

Mulligans

Rev. Shelley L. Dugan

I used to make fun of golf. It seemed to me such a silly game - chasing a little ball around expanses of carefully mown grass. I didn't think it should be categorized as a sport.

Then, I tried it. And I ended up eating crow. I had no idea it could be so difficult and complicated. And, of course, I was terrible. So I took lessons and a class. I still played terribly. So I took more lessons and practiced, and still my golf game stank. I now have respect for the game and for people who are good at golf. I still have my set of golf clubs. I don't know why I keep them. I will never really be good at this game.

But I did gain something wonderful from my experiences with golf. I learned about "Mulligans."

A Mulligan is when a golfer tees off, has a poor shot and decides, "I think I can do better than that" and tees up and swings again. The first swing doesn't count. There is no penalty. It's a free "do-over."

Now golf is a very serious game. Those who play do so with an intensity and are continually looking for ways they can improve their game. And golf is an adult sport. Yet here, in this reputable, mature game, we find a perfectly acceptable "do-over."

Somewhere along the line most of us got the idea that as adults, there are no "do-overs." It seems ok, even appropriate and necessary for children to have "do-overs." They are learning, how to use their bodies, develop skills and coordination, and how to negotiate this world. A number of children's games allow extra chances. And as adults we watch and think it is dear and innocent.

However, after a certain age, there are no more "freebies." We are adults. We do what we can and we do the best we can. But we must live with the consequences. How often have we been told "You made your bed, now lie in it"? In golf, we must play the ball from where it lies.

It seems rather daunting. Life requires a great deal from us. We have to deal with relationships, careers, making a living, maintaining home, raising a family, being a good citizen, handling money, managing our physical health, preserving our mental health, balancing the spiritual, physical, emotional, and mental aspects of our lives. Life is so big, and there are so many details. Trying to do it all right is not only exhausting, but impossible. Samuel Butler described it well, "Life is like playing a violin in public and learning the instrument as one goes on."

Let me offer to you the idea that do-overs are not only for children. We can have mulligans, at any age and in any area of our life. Rather than thinking of these do-overs as childish, irresponsible, and self-indulgent, I would like to propose to you that taking mulligans is instead a mark of spiritual maturity. Do-overs are both a spiritual principle as well as a spiritual practice. If one of our purposes on this earth is to learn, we need opportunities to make mistakes and then discover better ways to do things. Right now I'm in the process of training my dog. Most of the training is about introducing a new situation, making some mistakes, and then re-enforcing the desired behavior again and again.

All this sounds so basic, so obvious. I haven't told you anything new. But the rub is that we forget. When we are consciously and intentionally learning a new skill or taking in new knowledge, we understand the need for do-overs. It is part of the process. Yet when we are going about our daily lives and watching the lives of others, we forget. We become harsh and judgmental. We feel trapped, frustrated, and discouraged.

I was talking with a colleague one afternoon and she began to tell me about a work situation she was in that felt very much like something that had happened to her years ago. She had found herself dealing with difficult co-workers, a grueling schedule, and an angry boss. She said, with great despair in her voice, "I've been here before. It did not go well. I'm dreading dealing with this again." Life was repeating itself, and it hadn't been good the first time.

After sitting with her for a few minutes, I ended up with possibly a goof smile on my face and in an excited voice I told her "This is a mulligan! This is your chance to do it differently!"

The idea of a mulligan changed the whole thing. Instead of being stuck, she could think about what she wanted to do differently. She could use what she had learned that first painful time and use it. Instead of

feeling like life was punishing her and putting her back in an awful situation, she felt some freedom and even a little excitement. What could happen this time?

A spiritual opportunity.

Think for a moment about how easily we judge others. It is common for us to look down on someone not only when they make a mistake, but when they take a mulligan. Some times we move into that indignant attitude “How dare they?! They need to grow up, or move on, or just deal with it. They have no right to do this again.”

Let me give you a perfect example. Elizabeth Taylor, the actress. She has been married eight times. Comedians and preachers have made her an easy target. It is assumed that her many marriages show a weak moral character. Clearly something must be wrong with her if she couldn’t get it right the first time, or the second or the third!

What if we were to applaud her efforts instead? This woman wants a good marriage so badly that she is willing to try again and again. She is willing to keep at this until she gets it right. And in her case, taking as many mulligans as she needs may require more courage than simply saying “I made my bed and I must lay in it.” Yes, she “made her bed,” so to speak. But that doesn’t mean she is stuck in it. It can be remade. She can do it over. And she can do it over as many times as she needs.

Aren’t we just a little scandalized by this? Again, “How dare she?” “What gives her the right?” Something must be very wrong with her. And of course, we are secretly feeling superior, either because we did not need a do-over in that area, or because we stuck it out and stayed.

