



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Gracious Gifts”

© by **The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen**

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Centering Thoughts

*Something opens our wings. Something makes boredom and hurt disappear.
Someone fills the cup in front of us. We taste only sacredness. Jelaluddin Rumi*

*Grace is something good that comes into our lives unexpectedly and we know that we do not
deserve it. When grace comes, even in little things, all life suddenly becomes better.*

John B. Coburn

*I do not at all understand the mystery of grace – only that it meets us where we are
but does not leave us where it found us. Anne Lamott*

Sermon

Happy JUUbilee! We're going to have a great time celebrating the gracious gift of the Fellowship's founders. It was a gift of grace since we weren't present when this Unitarian Universalist community began, and therefore we did nothing to earn this legacy.

During our lives we receive many gifts, but often we don't know when they arrive because we don't pay enough attention. Sometimes we don't look past the material gift to see the spiritual gift that lies within. A cookbook is just a cookbook until you share time with a family member or friend to make one of its recipes or you sit down to eat the resulting food together. When we realize the deeper dimension of a gift, we enhance the gift and our lives.

If we become more aware of unearned and unasked for gifts of grace, we might feel more blessed. The greetings you shared this morning—touching another's hand, making eye contact, giving a hug—these are among life's many graces. If we're feeling particularly sad or frustrated because of disappointments in relationships or careers, for example, our attitudes might improve if we notice and give thanks for the unexpected grace. A puppy quickly lifts our spirits when wags its tail at us. So may a splash of colorful spring flowers on a hillside make us feel blessed.

We don't earn or create Nature's graces and they don't care if we notice their existence. But they are there for us to notice and enjoy anyway. Our lives are filled with graces waiting to be noticed.

Mark Nepo tells a story about grace titled ‘The Spider and the Sage,’ in [*The Book of Awakening*](#) (p20). (Although spiders bite, not sting...) He writes:

In India, there is a story about a kind, quiet man who would pray in the Ganges River every morning. One day after praying, he saw a poisonous spider struggling in the water and cupped his hands to carry it ashore. As he placed the spider on the ground, it stung him. Unknowingly, his prayers for the world diluted the poison.

The next day the same thing happened. On the third day, the kind man was knee deep in the river, and, sure enough, there was the spider, legs frantic in the water. As the man went to lift the creature yet again, the spider said, “Why do you keep lifting me? Can’t you see I will sting you every time, because that is what I do.” And the kind man cupped his hands about the spider, replying, “Because that is what I do.”

Like this man, we perform acts of kindness, undeserved graces, because that is what we do. I’m sure you’ve assisted an elderly person who needed a hand. I’m sure you’ve allowed people to cut in line ahead of you because they seemed more rushed than you. I’m sure you’ve given a friend a gift just because you felt like it.

We perform acts of love and kindness even when we know we might get hurt. We risk loving someone, knowing they might not love us back. We risk doing a job we’re not particularly good at because someone needs our help. And we ask for forgiveness, even when we don’t feel we’ve done anything wrong. But we do so to restore a relationship that’s more important than our being right. Being kind, giving such unearned gifts, is part of who we humans are.

Some of us might see the face of God or human goodness in the Indian sage. Another story of grace is found in the Hebrew Bible. Jacob, second son of Isaac and brother to Esau, is more spider than sage or saint. Jacob covets his father’s blessing and his brother’s birthright, so with his mother’s help he tricks Esau out of his inheritance, lies to his father by pretending to be Esau, and then runs away when Esau vows revenge for his deceit. Jacob heads towards the home of his mother’s father, but to get there he must spend a night sleeping on the ground with only a rock for a pillow. That night he dreams of a ladder to heaven and a visit from God.

In the dream, despite Jacob’s moral shortcomings, God blesses Jacob by promising him offspring and land. Jacob learns that God will be with him wherever he goes. (Gen. 28:16) When Jacob awakes, he knows God was present – something he couldn’t see or feel beforehand. Exultant, Jacob cries out, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven.”

Like the spider, Jacob received a gift of grace. Jacob had been blind to the holy, but after the dream, he sees differently. His life is changed. It may not be in the spider’s nature to change, but it is human nature. Because of Jacob’s new vision, the Hebrew God gave him grace rather than punishment.

However we think of God, we prove it is human nature to show love, compassion, charity, and consideration of others. We rightly give second and third chances to people who make mistakes, and we want them in return. We hope for grace when we most need it.

