

THE LEN CEDARLEAF AWARD

For Excellence in an ACPE Theology Theory Paper*

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One of my CPE supervisors once asked me, “Can you ever accept that you are good enough?” Stunned and moved to tears, my response was, “I wish I could. It hurts to feel that I must be perfect in order to be loved.” That was a turning point in my spiritual and pastoral development. I felt accepted for who I was, an experience that was unusual for me in my perfection-seeking relationships in family and business. Accepting this freely-offered gift of grace helped me feel closer to God and others. My pastoral care skills developed in intimacy and acceptance. I’ve since found that I have grounded my supervisory practice in a theology of grace, lifting up the belief that God believes us to be good enough and deserving of grace and blessing as we are. In so doing, I’ve been able to accept and offer grace to myself, to God, and to my students.

My supervisory practice is based on the theology of grace. The theologian whose writing most informs my theoretical position is Karl Rahner, SJ, a

* The Len Cedarleaf Award has been granted for a number of years by the Pacific Region of the Association of Clinical Pastoral Education for an outstanding theology theory paper. This is the first time the paper has been published in *Reflective Practice*. Editor

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prominent Catholic theologian of the twentieth century. His writing regarding the role grace plays in our relationship with God, self, and others resonates with my experience of grace in my own life and pastoral and supervisory work. In addition, Roman Catholic theologians Elizabeth Johnson and Margaret Farley inform my supervisory practice. Johnson, a feminist theologian, illuminates the inclusiveness of God's love for all humankind. Her insight into the ability of different theologies to "unlock the unsuspected presence of the gracious divine mystery" helps me to work with students and patients with other belief systems.¹ Farley, a medical ethicist, articulates a theology of compassionate respect which helps widen my heart and mind to care for people in their own unique cultural contexts.

THEOLOGY OF GRACE

I understand grace from Catholic teaching, as "favor, the free and undesired help that God gives us to respond to God's call to become children of God."² As such, grace depends entirely on God's gratuitous initiative—a self-giving.³ I further understand grace from a twentieth century transcendental perspective as "supernaturally existential,"⁴ the condition that God creates within us that allows us to welcome God. I experience grace as acceptance of who I am as I am, imperfections included. Grace is my saying "yes" to God, and yes to loving others even with their own imperfections. For me, grace is necessary in order to live the challenge and blessing to "love God, and love self and neighbor."⁵ One gift of God's own self is grace. Grace is the loving presence of God dwelling in the heart of our existence. God is not a distant being but a transcendent holy Mystery engaged in all the realities of the world. One's relationship with God can be given credible form only in unconditional love of self and neighbor.

Grace is experienced through relationships and is, therefore, foundational to self-acceptance, as well as pastoral interventions and supervisory relationships. God gives grace to us as we are, through our everyday experiences of love, faith, and hope as they play out through our own familial and cultural circumstances. Grace respects freedom in relationship. Grace is a constant feature of our experience, given freely and perfectly. God does not force us to receive love or to accept holy presence. Rather, God invites us to risk moving ever closer. Our movement toward or away from holy Mystery is calibrated to a large degree by our ability to trust and by our emotional and spiritual maturity. My understanding of our relationship with God par-

allels my understanding of personality development and family-systems theory. We often resist and fear vulnerability. Yet, the more we trust, the deeper our relationship with God, and others, becomes.

The way I understand persons as creatures in relationship with God is that all persons are children of God, created in God's image.⁶ The sacred story tells us God regards humanity as "very good"⁷—not perfect, yet very good. Our ongoing longing for a deeper relationship with God was classically understood as "our hearts are restless until they rest in God."⁸ Rahner's understanding of our relationship with God begins with the "subject," focusing on the person not as a mere object but as a human subject with interiority, a thinking mind, and freedom to choose.⁹ This means that the quest for God begins inside the person; it is internal to our lives.

