

May Theme 2019
Mercy: the practice of awareness

*The quality of mercy is not strain'd,—
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest,—
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes*
~William Shakespeare

Got mercy?

How would you define it, let alone find it? Search for *mercy*, and you may get “compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one’s power to punish or harm.” Google’s Ngram Viewer, which shows a line graph tracing the prevalence of the word’s usage over time, reveals that the term’s popularity has steadily declined since peaking in the 1820s. Does this suggest there’s less mercy to go around now than there was for our ancestors?

In contrast to the decline and fall of mercy stands the ascent of an emerging *awareness*. This time, the search engine experiment yields “knowledge or perception of a situation or fact,” with the graph showing the term’s usage increased 20-fold over the past century. The slope of the line rises most steeply in the 1960s, a watershed of a decade—with parallels to this one—marked by a new, collective, radical awareness and activism aimed at halting the evils of inertia deeply rooted in earlier eras of American society. Matters of race represent but one example.

At a politically polarized point in time, rife with unpleasant, unrelenting, and uncivil public discourse—amplified by reckless rhetoric from on high—many of us are searching for mercy, but where do we get it? Who can grant us mercy, put a stop to our suffering, and silence our news feeds, if only for a moment?

As Portia notes in Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*, mercy’s benefits can surely flow in both directions, to the giver and to the receiver. Yet mercy doesn’t typically imply a symbiotic relationship among equals. Mercy carries connotations of a disproportionate power dynamic, such as that between lord and vassal on the manor of medieval Europe, between master and slave on the plantation of the antebellum South, and between Nurse Ratched and Randle McMurphy in the asylum in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. Deirdre N. McCloskey, the distinguished Harvard-trained economic historian—who has “been a woman since age 53” and was involuntarily committed to a psychiatric hospital more than once—explains: “People like me remain at the mercy of the highly credentialed owners of fainting couches for favors like certificates of mental health, signatures on paperwork for medical procedures, and testimony before judges who approve gender changes on official documents.”

Professor McCloskey’s own highly credentialed work, epitomized in *The Bourgeois Virtues: Ethics for an Age of Commerce*, shows how paying attention and staying alert, throughout history, has helped enrich us all. Indeed, practicing awareness deepens our understanding and expands our vision. It affords us better access to our own direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life.

This month’s theme was composed by Jeff Brown and the Worship Associates.

Awareness also helps us better recognize subtle and not-so-subtle powers and structures of evil, offering us an opportunity to summon the courage to confront them and, by extension, an opportunity to grant mercy to those who most need it; the #MeToo movement comes to mind.

Finally, the practice of awareness underpins our recognition of, and respect for, the interdependent web of all existence of which we're a part. As members of a congregation of the Unitarian Universalist Association, we covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and that may require giving or receiving mercy when we're in a position to do so. But the opportunity for mercy may pass without the awareness to seize it.

Questions to explore

1. When was the last time you recall being on the receiving end of mercy?
2. Can you recall a time you demonstrated mercy toward another—or even the nearly impossible, toward yourself?
3. What's the difference between forgiveness and mercy?
4. If the Arabic word for God, *Allah*, means the most merciful and the most just, then what's the relationship between mercy, on the one hand, and justice, on the other?
5. If there's always mercy, then there can be no mercy. Do you agree? Why or why not?
6. When you practice awareness—recognizing the interdependent web of all existence—does it give you better access to your true self? Does the practice of awareness draw you closer to other people, to sacred places, or to holy things? If so, how?
7. How do you feel when you meet someone who radiates awareness?
8. Have you ever deliberately feigned a lack of awareness—or, perhaps, subconsciously indulged in the convenience of unawareness—in order to avoid showing someone mercy?
9. Many among the marginalized might be near the point of maximum vulnerability at this moment—who's most in need of your mercy right now?

Quotes to contemplate

“Be kind and merciful. Let no one ever come to you without coming away better and happier. Be the living expression of God's kindness.” ~*Mother Teresa*

“I don't exist when you don't see me.” ~*The Sisters of Mercy*

“My religion is very simple. My religion is kindness.” ~*Dalai Lama*

“Churchill finally got his voice, of course. He stressed strategy, but it was his voice that armed England at last with the old-fashioned moral concepts of honor and duty, justice and mercy.”
~*Suzanne Fields*

Reading to recommend

Crossing: A Memoir, by Deirdre N. McCloskey, University of Chicago Press, 1999.

For more on this month's theme go to: <http://uuac.org/worship/themes-for-spiritual-practice/>

The Worship Associates are Matt Andrus, Jeff Brown, Jen Ryan Brown, Alexandra Businger (chair), Alan Cantor, Erin Collier, Jess Jonas, Katherine McHugh, and Gary Strichartz.