It also is our nature to trust others to be kind. When you came here for the first time, I imagine you felt somewhat vulnerable because you risked the possibility we wouldn't welcome you. If you felt stung by us, you might not have come back, unless you chose to grace us with a second chance. Fortunately, we aren't poisonous and many of you say you get much more than you give to UUFA.

But I imagine some of you may find it difficult to give unless you feel it's been earned. I think this issue is one reason why some in our country find it difficult to give to charities or have their tax dollars used for certain types of public assistance.

Perhaps you perform mental calculations to determine whether UUFA should be graced by your time, talent, or treasure. Do you give only what you think your experience here is worth? This consumer approach to spiritual life turns worship and spirituality into a commodity like something on a shopping list. That approach doesn't foster spiritual growth.

In ancient days offerings were sacrifices, gifts of the best animal in the herd or the most beautiful and prized possession. The offering wasn't supposed to be easy to give. A sacrifice must hurt a little, otherwise it's not a sacrifice. I know your time is precious, so when you attend worship or volunteer, I know it's a sacrifice. I appreciate your significant gifts of the heart.

In December, many of you willingly made a special monetary donation so that the non-ministerial staff could receive a holiday bonus. They earned their salary already, so this was your gift of grace. Our custodian, Pam Smith, called to say she had not been expecting a bonus. When the payment envelope arrived in the mail she thought it was her regular fee for her Sunday morning work. Her earned salary wasn't special, so she set it aside. When she later opened the envelope, she was totally surprised. She graciously conveyed her gratitude for this special gift. The whole staff is grateful for your generosity.

Personally, I find the world to be a better place because not everything must be earned. Gifts of grace are special. If we had to earn everything we wouldn't feel so blessed. To the person who has little or is unable to earn much, grace is especially precious.

Thank heavens I don't need to earn the smell of fresh-brewed coffee. Thank heavens I don't need to earn the right to enjoy the music of Bach, the Beatles, or even Beyoncé. Thank heavens we don't need to earn the right to wake up each morning to be blessed by the smile of a friend or a lover.

Heaven knows, many of us don't deserve to be loved, but we are. Many of us make more mistakes than we can count—and don't count mine! Most of us won't contribute to the world like Albert Einstein or Martin Luther King, Jr. Most of us will make a difference only to the lives we touch directly.

Our First Principle affirms the inherent worth and dignity of all people. It calls us to treat serial killers or terrorists with respect, to love our neighbors as ourselves, and even to rescue spiders. Our criminal justice system appropriately recognizes that people change. First offenders are treated less harshly than multiple offenders. Prisons give grace in the form of early release for good behavior. We have the grace to try to rehabilitate, not just punish offenders. Mental health and medical treatment helps more than violence and disrespect ever will. If change isn't successful, we can insure public safety while still treating prisoners humanely.

If you flinch at the idea of respecting serial killers or terrorists, then you know how difficult living up to this principle can be. But if God saw the worth in Jacob, and the sage saw the worth in the spider, then we too must see the worth in the evil doer.

Our First Principle is a grace principle. No matter who you are, what you've done, whom you love, what you contribute to the world, or what your economic means or immigration status, you are worthy of grace—unearned kindness, compassion, respect, and love. No one is beyond hope, beyond saving, even when they sting repeatedly.

Our Universalist ancestors said God would save everyone because God loves everyone. They believed God was too good to damn anyone forever. This was an early version of the First Principle.

Our Unitarian ancestors said humans were too good to be damned to eternal Hell by God. They believed salvation by character was possible, that humans could change for the good. Another early version of the First Principle.

Love and a divine spark of goodness and grace lie within each of us, albeit some sparks lie deeper than others. Some sparks need to be inspired and ignited so that they will burn more brightly. When my spark dims, I'm grateful for the gifts of grace that are offered me. Thank God, thank the Universe, thank Humanity, and thank Goodness that we receive second and third chances to become better than we are.

Thank God, thank the Universe, and thank Mother Nature for shooting stars, glorious sunrises, and amazingly cute puppies. And thank you for celebrating sixty years of liberal religious values in Athens, Georgia, with us this year. May we celebrate many, many more grace-filled years together.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Share a time you gave or received a grace or blessing. How did this make you feel?
2. Do you struggle with the idea of giving grace to someone who 'doesn't deserve it'? Share.
3. What thoughts or feelings might hinder you from being a cheerful (spiritual or material) giver?
4. Do you trust that you will receive human or divine grace when it is most needed? Please share.