Our relationship with God is characterized by God creating us with an inherent structure toward the divine through the gratuitous gift of grace. "Restlessness" is then understood as our own curiosity. We do not know something, so we ask. This dynamism in the human spirit drives us toward wanting to know more, thereby expanding our connection with our own depths and with the wider world. Rahner describes the basic condition of human nature in this way: "the human spirit is characterized by an unrestricted drive toward the truth, which is ultimately boundless. In every question we ask, we transcend the immediate point and reach dynamically for something more...human beings are oriented toward boundless truth."¹⁰

Our relationship to the divine, described by Rahner as grounded in the abyss of ineffable Mystery, means that we cannot know the fullness of God. At best, we know something about God and our relationship with God through the concrete experiences of our lives, especially through the care shown to us by others. Existential moments in which we know God are when we "curiously question and freely love, desire happiness, know loneliness, doubt, resist injustice, plan projects to benefit others, act responsibly, remain faithful to conscience under pressure, are amazed at beauty, feel guilt, rejoice, grieve death, and hope in the future."¹¹

GRACE IN ACTION

This understanding of persons as children of God informs my supervisory strategy. For instance, I intentionally invite God into my supervisory and pastoral relationships through prayer. I accept who I am with my shortcomings and forgive myself for mistakes. I challenge myself to recognize each

student's uniqueness, including his/her belief system, life experience, and problems with learning. I approach the supervisory relationship by welcoming and affirming the goodness in each student. The common ground of our supervisory relationship is that we are all children of God. This provides a place where we can join together in order to explore our differences. Grace prompts me to be open to and curious about my students and to accept them as they are through compassion and respect. I rejoice with them when they experience growth.

As CPE supervisor, I seek to help students and myself extend grace to ourselves when we stumble in our interactions with one another. I create as best I can a good enough holding environment in which they feel secure enough to risk vulnerability. I share my vulnerability, within appropriate boundaries, in order to model for them my willingness to trust and be vulnerable. I am aware that I can sometimes be impatient or judgmental and when aware of this, I work very hard not to allow these qualities to come into play. With grace, I treat my students as good enough without judging them against the standard of perfectionism. I am gracious when I give beyond what is technically required in the learning contract and when I forgive mistakes and celebrate moments of discovery. I realize that experiencing self as a "good enough child of God" may be difficult for some because of their own life experiences and cultural circumstances. My solid faith and experience of faith helps me help students develop their theology of pastoral care. Caring for the students requires maintaining boundaries as well, such as holding students to program requirements, challenging them to work toward goals, and refraining from doing for them what they can do for themselves.

My supervision of EG is a good example of the application of grace in supervision. EG is a married, male, Episcopal seminarian in his mid-twenties who took CPE to fulfill an academic and ordination requirement. He was relatively unmotivated and resistant and I was not certain how best to make him feel secure enough to risk vulnerability. For instance, EG was reluctant to engage in self-reflection, fearing in his own words, that what he would discover would be ugly. He also had concerns about his relationship with God, fearful that he was not good enough for God to love. In addition to verifying that EG was seeing a therapist, I suggested that meeting with a spiritual director while taking CPE might also be advisable. That way he would have someone to serve as a companion as he explored the nature of his relationship with God. I worked with him during many individual supervisions focusing on his understanding of grace, his willingness to ac-

cept and love himself as good enough, and his ability to risk being curious about himself. He trusted me as a guide on this exploration. As his self-acceptance improved, his defenses lowered. This meant that during verbatim discussions, he spent less energy berating himself and more listening to feedback. The more he accepted himself as good enough student, the more he extended himself in pastoral care. He was able to apply the principle of grace toward his patients, seeing the uniqueness of each. EG said in the exit interview that his greatest learning came from my being “willing to be vulnerable and walk in that path with students.” From this, he said he learned that “vulnerability is power” rather than weakness.

When I see suffering in a student like EG, I remind myself that suffering is, for all of us, inescapable. Jesus’ violent death on a cross placed the infinite mystery of God in solidarity with all vulnerable creatures. For Rahner, the motive for the incarnation was so that God, who is love, could enter into deep personal union with the beloved. To me this means that to accept self also means to accept pain, suffering, responsibilities, and limitations. Sometimes we cause pain and suffering to others. When we do, we have the option to ask for and to receive forgiveness. We can also choose to forgive, which is an act of charity for ourselves, freeing us from the burden of indifference. Suffering is neither welcome nor something we seek. Yet, as Farley states, suffering has the power “to hold us so that we cannot avoid the reality of the sufferers or the reality of ourselves. Insofar as we genuinely behold it, it awakens in us a moral response—to alleviate it, ameliorate it, prevent it in others or, if none of this is possible, to become a companion and literally bear with the sufferer in love and respect.” Compassionate respect is an attitude of the heart that guides my actions with those who are suffering. As Farley describes it, compassionate respect is a “way of seeing the concrete reality of those who are in need.”¹²

