



The Unitarian Church in Westport

SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

Losing Patience, Finding Grace on the MTA

By Mary-Megan Marshall

Sunday, July 14, 2019 10 AM

I am a big believer in signs—those little hints we all seem to get occasionally from the universe, God, the Divine. As a big believer in signs, I get them all the time. I've gotten signs while counting money at the end of my shift at Old Navy, during my descent from the dome of the cathedral of Florence, and even while online dating. I see them everywhere and I love it. To me, it's a small reminder I'm not alone in this and that there's something bigger than I am out there, watching and caring.

One night in early March of 2019, I got smacked over the head with a sign. My sister and her now-husband had their Bridgeport wedding shower. The crowded room at the back of Brewport held many family members, old friends, and neighbors. I did my best to mingle, chatting with people here and there, some even called me a good hostess although it was not my show. Despite wanting to talk to everyone and catch up, I found myself spending most of the evening in the back corner with my sister's godmother, my godmother, and her husband. I had the best time. Cousins came up to me to say a quick hello-goodbye stating they hadn't spoken to me all night. I apologized, but truly, I was where I needed to be. Before the shower, the last time I saw these two incredible women was at my grandpa's memorial service about two years prior. A lot changed in those two years and we had much to discuss.

As with most people I spoke to that evening, conversation started with what I was doing for work. I explained my job doing case management for families impacted by domestic violence. Then the question came if I was still living in Norwalk. I explained that in late August my fiancé and I moved to Brooklyn. Yes, I still work in CT, yes I commute every

day, no reverse commuting is not really easier. My commute is between 2 and 2 and a half hours each way every day. I discussed leaving my apartment by a certain time in the morning in order to grab a seat on the F train. I discussed transferring to the 6 train, and finally the metro north. And no, I didn't find driving easier.

By the time the discussion really got going with the two godmothers, Chris and Josephine, and Josephine's husband Paul, my mouth was dry and my throat hurt slightly. I recited my commute like I did all night. They wanted to know more. I described my job. As I talked, I flailed my hands about wildly, like I'm known to do. Chris and Josephine smiled at me. They noted the passion in my voice and face as I spoke. I really do love my job. It is a great job!

Later, after lengthy descriptions of joys and frustrations of my work, I sat right next to my godmother, Josephine, and we talked about life. She told me a wisdom I've come to cherish. "If you pray for patience, you will receive situations that test you. Pray for grace, and then you can handle what you're going through." She repeated it to me, the importance of asking for grace. This was the most gentle, loving, kick-in-the pants kind of sign I could have ever hoped for.

I'll be candid with you all, as much as I love my job, I hate the commute. It is too long, too crowded, and sometimes even scary. I've been harassed and I've called my parents while walking home at night by myself, all more than a few times. I've seen people smoking and drinking on the subway, and those possibly experiencing a mental health crisis. More than once, I saw people in pain, asking for money, or experiencing homelessness and I did nothing. I had excuses, lack of cash, concerns about my personal safety, uncertainty about how to solve the problem. Even so, I felt like I was losing my humanity. I felt as though I had become immune to the suffering of those around me, despite my full work day as a case manager serving others. I was drained and my soul became weary.

Something I did to pass the time on my long commute was listen to podcasts. One of my favorites, that I found especially uplifting, was Harry Potter and the Sacred Text. I have been listening to this podcast since about its incarnation. Each week the hosts, Casper ter Keile and Vanessa Zoltan, explore a chapter of Harry Potter, going through the books in order, through a theme. After the impactful conversation with my godmother, I went back and listened to their episode on grace, about the chapter of Chamber of Secrets aptly named “The Chamber of Secrets.” In their episode, Casper and Vanessa discuss how they typically don’t use the word grace in everyday language. They even expressed hesitancy on a definition. Vanessa states that she reached out to a Christian theologian friend for help. This friend, Professor Matt Potts, informed Vanessa that “grace leads to gratitude, and gratitude leads to responsibility, and that is grace embodied, grace enacted.”

Keeping this in mind, I began to wonder how I could embody grace on my daily subway rides. I’ll be honest, this was difficult. During my morning commute, I was typically pushed while transferring subways, and even in the car, to make room for my fellow passengers. I worked on my anger around these situations. Anger, of course, is a natural, healthy human emotion. I did not believe the people pushing and shoving me deserved my wrath though. I reminded myself that we were all just trying to get somewhere, most likely work. I was fortunate that my job was flexible with time, but not everyone is. I tried to put myself in the shoes of my fellow subway riders: harried parents taking children to school, overworked employees going to or from work, people experiencing homelessness attempting to stay sheltered. With my new attitude, I felt more graceful, and possibly less grumpy, on my commute.

