

NAMING GRACE

A sermon given by the Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason

at UU Wellesley Hills on

Sunday, January 27th, 2019

In my teens and twenties — so a while ago, decades — I spent a fair amount of my spare time as phone volunteer, first at a community helpline and then later at a suicide hotline. The helpline was located in a comfortable New England town not unlike this one, and callers were sometimes anxious middle-schoolers, sometime lonely elders, but most were easily managed and soothed, and usually during daytime hours. A teenager then, I tried to share my shifts with a couple of friends from high school who also volunteered. Our experiences there made us feel quite astute and capable, both things we were in the process of becoming. The hotline was a different situation. While I trained with another twenty-something friend of mine, the shifts were done solo and we took the overnights on a rotation in an empty office. We served a large metropolitan population, in a city rife with social ills, and our callers were always in real distress. For the sake of privacy and protection, several volunteers had phone names, and I decided to take one, as well.

My name was Grace. We volunteers knew each other by our full names, and a few laughed when they heard mine. “Grace Kelly!” they all said, making reference to the famed American actress. “I get it!” They felt like they were in on the joke. My callers, though, never knew

me as Kelly. “Grace,” they would repeat after me. “Grace, really,” they said, as if they could not believe their good fortune. “Grace? That’s your real name.” Occasionally that was posed as a question, other times not. It was invariably the start of a significant conversation.

The late poet Mary Oliver, now beloved in the memory of so many of us, wrote: “You can have the other words — chance, luck, coincidence, serendipity. I’ll take grace. I don’t know what it is exactly, but I’ll take it.” The whole month long, the entirety of this new year, we’ve been talking about that word here at UU Wellesley Hills. We’ve read about it in the January 2019 journal, talked about it our Touchstones groups, gleaned insights from the Thought for the Day in our inboxes, and just earlier heard our Worship Associate share her reflection on grace. The word itself seems to matter to people, even if the religious concept proves elusive.

Great theologians themselves have struggled with it. Asked to explain grace, St. Augustine of Hippo replied, “I know until you ask me; when you ask me, I do not know.” The centuries-old hymn we sang this morning called grace amazing, so clearly, it remains a powerful notion. Perhaps any definition feels too definite, in the end, too limiting for something so encompassing of the human condition.

Writer and minister Frederick Buechner ventured only an analogy, stating “grace... means something like: ‘Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party wouldn’t have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don’t be afraid.’” He offers us a prescription for radical acceptance, but according to him, there is a catch. “Like any other

gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it. Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift, too." I suspect that our desire to take it, to "take grace", is what compels us to call it by its proper name.

In my household growing up, we usually said a formal grace before meals. The language of the particular prayer we said still stays with me — it was for "gifts which we are about to receive". We declared our thanks in advance, out of anticipation of shared nourishment. Although we said it in hurry, usually in a rush to start eating already, that act of saying grace served the function of creating a positive expectancy in us, a term I would not learn until much later in my adulthood. As I was taught in my graduate program, a positive expectancy influences individual outcomes and informs people's responses. Somehow, the good becomes credible to them. They suddenly perceive it as a possibility, when they hadn't beforehand. How could that shift not seem miraculous to us?

If there is a geometry to grace, I see it assuming the shape of a circle, capable of expanding infinitely, ever stretching into that "larger circle" poet Wendell Berry describes. We sometimes use the terms spaciousness and graciousness interchangeably, because grace inevitably gives us room: room to breathe, room to grow, room to extend ourselves. In her book, A Pace of Grace: The Virtues of a Sustainable Life, Linda Kavelin Popov, a psychotherapist, hospice chaplain, and developer of a suicide prevention program, declares that "happiness is a natural outcome of living with a sense of grace. Our reclamation of joy does not come easy. It carries a price. We can no longer rush around, remaining disconnected..." Grace always calls

us into greater connection, connection to ourselves and to others and to existence itself. “In living a pace of grace,” Popov writes, “it is blessed not only to give but also to receive.” We take care to maintain the connections that are especially sustaining for us.

