothing at all to do. Had I been borne aloft upon wings, my deliverance could not have been more complete.... I found a way without effort, and soon stood upon the topmost crag in the blessed light.”¹

David Richo, a teacher, therapist and author, says that in those moments when we feel we are receiving something without effort, grace is there.

At a recent workshop at the UU church in Walnut Creek, David Richo said the power of grace is part of our evolutionary adaptation as humans. Like our intuition, grace aids our survival. He says we humans have always been able to receive it. It is a power we cannot command, whether it comes from beyond ourselves, within ourselves, or both.

He highlights John Muir’s experience of receiving a sense of something beyond himself, after a temporary panic. Muir says: “[Perhaps it

was my] other self, bygone experiences, Instinct, Guardian Angel—call it what you will—[which] came forward and assumed control.” Muir gives himself no credit for overcoming his predicament.

Have you ever said something like this? “I felt as if I were somehow guided to this decision.” In his book *The Power of Grace*, Richo gives a number of examples of how things can, sometimes, fall into place. For example:

“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.” “Finally, without even trying, I met just the right [person].”² This is grace, what he calls the gift dimension of life.

Richo says: “Something seems to be helping us, an empowering force around us that yet seems to be within us.”

There’s a school play, and it’s just before the curtain opens. The kids are distracted. Not all their lines of the script are nailed down yet. The rabbit costume is missing a left ear, and the anxious director has misplaced his notes twice. The audience is on the edge of their seats with anticipation. Now it’s show time. The curtain rises, everyone remembers their cues and lines, and as the curtain falls, applause thunders. It’s not perfect, but it’s whole. A satisfying experience. Even sort of magical. It succeeds, beyond the efforts of anyone there. This is an example of grace.

Perhaps you’ve had things come together like this: in music or teaching, in athletics, business, or public service. Perhaps it seemed as if grace guided your hands while fixing or building something. Maybe grace is the final ingredient added to a sauce you cook. It shifts the taste from delicious to unforgettable. Many of us plant a garden, making sure to weed and water it, but we don’t make things grow; we invite them to grow and then watch.

¹Richo, David. *The Power of Grace*. Shambhala (Boston, 2014), p. 72. All quotations are from this book.

² Foreword, p. xi.

As a teacher and therapist, Richo invites us to be open to grace so that we might grow in wisdom, serenity, courage, and gratitude.

He wants us to be more mindful along our journey, more patient and open to the unknown. He's not selling a formula for success. Indeed, he says, grace isn't guaranteed. It's not an entitlement. It's not a reward for good behavior. It's not even the assurance that everything is going to turn out for the best, as some like to say. Life doesn't work that way.

Life is a gift, yes, but life is not fair. The world is filled with things of wonder, *and* it bears hardship, misfortune, and misery. Human beings are worthy of love and capable of kindness, but we are also prone to greed, self-delusion, and violence. It would be arrogant and heartless to *explain away* the misfortune of others, when their desperation calls us instead to bear witness and try to help.

Sometimes a mountain climber doesn't get the burst of grace the way John Muir did, and they fall to their death. Bad things happen to those we know and care about. Bad things happen to us.

Richo says, for example: "[Life] as we know it falls apart. A relationship ends. Our self-esteem suffers; our finances are in disarray; we feel unsupported and lonely. We see no grace in what has happened to us. Yet, somehow, we come through the losses. [Perhaps we] find a new direction in life."

Looking back over earlier times of trial, pain, loss or confusion, we might be able to see where grace has appeared. It may show up as our own invincible spirit of survival, as courage found, as wisdom gained, as help from another person. It's grace, emerging from the shadows along the journey.

Maybe 25 years ago, I was talking to a friend from college. She had known me through a series of my losses and personal struggles. I had stretches when I felt inadequate, worthless, hopeless, and plain messed up. Yet I told her that in looking back over those years, I had a sense--through all the ups and downs--a sense that someone was watching over me. Not intervening,

just there with me, companionship me. Though I had lonely times, looking back I didn't feel alone.

What was this? Perhaps the spirits of my deceased parents were being present for me in ways they had not been equipped to be in my childhood. That would be a surprise--but maybe they had found some heavenly social workers who sent them hovering over me.

However you name it, maybe the energy of divine care has been going with me wherever I go. In the ancient Jewish prayer known as the 23rd Psalm, the poet puts it this way: "The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want.... [Later on, the poet says:] Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, Thou art with me." The prayer doesn't claim avoidance of or deliverance from the valley of the shadow, only the abiding presence of divine care. When we must make our journey through the valley, we can try to stay open to the gifts along the way.