Once, while leading a gratitude exercise in a job interview, I expressed my appreciation for public transportation. One of the women interviewing me laughed and stated she had never heard someone say they were thankful for the MTA. I explained public transportation was my only means of travel to and from work at the time, and that it brought me to the interview that day. I realized it was unusual for someone to be thankful for an overcrowded, crumbling system, but I really was. I also thought of people who do

not have the privilege I do of being able to keep a car off site. For many people, public transportation is 100% their only form of transportation. While we may grumble about it when we do need to take it, there are those who cannot afford even to grumble. They have no other option. I am grateful for the MTA because it gets me where I need to go. Maybe not always the fastest or most direct way, but I get there. For that, I will always be thankful.

On a separate occasion, I was traveling to CT on a Saturday morning to see my family. My sister, her husband, and their dog were visiting from Maryland. For once, I stood in Grand Central and it wasn't crowded, so I looked up to admire the ceiling in the main hall. Of course, in true millennial fashion I took a picture and added it to my Instagram. I had not been struck with the beauty of that place in years, most recently taking it for granted. There is grace in the beauty of the architecture, there is grace in the waiting period before a train, and there is grace in a quiet moment one can find, wherever one can find it. These are the moments we must search for and seek out; those tiny moments of beauty, grace, and peace, so we can celebrate them.

While I was deliberately trying to embody grace on my subway rides, I received another sign. It came during a time when I was beginning to falter and forget my mission. On my way home riding the F train one night in May, I was squished into a seat I was lucky to have right near the exit doors between subway cars. On the handle for the door facing me, someone wrote a very simple word: "pray." Again, naturally I snapped a picture. I took this as a sign to remember and get back into my practice of finding grace. What I love most about the simplicity of the "pray" on the door handle is that it did not say whom I should pray to, it only said I should. Now, this might be me getting all wrapped up in being Unitarian Universalist, but I appreciate that freedom and simplicity. I took this sign as a reminder for a few things. Obviously, surface level, pray, but also, I didn't need to stress so much about embodying grace and seeking out peace. That was counterintuitive after all.

As I mentioned earlier, I was not always finding grace on the commute and it was wearing me down. Right around the time of the bridal shower, I was having quite a tough time. This is why I took my conversation with Josephine as such a grand sign, such a smack in the face. It was like the universe was speaking through her right to me. I think Anne Lamont put it best when she wrote “Sometimes grace works like water wings when you feel you are sinking (<https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/1057710-grace-eventually-thoughts-on-faith>).” I certainly felt as though I was sinking, and the conversation with Josephine added the water wings of grace that I needed.

So, did any of this impact my stress levels? Of course. After some time, I began to notice that when I reached for grace and even understanding first, I was less stressed. For example, a sort of mantra I began using after stressing over missed subways is “there’s always another train.” When I remind myself of this, I was more calm, even if I had to repeat it many times. When I became overly stressed in the mornings about my commute, I did my best to wake up earlier and leave more time for the train. This was not easy by any means, but it certainly helped. As I fell asleep, I would tell myself, “I will wake up early tomorrow.” Having that repeat in my mind not only served to aid in waking up, but also assisted me in falling asleep. One last mantra I’ll share is “that rat better not come up here on the platform.” And, yes, even that was helpful.

I also just began to let go while on the subway. Never of the pole or anything, but of other people’s opinions. I gave myself the freedom to break the unwritten subway rules and simply be myself. I like sitting on the subway. I find it more comfortable. Unfortunately for those around me, I have big hips, so sometimes we were squished. I stopped caring. Now, I wasn’t going out of my way to deliberately make anyone uncomfortable of course, but if i fit, I sit. I gave myself the gift of permission to not worry about etiquette and it was so freeing. It also lowered my stress levels. When I put my own concerns first, and stopped worrying what other people thought of me, I found a sense of peace. One thing I did throughout my time on my big commute was focus on my breath. It sounds rather silly, I know. When I first began taking the subway daily, I was afraid. This

was a new thing for me as I had ridden the subway by myself only three previous times. So, whenever I was on, I focused on my breath to not become too anxious. It worked. Before long, as soon as I was on the subway I was breathing deeply without even trying. I suddenly understood how Pavlov's dog would have felt if it had been practicing mindfulness.

Now, I'm not expecting you all travel as far for work as I did. I'm also not expecting you look for hints from the universe the way I do. However, consider your presence at this service today a sign. This is how I found grace and peace on the New York City subway, probably one of the least likely places to do so. I worked hard at embodying grace by being generous, practicing gratitude, looking for beauty in all places, using mantras, freeing myself from expectations of others, deep breathing, and yes, even keeping an eye out for signs. I didn't mention my favorite method for staying above the madness, although I hope you picked up on it. It's humor! I love using humor to diffuse a situation and it has always helped me. Laughter is vital to who we are as people; it's crucial to our sanity. So, I'll leave you with a quote about laughter from one of my favorite books, a book that revolutionized my world at 16: *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. "He knows that you have to laugh at the things that hurt you just to keep yourself in balance, just to keep the world from running you plumb crazy."

(<https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/2100252-one-flew-over-the-cuckoo-s-nest>)