“One of the ways to live with a pace of grace is to use our time well, as it was intended,” Popov states. Using it well is not maximizing all available hours, she cautions, or pushing ourselves relentlessly, never pausing either to rest or to reflect. Rather, we begin free ourselves from habitual feelings of fatigue, overwhelm, and guilt and our nagging fear of inadequacy, of never doing enough or having enough to show for ourselves. We stop judging ourselves and others without mercy. We learn to become better stewards of our energy and find time to notice thoughts and feelings with compassion. We pay close attention to others and deepen our capacity for fellowship. We affirm all that is right in the world. We come to trust our own worthiness. We allow for abundance. In a state of grace, we are more readily present. We move through our days with increased ease.

The start of this new calendar year gives us the opportunity to consider whether we ourselves are moving at a pace of grace. One of my ministerial colleagues recommends that people schedule an “annual spiritual” in much the same way that they would an annual physical, and I think that is an excellent idea. So in 2019, I’d like to encourage each of you to take time to examine your spiritual state, either with me or another trusted advisor in your life, whether that be a therapist, if you have one, or a Twelve-Step sponsor, or a spiritual companion.

When I taught pastoral counseling a few years ago, I shared with my students a questionnaire that a local New York City teaching hospital used to assess spiritual health. It asked people a series of ten questions about: the differences they believed they made; their sense of self-worth; their need for forgiveness; the ways they expressed gratitude; the strength of their their community connections; the quality of their interpersonal relationships; the times they were playful; their struggles around acceptance; the losses they were grieving; and the experiences they had of awe. “Spiritual healing is always possible,” the questionnaire contended, “even when physical or mental healing is not.” Staff in the hospital setting saw that routinely, and my students started to see that for themselves.

Spiritual healing seems almost indistinguishable from grace. It hinges on our willingness to be made well. Not all of us are truly willing, though. Sometimes we resist grace for reasons even we may not comprehend. “Give up to grace,” the great Sufi poet and mystic Rumi said. “The ocean takes care of each wave 'til it gets to shore. You need more help than you know.” Grace is so matter-of-fact about our need for help; it actually assumes that and responds generously, often instantaneously. Grace shatters our shame and isolation, our secret belief that some personal failing or long-kept secret or wrong choice disqualifies us from belonging or fully participating in life.

When I consider the difference between those helpline callers and the hotline callers, I see that the former were grasping for life-preservers, while the latter were in danger of letting go entirely. Our job was to keep them on the line for as long as possible, for the duration necessary, to maintain the connection with whatever means

were available to us. While grace does not have duress as a prerequisite, it can be under such circumstances, moments *in extremis*, that grace announces its saving message most emphatically. “You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later,” the theologian Paul Tillich wrote. “Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything, simply accept the fact that you are accepted.” Understand that Grace is and is not Grace’s name.

All of us here have countless opportunities to become agents of grace in this world. In subtle and not-so-subtle ways, we can testify that we find kindness more convincing than cruelty. We can volunteer our time, we can donate our resources, we can advocate for the vulnerable, we can publicly renounce the tones of contempt that govern our national discourse recently. There are too many purveyors of despair today, and they seem to have caught an outsized market-share in America. Worse still, they’ve seized our popular imagination. As people of faith, we can choose another emotional economy altogether.

Thinking back decades now, I wonder what made us phone volunteers so resolutely hopeful and intermittently helpful in the face of deep despondency. I have a hunch. Our suicidal callers needed services, certainly, but they also needed a promise of spiritual healing held out to them. The reason we volunteers we slept alone on the cot in that hotline office at the edge of an intensely lonely city and answered the phone late at night, perhaps under an assumed name, was that we

could possibly save a few lives - not once and for always, but rather more modestly, for another day or another night. Together we could conspire on behalf of the good. Grace is routinely in the business of getting us to do that, and I have never for one instant doubted that She was entirely real.

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