

**Grace Overflowing**  
Sermon by Audette Fulbright  
Sunday, November 5, 2017  
All Souls Church, New York City

I wonder – have you ever felt it? Known with certainty the moment when it entered in and changed, if not everything, at least one moment, utterly? This is how grace is known; when it enters fully, unadorned. When it arrives to proclaim itself, to say, “You, too, are mine.” When it shows that you are not in control, you are not in charge of the universe, and this is as it should be: because there is something beyond the single self. Grace. The unearned beauties of this life; the wonder and awe that surrounds us when we are open or opened.

“A six year old girl has wandered off from a family picnic near Masquinongy Pond, and she remains missing after a long day of waiting,” writes the Rev. Kate Braestrup, a UU chaplain for the Maine Warden Service. “[The wardens] mounted a search. There are dozens of people combing the woods near the picnic grounds... Handlers from the warden service K-9 unit have brought dogs trained... to alert to the signature scent of a cadaver.

“The parents [the Moores] may or may not know about the cadaver dogs. They may or may not realize that when Chief Warden Pilot Charlie Later’s plane buzzes overhead, he is scanning the brown bed of the pond for a small, human shape beneath the water.

“The parents do know this much: they love their child, and their child wanders in an inhospitable environment. They know the dark is coming on. They know [the chaplain] has been called in ...

“...[When I arrive, the parents confess they are not churchgoers.] ‘I’m not a church minister,’ I shrug and smile. ...

“‘Actually, I should probably tell you: we’re atheists.’

“‘Ah.’

“‘No offense.’

“‘I’m not offended,’ I say. ‘What a long, hard day you two have had.’ ...

“‘Listen,’ the child’s father is saying to me. ‘I’m an engineer. I work with statistics. You don’t have to [bs] me.’

“His wife is holding onto my hand, tightly, and her hand is cold. She turns her eyes to me as her husband continues. ‘I know the longer this search goes on, the greater the chances are that my little girl is dead.’ Ms. Moore flinches sharply at the word, and grips

my hand even more firmly. Later my knuckles will ache, and I'll find marks of her fingernails in my palm.

“I have been on many searches with the wardens,’ I answer him. ‘These guys are good at what they do...If the wardens have told you that in their professional opinion they think they will find your daughter alive, I believe we’re going to do just that.’

“Mr. Moore’s knees visibly wobble. Mrs. Moore gives forth a weak exclamation, and her hand softens in mine... [We wait.]

“And this is how the Maine Warden Service found her: at about three o’clock in the morning, a few miles almost due West...Warden Ron Dunham’s K-9 Grace found a little girl in an Elmo sweatshirt curled up under a bush. Ron hunkered down and let the dog’s cold nose awaken her. ‘Hey, honey,’ Ron said gently. ‘Do you want to go home?’

“The girl sat up and rubbed her eyes. ‘Yes,’ she said calmly.”<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes, Grace is what floods you, rushes in and covers you up, washes you away. Sometimes Grace is a dog that finds what you most love in the world, the pinnacle moment when all that does not matter at all in this world falls away and only what we cherish and need remains. Sometimes, too, grace is the hard work and effort of people we do and do not know; the accumulated power of good will and sweat.

The point is, grace is, most of all, not what we do for ourselves, but rather, what we receive, what comes to us, unbidden. This is the theological core of grace. It is that transformative experience of love and awe, power and beauty, that comes wrapped in wonder. Throughout much of human history we have struggled with the question of grace – especially as the American heirs of a Puritan tradition, as modern heirs of a movement transformed by its relationship with humanism, grace is a question. Are we “saved” in any meaningful sense by grace, or is it all works? Is it only what we do and do not do that saves us?

The central message of Universalist theology is a theology of grace. It has always declared that we are given grace, that God loves all and will never be parted from any. It was an heretical declaration at the beginning, and it remains a struggling point. What would God-given grace mean to the Moores, who don’t believe in God? Perhaps nothing. But I think that in that moment in the woods, when the word comes in that their daughter has been found safe and alive, they would know what grace is, no matter what its source.

I believe that while grace is an experience we cannot command, cannot control, it is still something we can invite and encourage, and embody. If we long for grace, it can become a way of seeing and experiencing the world, an act of becoming familiar, just as we become familiar over time with a lover’s face. We can become acquainted with its

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<sup>1</sup> *Here If You Need Me*, by Kate Braestrup, pp. 3-17. Back Bay Books, NY/Boston/London

contours and expressions, begin to recognize its shape within the host of common things.