A number of years ago I was serving as a Chaplain at a long term care facility. There I met a family in great torment. The son had gotten angry at his parents one evening, took off out of the house on his motorcycle, and ran head on into a semi truck. He was not wearing a helmet. When I met this family, the son had been in a vegetative state for five years. He had to receive total care, he was fed through a feeding tube which had been inserted into his stomach. He had a tracheotomy so he could breath. He occasionally rolled his eyes, made a grunting sound, or had spasms in his arms.

And the family members were beside themselves. On one hand, they knew he would never recover. It was excruciating for them to see him like this. And yet on the other hand, they kept up hope. Each time he rolled his eyes or appeared to focus, each time he grunted or clenched a fist, they thought that perhaps he was trying to communicate. They were not only dealing with the guilt of the fight and his accident. They believed that if they allowed him to die, they were giving up hope. And their clergy person had said as much to them.

During my time at that facility, I watched this family struggle. I supported them as their Chaplain. After three more years of watching their son stay in his vegetative state and witnessing no improvement, they made the heartrending decision to let him go. What they decided was that the next time he had an infection or pneumonia, they would not give him antibiotics. He would be kept comfortable and the disease would be allowed to run its course.

And so, in a short time, the son had an infection. And for one day, the family stuck to their plan of no treatment. And then they relented and asked that he be put on antibiotics. And the nursing staff was frustrated.

This same scenario was repeated for months. The family would discuss matters and instruct the nurses that next time, they were to give no treatment for the infection. And then when the next infection came, they would change their minds. Sometimes it took one day, sometimes they lasted 3 days.

As a Chaplain, I witnessed not only the anguish of the family, I saw the exasperation of the staff. They were weary of watching this young man being kept alive in such a non-responsive state. It hurt their hearts to know that he would not recover. The on again, off again treatments were frustrating to them as well.

At one staff meeting, I was able to suggest to the staff that this family needed a series of “practice runs.” Rather than see each incident as a failure on the family’s part to follow through, we could see them practicing and making themselves ready for the time when they would let go.

In time, the family did come to a final decision. And they stuck by that decision with both grace and great love for their son. They just needed to practice doing it a number of times first.

This is grace. A second chance – or an unlimited number of chances. So often the term grace is limited to the idea of sin and redemption. The word “sin” came from the sport of archery. It was the term used when one shot an arrow and missed the target. And if we think of sin as “missing the mark” and redemption as recovery and healing, this certainly makes sense. But grace, as a theological concept, and as a spiritual principle, is much bigger. We do ourselves and grace a disservice to constrain it to one specific theological definition. Grace abounds. In the smallest details of our lives as well as the great big picture.

In the Bible there are all sorts of places where we see grace – and often it is grace in the form of a mulligan. Two different women approaches Jesus and asks him to heal their daughters. To one woman, Jesus says no, he is here for the Jews. The other woman he does not even answer. Both of these women take a mulligan. They try again. They approach from a different angle. And Jesus rewards them. Their daughters are healed.

Peter betrays Jesus, three times denying that he knows him. And later, Peter is given a do-over. Three times he gets to do it right by telling Jesus that he loves him.

Over and over Paul finds that his preaching the gospel puts him in danger and jeopardy. And over and over he is given the opportunity to preach again. Without making this into a whole sermon, we can even trace Paul’s learning curve and see what he does different in his do-overs. Each time he preaches, he learns something new. And think of where the Church might be today if Paul had decided that preaching didn’t work or that he was no good at it and should accept it and move on to something else. Paul’s mulligans still provide grace for us.

Queen Ester was a master at using “practice runs.” In her effort to save her Jewish people from the genocide ordered by her king, Ester practices her meetings with the King and takes what could be a dangerous amount of time before she makes her move. And her practice runs server her, and her people, well.

We also see that the various religions of the world all teach the spiritual principle of grace, even grace in the do-overs. In Buddhism, a student may strive for enlightenment as many times as necessary. In Hinduism, God comes to earth in human form as an Avatar anytime it is required. And think about reincarnation, it is one huge do-over! The spiritual principles of grace as another, unmerited change goes on and on.

There are two major components of grace. The first is that it is unmerited. It is not something one works for or earns. It is given freely by God or the Universe. The second is that in order for grace to be effective, it must be received. An individual must take it. It does not just happen to us, we must accept it, and in some cases, act upon it, before grace is ours.

So graceful mulligans means that we accept this gift of having another chance. No one earns the right. It is a given. We all have that right. And knowing this can remove the judgment we pass on others when they try again. And it can remove our internal blocks that tell us we haven’t earned the right to try again for health or happiness. Grace is unmerited, and it is available to everyone.