THE JOURNEY TOWARD GOD: SUFFERING AND MYSTERY

The theology of grace and suffering informs my supervision in that my students exercise free will in making decisions regarding their commitment to education and interaction with others. I cannot control their engagement or learning. I intentionally establish and maintain a good enough holding environment in which students can trust enough to risk vulnerability while dealing with the anxiety, resistance, and other inhibitors to relationship and learning. As they develop appropriate connection and trust with the group

and with me, they feel freer to explore the unknown aspects of self, relationship with the Holy, and pastoral care.

My theological understanding and personal experience of suffering enables me to be with the students who feel burdened by their struggles with patients. I help students stay with their feelings to discover what personal wounds are ready for healing and which stories are ready for exploring for meaning. I challenge them to draw on their spiritual resources, empowering them to cope and even to grow because of their suffering. I draw upon my own experiences of grace and suffering to be open to their experiences and the students do likewise in their practice of pastoral care.

My religious heritage is a theistic understanding, based on the teachings of my faith. Others have different theistic and non-theistic understandings of the transcendent. I draw upon Elizabeth Johnson's theological perspective that expands the boundaries of the "garden of the transcendent." This supports my conviction that grace, which supports us in loving God and neighbor as self, is consistent with the ACPE's culture and mission of respecting the dignity of persons of diverse cultures, ethnic groups, and faith traditions as we practice spiritual care and supervision. Neighbor means global neighbor: all genders, all races, ethnicities, and belief systems. This broad perspective of neighbor is essential in interfaith ministry and in working with students from diverse cultural contexts. Grace assists me in supervising students with belief systems different than mine. My own strength in faith helps me assess what may be happening with the students as they grapple with understanding and living their belief systems. I am, as they are, the beloved, yet imperfect creature of God. I seek, as do they, meaning in life. I have an understanding of others as they struggle and rejoice in faith. I strive to be gracious in my relationship with the students as we engage in the learning process and practice of pastoral care. I encourage students to be gracious as well, to see themselves and others as we imagine God sees us.

One criticism I have of my faith tradition is that it uses limited language for the ineffable, incomprehensible mystery that is God. Johnson provides a rich abundance of descriptions and images for imagining God, which widens the space within which the Holy can be known.¹³ Feeling free to regard God in more intimate terms has brought me closer to God and enriched my regard of humans as truly beloved. This inclusive God is large enough to hold the diversity of humankind. It is even large enough to hold the leadership of my Church, who often evoke painful feelings for me. Furthermore, Johnson opens up an understanding of a God that embraces the different

theologies and belief systems in our multicultural world, to “illuminate and unlock the unsuspected presence of the gracious divine mystery...each particular approach amplifies the meaning of the whole, like different gateways opening into the one garden. Together these gateways offer us glimpses of the living God.”¹⁴ This insight guides my work with students and patients with other belief systems. Metaphorically speaking, students and I can walk along together into the one garden of the divine mystery. The critical purchase of my taking this theological stance is that it can seem relativist, which I am not. As Christian, I hold in tension the recognition of God as divine mystery with the teaching that Jesus is the only pathway to God. I cope with this tension by trusting that the ultimate truth is in the hands of the Divine.

COMPASSIONATE RESPECT

Margaret Farley offers a powerful critique of all majority religions, Catholicism included. We may fail to regard the dignity of persons, whether religious or not, if we fail to use compassionate respect in responding to the needs of others. Compassionate respect is the mode for relating with persons of all cultures and faiths, taking into conscious consideration the specific concrete reality of each person rather than how we wish they were. According to Farley, compassion and respect are “conducive to the widening of our hearts and minds in relationship to God and neighbor, that is, they are a means to love and to action.”¹⁵ Compassionate respect requires that we care for persons in the contexts of their relationships and their unique set of circumstances.

