

The Grace Scale and The Universalist Imagination

I remember my mom taking us to Mass when I was a kid. She was recently divorced and a priest refused to give her communion. She marched us right out of church, saying we would go to church someplace where the priest actually understood something about Jesus.

That's the earliest thing I remember as a starting point in **my life long quest to find a more grace-filled religion.**

Unitarian Universalism, with it's message of radical welcome and radical acceptance by God of everyone and everyone was where I landed... but I think Religion in general, Christianity and the world's religions are all moving toward a more graceful or grace-filled human spirituality.

One of the reasons Unitarian and Universalism both grew smaller over the 20th century and a reason for lack of growth now is partly due to the reality that we won the theological debate. Christian churches are growing steadily more open minded and accepting, preaching love and inclusion instead of fire and brimstone, and becoming more universalist places of grace.

A 1985-1987 questionnaire from the University of Chicago General Social Survey, asked respondents to place themselves on continuum

Do you see God more as Father or Mother?

Do you see God more as a Master or a Spouse?

Do you see God more as a Judge or a Lover?

Do you see God more as a King or a Friend?

Deceased Catholic priest, sociologist, and author Andrew Greeley called this the "Grace Scale" High scores on the grace scale favor the mother, spouse, lover, friend image of God. Grace Scale scores correlate with social and political opinions attitudes and behavior.

People with high scores on the scale, who imagine God as mother, spouse, friend, and lover, are to a significant statistical degree:

- Less likely to support or vote for Reagan (Republicans)
- More likely to support government assistance programs to lift people out of poverty
- More likely to support racial integration and reconciliation
- More likely to claim feminist attitudes and views, equal pay, reproductive choice, etc
- More likely to oppose capital punishment

The statistical correlation held true over constants of age, region of country, gender, and educational level.

The Grace scale is NOT affected by any of the usual demographics of sociological research, and proved to be a higher predictor of attitudes in these areas than did a person's than region, gender, age, and very close to educational level. The general orientation of one's spirituality is as strong a predictor as we have for a person's social and cultural attitudes.

Is this just the presence of religious liberalism? No, the grace scale holds constant over all variables - it's less strong the more educated one is and the more fundamentalist a person claims to be, but it is a strong predictor not only of attitudes, but of voting patterns.

When Greeley did this study we were in the early years of the ecumenical age still, the generation born when Kennedy - A Catholic! - was elected were just starting to vote.

Greeley was heavily influenced by a lay Catholic theologian at the University of Chicago named David Tracy whose work centered on what he called the "analogical imagination." He argued Catholics have a different religious imagination than do Protestants. The Protestant imagination, which is our Unitarian tradition is dialogical - It's infused with dualism, God and the spiritual are above and beyond the world, the world is sinful and fallen. The Catholic imagination is analogical - God is in the world, god is the world, the self disclosure of the divine comes through people and places and event and creation itself. Thus in Catholicism the community is sacramental, a way to know God. In Protestantism the Community is fallen and sinful (of the world) and not to be trusted.

The rise of modern capitalism mirrors the development of the protestant work ethic, where the industrious individual stood alone trying to master resources and relationships to make profit. The individual struggling alone for personal freedom and autonomy against oppressive social networks and systems Workers were seen as objects, as "labor" to be used as a resource. The Catholic imagination saw more value in the community, and upheld human beings always as ends in themselves, not a means to an economic or political end. The Catholic imagination saw human beings as inextricably caught up in a social network of relationships, through which God is revealed.

History now has brought us to a place where the analogical imagination is failing, even to the point of collapse, Capitalism increasingly only greatly benefits those at the very top.

And there is a wider yearning for the web of relationality and community that is more common to the analogical imagination. Religious imagination isn't so much divided now between Protestant and Catholic but the struggle between fundamentalism and grace. The divide is by a traditionalist, individualist, individual piety and salvation driven set of rules and holiness practices VS the open, inclusive, universalist, progressive approach of seeing the divine in the

relationship with others, creating the beloved community, seeking justice for all, even though it means giving up power and privilege for some.

Universalism is a decided phenomena of analogical imagination. The world is evolving, concepts of the divine evolving and there is a decided difference between those with an analogical, relational, non hierarchical, collaborative view of the divine and those with the dialogical, hierarchical, individualistic view of the divine, between those scoring high and low on the grace scale.

Our Unitarian side is still somewhat rooted in the protestant ethic, salvation by character, and dialectic, but our Universalist side is fast becoming the prime expression of the flip side, the analogical side, the high end of the grace scale. Our LGBTQ work, our Siding with Love efforts, the Green Sanctuary, anti racism work - our entire religious movement is about beloved community and relationality...and so it is little surprise that our congregations deeply rooted in the protestant ethic of the 18th and 19th century are finding it hard to break out of the congregational behaviors that prevent them from walking their talk and matching their ideals with the relationship building that is necessary for contemporary faith communities.

Our Unitarian Universalist churches that thrive are high on the grace scale and deeply analogical congregations, those mired in the individualistic, intellectual, learned religion tend to find it hard to move beyond their walls and make the shift to a more outward looking faith community.

The Grace scale has been reinforced by recent studies that find liberals and conservatives actually think differently, not as in have different opinions, but liberal and conservative brains process information differently.

