

Grace
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June 20, 2021
UUMSB

The author of the hymn “Abide with Me,” Henry Francis Lyte, was born in the 1790s and was sick with tuberculosis for a long time before his death. And wrote the hymn about a month before he died:

Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens; still with me abide.
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, O abide with me.

Composed in the 19th century, some of the theology of this hymn may not be what resonates for you, especially some of the other five verses that are not included in our hymnal, but I imagine that most of us have been in places in our lives when we felt alone, when we needed help, when we hoped for grace. There is something in the simple imploring words of this song that touches me through time and differences in theology and metaphor. “I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless... I triumph still if Thou abide with me.”

I was having a conversation with someone yesterday about how little we know about what is going on inside of other people, and how different that internal life, or the struggles that folks hold, can be from the face they present to the world. In spiritual community, we offer care to one another, we work to treat each other with compassion and respect, to grow and deepen our spiritual selves, and many of us, I am sure, have challenges and grief that may not come up in everyday conversation, but are there in the background, present. As we navigate launching multiplatform worship, and living in this still inbetween time, when vaccines are not yet available to all of the folks in our community, we can remember that we are all having different experiences in this transition, and that offering grace to one another may be a vital gift for our community. In a workshop on reopening offered by our New England Region of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the theme of offering each other, and ourselves, grace as we move into the next phases of reopening our spaces and worshipping in new ways, came up a lot. Grace is blessing and compassion offered, not because of something one did or earned, but freely given. Reminding us to offer grace to one another is a way of asking us to be gentle with each other. To hold space to figure out our feelings, where we are comfortable and uncomfortable, what challenges are about growth, and what are about not being ready for something yet. To offer each other grace as we come back together, invites us to slow down a bit, and pause for reflection as we make decisions. We do not have to be perfect. We do not have to agree on everything to be in community and do great work together, in our congregation, and out in the world. Just as one might say to anyone exploring something new, if we don't make mistakes, we won't learn new things. Offering and being attentive to moments of grace connects us with one another and the universe. Grace can be offered from one to another, *and* it can also be moments of realization, of paying attention, and finding a blessing, joy, or compassion, in a moment. In her book *Fluent in Faith*, UU minister, Jeanne Nieuwejaar writes:

The colors of the sunset, the birds on the water, the tenderness in our loved one's face will be there whether we notice or not. To be a person of faith is to be receptive to grace, to notice, to be attentive. It is akin to mindfulness. Gifts are available to us all the time, but they will pass us by unless we are open to see and to feel and to celebrate. In the words

commonly ascribed to Ramakrishna: “The winds of god’s grace are always blowing, it is for us to raise our sails.”¹

We all respond differently to uncertainty and change. Some people get sad, some angry, some withdraw, some try to ignore it, and some embrace it. Some types of uncertainty are easier to hold than others. It is always true that we are not in control of the universe, of chance, of anyone else's being, or truly, even the vagaries of our own bodies. Cells in our bodies misbehave, viruses spread, storms come. *And* because we are all connected, our choices impact our environment, and one another, *we are accountable for the impact of our actions*. We can get closer and closer to understanding the whys and wherefores of our world, but we will never fully understand everything. The universe we are a part of is expanding and changing, and we are enmeshed in an infinite web of interconnection. Each choice we make impacts our world, sometimes in big ways, sometimes in small, but there is no amount of work or will that any one of us can do or have to *force* an outcome. Sometimes that is easier to hold than others.

Each of us may have practical and spiritual tools for making our way through times like these. But, when we are in the thick of things, it can be easy to forget those tools and practices. It can be easy to get stuck in the details, or in worry. Sit with me for a *just* moment in the questions you may be holding, in the uncertainties you may have. However challenged we might feel in a moment like that, we can know that not only does everyone experience this moments like these as well, but that *we* have come through challenges and uncertainties before ourselves. It is easier to stay centered when we practice, when we have prepared, have built up our resilience, but sometimes we get hit with a sucker punch, or live through a pandemic together, draining our reserves. These are the times when we may need to lean on someone or something outside of ourselves. However we understand the universe, we can remember the gift of leaning on something—the arms of those in our community, or the arms of that force outside of ourselves that pulls us toward justice, love, and grace.

When I was in seminary, we used to sing, “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms” a lot and we have sung it here together. It is an older Christian hymn, that was written to comfort those who had lost loved ones. It invites an image of God that one *could* interpret as an anthropomorphic God up in the sky, but I hear it a little differently. In Christian scripture, Paul talks about the church being the body of Christ, in other words, that *we* are the arms of God. We are the hands in the world that do the work of building community, holding each other, working toward justice and fulfillment of grace. That is what I hear in the song, and why it is one of my favorites. These are arms we can lean on when we are uncertain, hurting, or troubled. We might also feel hands beyond us, a force for love, compassion, justice, grace, blessing, there when we seek it --a force in the universe, arcing toward justice. Will you sing with me? And feel free to go to gallery view and help me lean!

Leaning On The Everlasting Arms²

What a fel-low-ship, what a joy di-vine,
Lean-ing on the ev-er-last-ing arms,
What a bless-ed-ness, what a peace is mine,
Lean-ing on the ev-er-last-ing arms.

¹ Nieuwejaar, Jeanne Harrison (2012-08-15). *Fluent in Faith: A Unitarian Universalist Embrace of Religious Language* (Kindle Locations 1576-1581). Skinner House Books. Kindle Edition.

² Written by: Elisha A. Hoffman and Anthony J. Showalter

CHORUS

Lean-ing, lean-ing, Safe and se-cure from all a-larms,
Lean-ing, lean-ing, lean-ing on the ev-er-last-ing arms.

To offer one another grace, honoring accountability and covenant, asks us to practice taking a breath, holding a beat as we respond to change and manage uncertainty, to remember that we are not alone.

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about your despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting --
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.³

So may it be. Amen.

³ "Wild Geese," Mary Oliver