Two aspects of my cultural context that I bring as “use of self” in the interplay with others’ journeys in the multi-cultural, multi-faith environment are family of origin and socio-economic circumstances. My father died when I was two. Being raised in a rural, blue-collar family without a father meant having limited resources and limited access to a male world of authority. I experienced support and care from my mother and one brother with whom I was particularly close—and this is something that I draw on to show others how they can connect with sources of love and support. I carry the sadness of the absence of my father. I resonate with those who are sad and angry with distant or absent loved ones. I have become an upper middle-class, educated, married woman—circumstances very different from the context in which I was raised. Although spared great suffering, I have had the pain of feeling undervalued as the only sister among three brothers, unacceptable as a female executive in a male-dominated business world, and isolated as I prepared for

ministry. These experiences help keep me attuned to students who are undergoing similar experiences of suffering or who touch into their own pain as they encounter patients. I help them explore the meaning of their suffering and encourage them to draw on resources for strength, comfort, and hope.

My supervisory relationship with student, MD, exemplifies the interplay between her set of cultural circumstances and my own. MD is an African American woman, married, with one child with special needs. I was aware of how her uncertainty about being accepted by her CPE peers and supervisors was causing her anxiety. MD was from modest means. She served in the Army reserves in order to pay for her college education. She was taking a second unit of CPE to advance toward certification as a chaplain, thus widening her career choices. MD was somewhat uncomfortable in the predominately Caucasian culture of our hospital setting. She was concerned about being both racially and theologically different from her peers and supervisors. Through respectful interactions with her peers and I, which indicated acceptance and interest, her trust of the group grew. During class and individual supervision discussions, MD shared issues that surfaced from past experiences of discrimination and her relationships with staff, patients, as well as the group, grew stronger. She became curious and willing to share and listen, which helped her to open to the pastoral experience. Sadly, MD left 4 weeks into the 30-week program in order to more closely manage her son's care and education. I will never know, but often wonder, if any portion of her decision to leave was based on her feeling "different." I welcomed her and wanted to learn from her about her cultural context. Even so, I cannot know how my unconscious prejudices may have impacted our relationship.

CONCLUSION

Grace is the core of my being. Grace helps me accept myself and others as we are. Grace is the basis for all interpersonal relationships. Grace helps us risk vulnerability as we relate to self and others with openness, acceptance, and trust. This helps us challenge and support one another in the learning environment. The dynamic process of CPE opens the way for supervisor and students to learn more about themselves, which parallels our ability to care for others. As supervisor, I find it gratifying to participate in that self-exploration relative to God. One student described her discovery as "feeling as if space has been opened within me, making room for deeper understanding of myself, more connection with others, greater ability to hold more of my

emotions, and a broadening of my intellectual, emotional, and spiritual self." Considering outcomes such as this, CPE and the supervision of students is, for me, a partnership with God and an exciting and gratifying journey.

NOTES

1. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2007), 226.
2. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, English translation for the United States of America (Citta del Vaticano, Italia: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), #1996.
3. *Ibid.*, #1998.
4. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1978), 126.
5. *The New American Bible*, Mark 12:29–31: "Jesus answered, the first is, "hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these."
6. *Ibid.*, Genesis 1:27 "God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them."
7. *Ibid.*, Genesis 1:31 "God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good."
8. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #30. "You yourself encourage him to delight in your praise, for you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." From St. Augustine, Conf. 1, 1, 1:PL 32, 659–661.
9. Johnson, *Quest for the Living God*, 31.
10. *Ibid.*, 33.
11. *Ibid.*, 34.
12. Margaret A. Farley, *Compassionate Respect: A Feminist Approach to Medical Ethics and Other Questions* (Notre Dame, IN: St. Mary's College, 2002), 42.
13. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), 45. "The incomprehensibility of God makes it entirely appropriate to...stretch language and expand our repertoire of images by uttering female symbols into speech about divine mystery. Reorienting the imagination, this usage challenges the idolatry of maleness in classic language about God, thereby making possible the rediscovery of divine mystery, and points to recovery of the dignity of women created in the image of God."
14. Johnson, *Quest for the Living God*, 226.
15. Farley, *Compassionate Respect*, 4.