We think our reasoning and political decision making processes are cognitive, but they are also emotional. And people with liberal and conservative political views tend to process emotional reactions differently.

One study of liberals and conservatives placed people in an MRI and showed them various images from pleasant to serene to happy to violent and disturbing. Conservatives had stronger emotional reactions as measured by the MRI to strong, violent images. Conservatives spent more time looking at violent and disturbing images while Liberals spent more time looking at pleasant images. Liberal brains had more tolerance for uncertainty. Conservative brains were more sensitive to fear. Conservative brains showed more action in areas of the brain associated with quick low-level thinking while Liberal brains showed more activity in areas of the brain associated with critical thinking and deliberate reasoning. Liberals were more likely to shift their gaze to the area of a person's eyes when in conversation and Conservatives were less likely to do

this. Conservatives more likely to identify faces and images as threatening and Liberals less likely. Conservatives have greater, stronger sensitivity to negative stimuli. Conservatives are more risk averse Liberals think in terms of providing for the common need and promoting the common good while Conservatives think in terms of avoiding the negative.

Political views correlate to being over sensitive to sudden noises and scary images. Conservatives are more sensitive to sudden noises and scary images and Liberals less so.

In a conflict situation, Conservatives are less likely to alter habitual behavior based on new information and Liberals are much more likely to alter habitual behavior in conflict based on new information. Liberal brains have a harder time sleeping and have a more active dream life. Conservative sleep better and have more mundane dreams.

It seems that liberalism is the departure from the norm, the evolutionary step. Why have war and violence been so prevalent, why change so hard - because conservative thinking and brain patterns are the default - or so it is speculated based on these studies.

Those who score high on the grace scale and those whose brains exhibit the behavior that lead to liberalism may be helping grace emerge as normative.

In fact according to Nancy Ellen Abrams in her book "A God that Could Be Real" We may be creating God as we evolve.

She writes: *"The emerging God, after all, is the source of all meaning, old and new, and can be understood this way in any religion that doesn't require taking its teachings literally."*

A scientist and an former addict, Abrams' husband was instrumental in positing and investing dark matter. She rationally knew there can be no God as traditionally conceived but she prayed. She says: "A part of my brain talked to another part as if it weren't the same thing, even though I knew it was, it helped... reconcile an idea of God with scientific reality.

She says

These are characteristics of a God that can't be real:

1. God existed before the universe.
2. God created the universe.

3. God knows everything.
4. God intends everything that happens.
5. God can choose to violate the laws of nature.

So if this is the God that cannot be, what would a God that could be look like?

She Proposes an emergent view of God. God not as being but as emergent phenomenon. It's from systems theory, when a system gets complex enough, it organizes itself into something radically different - a radically new thing emerges. Abrams says this is how god emerges from humanity

“The emerging God is the source of all meaning, old and new, and can be understood this way in any religion that doesn't require taking its teachings literally.”

Universalists were once theological radicals, but now we are becoming more and more mainstream. What we have to offer falls in line quite nicely with an emerging grace-filled divine. Perhaps, the fact that our movement is full of social and political liberals, and full of people who score high on the grace scale, is in some way connected to Abrams' emergent view of God.

We are the product of a complex evolutionary system where being open minded and having brains that reflect more and think more and yet still hold wonder and beauty is actually creating the God we seek. Our very living into our reality that accepts science and still acknowledges mystery and wonder and blessing is actually creating a more grace filled universe, a graceful God. We need this new kind of religion - the one that our faith proposes.

The God we can't believe in is a reality, but reality doesn't preclude the God we can believe in, that God that *might* be.

We take for granted now, we liberals, with our liberal brains, that mythos and story and emotion must be tempered by reason, but reason alone isn't enough -it's gets to Mr. Spock and Data - something's missing without the emotion, the soul of person. It's a marriage of the heart and head that is emerging in human beings and a fundamentalist atheism is no better than a fundamentalist christianity or islam.

The religious systems we've inherited don't address our current need or way forward. Pure reason breaks down into unfeeling and pure myth breaks down into unreasonableness.

But a place where reason and science and mystery and wonder coexist and co-create a spirituality is where most of humanity is heading.

Sagan - Reflections on the Romance of Science

The old systems are breaking down -

Economic, educational, political, the dialogical

Evidence of this in Occupy, BLM, Sanders on the left and Trump on the right - our two party system. Our society is ready for a new emergent economic, social and political order both hopeful and terrifying because the new emergent order could be much better or much worse.

Church - Phyllis Tickle great emergence - every 500 years a new way of being church emerges from a worn out church system, going through that now.

And perhaps the new emergent church needs Abrams' emergent God and the world's systems need a human spirituality even further up the high end of the grace scale.

Former Unitarian Universalist Association President John Buehrens was known to say to people who didn't believe in God, "Tell me about the God you don't believe in. Chances are I don't believe in that god either."

His statement implies that the person he's talking to believes in a God science can't support, a God that is father and judge and master and king. And Buehrens speaks for Unitarian Universalism when he says he doesn't believe in that, but here in our living tradition we can talk about a God that is mother, and friend, and spouse, and lover - a God we co-create and help emerge. A God, a mystery, a wonder, a Spirit of Life - that is full of grace!