My husband Rob has a coffee mug that reads, “For peace of mind, resign as general manager of the universe.” What else really needs to be said? We love and cling to our illusions of control. We feel responsible for so much, and much more than that, we take so much of life personally. You know what? Very little is really about us. The art and science of finding some perspective within our lives is a path to grace. We can work to remember that. But most of all, I think we can open ourselves to grace by opening ourselves to a loving forbearance. This is no small thing. I myself am a person who believes in accountability. I have a strong tendency toward feeling that people “should” live up to their responsibilities, be held accountable for their actions. But it’s worth considering: am I really ready to set myself up as judge and jury, to take it on myself to determine what penalty is warranted, and execute justice? What on earth would give me that right?

Here’s something I’ve learned: none of us get what we deserve. And for that we should be so, so grateful. In a world of hardship and struggle, into lives filled with missteps and misdeeds, each of us does the best we can each day, and when we do not, we know. We know. Yet fortunately, most of us are loved anyway. All of us in this room love someone who has hurt us, made a mistake that impacted our lives. Every day we come across people who make a bad choice or choices; every day, we ourselves make choices that we might wish we could do over. Grace comes in when we forgive and are forgiven. Holding out for perfect justice, holding back love until our beloved is faultless... these are impossible goals.

The path to grace is simpler than determining case by case the appropriate measures of justice and vengeance. It is easier than measuring out our love and forgiveness on hidden scales. It is, most of all, simpler than beating ourselves up over our failures and flaws. Grace enters in when we surrender, when we accept that no one is perfect, and that’s OK. At the end of the day, we can reflect on how we feel about our own actions, our own choices, and not focus on the failures of others. If we seek grace, we will be grateful and thankful for the many beauties and unexpected gifts of the day. We will be forgiving of ourselves or make amends for our mistakes. Most of all, we will work to forgive, be patient and less judgmental of others.

First Nations people express it this way: “do not judge someone until you have walked a mile in their moccasins.” Jesus said, “Judge not, lest ye be judged.” Many think he meant, if you judge, God will get you back by judging you. Don’t believe it. When we are judgmental, we develop a judgmental mindset. We begin to believe or assume others are judging us as we judge them – or as we judge ourselves. It’s a vicious cycle, and it forgets grace – the beautiful moments when we get not what we deserve or what we have earned, but what comes unbidden, what was needed, what our heart has longed for even when we did not know.

When I was in seminary, I had a wonderful friend named Alyssa. Alyssa was a free spirit. So many times she gave me just what I needed, when I asked and when I did not. For a

while, I was staying overnight at her house at least once a week, since I had a late-night class and early morning class back to back, and the trip home would have been long, expensive, and nearly pointless. We made a general plan that on those nights, we would do something together. Time and again, though, something would come up and I would either need or just want to change the plans. I would call Alyssa, and she would cheerfully say, "Ok, next time, then." She never was angry or irritated; she never punished me or withdrew. She didn't take my change of plans personally, and she didn't judge me as a bad person. From Alyssa, I learned first-hand the power of assuming the best of others. I learned how powerful it was to simply accept others as they are, love them as best I can, and felt what a difference such a simple thing could make.

When we become convinced we know what's right and wrong about other people's lives and decisions, we lose perspective, humility, and most of all, saving grace. It is the opposite of what I learned and felt with Alyssa, the freedom and gratitude that emerged, the openness I feel when I offer others the same patience and kind regard that she modeled so well for me. In the end, what matters most? The hard, angry conviction that we know what is right for others? Or the peace and openness that comes when we choose to love and forgive, to assume the best of others?

When we remember that until we have walked a mile in those moccasins, we can't really know what's best for someone else, what choices should be made? These are not intellectual matters; they are not the heady rigors of our Unitarian legacy. They are the felt and experienced knowings of our Universalist faith, that grand leap our foreparents took so long ago, when they committed themselves to the idea of a God too big and too good and far too full of love to ever seek eternal punishment or separation from even one part of creation.

Let us go forward into this bright day, on a weekend of celebration, and be ready to forgive with all our might. Love with all we have, and open ourselves to the power of grace, which awaits around every corner.

*Amen.*