And graceful mulligans require action on our part. Sometimes the do-over is put in our lap. Like my colleague with the all too familiar work situation. She did not consciously ask for it. But there it is.

Sometimes the do-over must be initiated by us. We find the faith, courage, and hope to try again. The do-overs must be acknowledged and seized. Otherwise, it is not a do-over, it is a rut.

One last piece about mulligans. They are not the same as pure perseverance. They may be related, but they are not the same. Perseverance often has a dogged, staid, dutiful weariness about it. There are times it is necessary. We keep plugging on. We don’t give up. That is another spiritual discipline.

Mulligans, however, have an underlying gratitude, excitement, and even a whimsical attitude. While there may need to be courage, a mulligan is not based on fear or frustration or desperation. It is a gift, a freebie. “Here you go. Take another swing. Try again. No penalty stakes held against you.” Mulligans encourage a sense of joy and lightheartedness and play.

We have as many chances as we need – even when we don’t think we do. When someone says something to you and you just do not know how to respond, when you wish you had the snappy comeback, and

nothing comes out, take a mulligan. Go see that person the next day and say “You know, I’ve been thinking about what you said and …” then tell that person what you need to say.

When you wake up crabby and out of sorts because of a bad dream, lay back down for a few minutes and put a different ending on it.

When you find yourself in familiar territory and it’s not where you want to be, rather than bemoaning your fate, take a mulligan. Let it end differently this time. And if it doesn’t end the way you want this time, chances are there will be a next time!

Do-overs, practice runs, mulligans. They are not frivolous child’s play. They are spiritual principles to be put into spiritual action. They are instances of grace, given freely, waiting to be accepted. God, quietly at work in our lives, giving us all the chances we need.

So, my spiritual charge to you as you go through this week and your days, is take a mulligan. Take all the mulligans you need. They are a gift of God.

Amen and Amen.

Order of Service
Storm Lake Area Unitarian Universalist Church
Mulligans
November 1, 2009

Welcome and Announcements

Call to Worship

We come together this morning to remind one another
To rest for a moment on the forming edge of our lives,
To resist the headlong tumble into the next moment,
Until we claim for ourselves awareness and gratitude,
Taking the time to look into one another's faces
And see there communion: the reflection of our own eyes.

This house of laughter and silence
memory and hope
is hallowed by our presence together.

Chalice Lighting

May this flame,
symbol of Transformation since time began,
fire our curiosity,
strengthen our wills, and
sustain our courage
as we seek what is good
within and around us

Opening Hymn

21 "For The Beauty Of The Earth"

Readings

"Grace" – Heretics' Faith – Fredric John Muir

...the transcendentalists and today's pagans (tell) us that the blessings of grace are all around us. We just have to open our eyes and hearts. This forms the core of a modern understanding of grace: it is unexpected – you don't know when the blessing will occur; it is undeserved – there's nothing you can do to earn grace; and yet it is everywhere, all about you – you don't have to be in the right place, timing means nothing. ... "There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it." ... Grace happens, if you'll reach out and take it. Hence the mystery that makes grace amazing; while on the one hand you can't do anything to force grace because grace happens, at the same time, if you don't create the opportunity, if you're not open to it, if you're not willing to receive it, then there won't be grace

Milestones, Millstones, Stepping Stones

Hymn

16 "Tis A Gift To Be Simple"

Reading

Listening To Your Life - Frederick Beuchner

If I were called upon to state in a few words the essence of everything I was trying to say both as a novelist and as a preacher, it would be something like this: Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.

Offering and Greetings

The offering is a sacrament of the free Church. It is supported by the voluntary generosity of all who join with us. The offering will now be given and received in grateful appreciation of our shared hopes and values.

Sermon

“Mulligans” – by The Reverend Shelley Dugan

Dialogue

Hymn

205 – “Amazing Grace”

Responsive Reading

665 – Transcendental Etude

No one ever told us we had to study our lives,
Make of our lives a study
As if learning natural history or music,
That we should begin with the simple exercises first
And slowly go on trying the hard ones,
Practicing till strength and accuracy become one
with the daring leap into transcendence.
And in fact we can't live like that;
We take on everything at once
before we've even begun to read or mark time,
We're forced to begin in the midst of the hardest moment,
The one already sounding as we are born.

Adrienne Rich

Extinguish Chalice – in Unison

We extinguish this flame,
But not the light of truth
The warmth of community
Or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

Benediction

As we close our time of worship, let us remember
These are the days that have been given to us;
 let us rejoice and be glad in them.
These are the days of our lives;
 let us live them well in love and service.
These are the days of mystery and wonder;
 let us cherish and celebrate them in gratitude together.
These are the days that have been given to us;
 let us make of them stories worth telling
 to those who come after us.
These are the days of grace. Amen