I have known grace along my journey. After years of lonely self-doubt, I began reaching out, letting down walls, showing others who I was. I risked rejection, and I was rejected sometimes. Even so, when I had the courage to assert my needs, opinions, feelings or identity, it felt liberating. Often I did find understanding and warmth from other people. I began to seek a listening ear from friends and mentors; I began seeking mentors.

At age 21, I made a scary phone call to a psychologist, to make a first appointment in search of healing, even though I didn't know what that might look like. Now and then, I would let myself have a good cry. Movies were good for that, a source of grace in themselves. Once or twice a movie-going companion couldn't figure out why I was blubbering while the final credits rolled and the music played. They were clearly uncomfortable. But I didn't care!

I started attending a church every week. I volunteered and made new acquaintances. I stayed in touch with close college friends even after we went our separate ways for first careers.

All these steps on my journey made me a bit more open to life's ongoing flow. I still had my

anxious moments, but they became less debilitating. I brought a sense of humor to my struggles and anxieties—joking about my “issues,” as we called such things.

I can’t say that anybody “fixed” me. Yet everybody and everything were working together, helping me relax into life and feel held, watched, and accepted. Through the ways I was reaching out, all the ways I was growing and learning, I felt an overall sense of good will, a sense that things might be okay. This was a grace in my life, a gift that arrived without expectation, a blessing beyond my own designs.

Perhaps it was the guidance of God, there all the time. Perhaps it was pure chance. Perhaps it was the luck of coming from a privileged background, growing up in this global superpower in the late 20th century. Whatever the source of my good fortune, I can count my blessings, and appreciate what they enable me to give back to the world.

To receive grace we need to make space for it. Do our best, and then accept our imperfections. Allow for uncertainty. Learn to relax and rest in times of doubt. It’s not always in our power to predict our future course, even to know what comes next. Grace stands for something more than what we bring to a situation. As Richo puts it, something more is afoot in the world than what we have at our command, more than what we know.

If grace is the gift dimension of life, the contrast is the effort and striving dimension, the non-trusting dimension. Let us trust, and let go. We can’t force grace to be present, but with practice we can make the way for it. Offer grace what it needs--the space of an ongoing open invitation.

Richo recalls: “I recently removed a chair that had been in front of a window for a long time. For the first week, when I looked at the window area, it seemed as if something was *missing*. But later, now, it looks like *more space*.”

He says this is what happens with recognizing the need to control, and letting it go. It gives us more space to be who we are. After the

chair was gone from the window, he says, “I did not *make* the change happen in my mind between believing something was missing and then finding more space. It just happened ... on its own.” (Richo, p. 156) Grace comes to us, as light coming into the soul.

We might recognize grace in the ordinary places of our lives. If we pay attention, we can take pleasure in all kinds of ordinary gifts. We can’t force grace on others, but we can set the stage for them to experience it.

A friend of mine used to walk in the hills of her northern California neighborhood. She writes:

I walk by the granddaddy of all the Live Oak trees. It’s massive; its limbs are like whole trees. You see it and you want to climb up into its arms and be held.

I take such pleasure in seeing this enormous tree. If we slow down and take pleasure in what’s around us, maybe we won’t have to work so hard in order to acquire more things to make our lives good. We’ll see we are surrounded by goodness.

Near the big tree is a walkway between two streets. Roses fall over a fence [and the fence is] posted with poems. It’s hard to rush on by. There are poems by Mary Oliver, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Emily Dickinson, and one by William Stafford. This poem says, “[You Reading This Stop](#).” I stop and read:

Don’t just stay tangled up in your life.
Don’t just look, either.
Let your whole self drift like a breath and
learn its way through the trees.
Stand here till all that you were can wander
away and come back slowly
carrying a strange new flavor into your life.
Feel it? That’s what we mean.

So don’t just read this—rub your thought
over it.
Now you can go on.

Wow! [My friend says.] An invitation to stop, to wake up, to breathe, to taste a new flavor in our life.

She found grace. She wasn't on the hunt for it, but she was open to it, inviting it while meandering. Grace can't be commanded. But we can be more open to feeling it or finding it. Nor can we force it on someone else. We can't make someone appreciate it.

Yet we can increase the odds that others will find it. We can make choices to increase the chance for grace in other people's lives, in our world. We can plant a tree, serve a meal, send a greeting card, offer a cup of coffee. We can attend a demonstration, write a citizen letter, visit a prisoner, or make a donation to charity. We can take a photograph, write a poem, lend a hand, or say, "Thank you for being here." We can increase the chance for grace by the gifts we share.

There *is* a dimension to our lives we cannot command—the gift dimension of life. Sometimes gifts of grace will show up in retrospect, as we look over the past, after we've done our part and moved forward. Sometimes gifts of grace will appear even when we don't do our part!

But we can invite these gifts, stay open to them, and give thanks. Something more is afoot in the world than what we know.

So may it be, blessed be, and amen.