

GRACE AS CONNECTION: ANNUAL FLOWER SUNDAY
UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP OF PETERBOROUGH
REV. JULIE STONEBERG
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OPENING WORDS

~ *George Campbell, adapted*¹

I hold the splendid daylight in my hands, inwardly grateful for a lovely day.

Thank you life.

Daylight like a fine fan spread from my hands; daylight like scarlet poinsettia

Daylight like yellow cassia flowers; daylight like clean water

Daylight like green cacti; daylight like sea sparkling with white horses

Daylight like sunstrained blue sky; daylight like tropic hills

Daylight like a sacrament in my hands.

We are graced with the many gifts offered by our splendid world. Come, let us hold our shared lives in gratitude together.

READING *The Enigma We Answer by Living* ~ *Alison Hawthorne Deming*

Einstein didn't speak as a child

waiting till a sentence formed and
emerged full-blown from his head.

I do the thing, he later wrote, which
nature drives me to do. Does a fish
know the water in which he swims?

This came up in conversation
with a man I met by chance,
friend of a friend of a friend,
who passed through town carrying
three specimen boxes of insects
he'd collected in the Grand Canyon—
one for mosquitoes, one for honeybees,
one for butterflies and skippers,
each lined up in a row, pinned and labeled,
tiny morphologic differences
revealing how adaptation
happened over time. The deeper down
he hiked, the older the rock
and the younger

¹ #72, *Lifting Our Voices: Readings in the Living Tradition*

the strategy for living in that place.
And in my dining room the universe
found its way into this man
bent on cataloguing each innovation,
though he knows it will all disappear –
the labels, the skippers, the canyon.
We agreed then, the old friends and the new,
that it's wrong to think people are a thing apart
from the whole, as if we'd sprung
from an idea out in space, rather than emerging
from the sequenced larval mess of creation
that binds us with the others,
all playing the endgame of a beautiful planet
that's made us want to name
each thing and try to tell
its story against the vanishing.

MESSAGE *Grace as Connection*

You are accepted. You are accepted just as you are. You are accepted and loved for who you are. Theologian Paul Tillich says that this is the message of grace, the message that grace whispers in our ears. We are accepted. You are accepted. I am accepted. Fine. But accepted where? Accepted by whom? A traditional understanding of grace states that grace is “the act through which God restores his estranged creatures to himself.”² Many of us aren't so traditional as to resonate with this understanding of grace, let alone such a patriarchal image of God, but let me unpack it, or re-interpret it, just a little bit.

What if by another name, God is the breath of life...particularly that life which is loving and affirming and inclusive and infused with spirit.

What if the act of restoration is something that, in addition to oft times coming unbidden, is also something in which we can have a hand? While we might happen upon grace completely unawares, and while grace happens all over the place without our help, we can also assist grace in its showing up.

And what if 'estranged creatures' refers to all of us...each and every one of us...in those times and moments when we feel outcast and downcast, when we're afraid that there is no place that we belong, and when we cannot feel any connection to the web of life itself?

² Van Harvey's "A Handbook of Theological Terms", p 108

If you are able to make those slight shifts in understanding, then grace is that which happens when the spirit of life, moving through and in us, enfolds those who feel separate and disconnected back into the embrace of love and life itself. Grace shows up to assure us that we belong and we are loved. Grace is the experience of being restored to a connection that always exists.

A colleague has said that “connection is our holiest word.”³ Perhaps this is because in our day to day lives, we are often disconnected, isolated, and distracted. We communicate with one another via screens and keyboards and commune with nature via travelogues and documentaries. (Even David Suzuki’s email this week was about ‘virtual reality.’) We tend to focus on the expedient and what is expected of us rather than on what life might offer to us if we could just slow down enough to breath it in. We are taught to be independent, self-sufficient, and our own unique selves, while at the same time feeling the pressure to fit into cultural norms. Messages about achieving more, buying more, and being more surround us... so much as to nearly suffocate us. Given all that, connection may indeed be our holiest word. We may be suspicious of its intent, and worry about being subsumed into something that doesn’t allow for our unique selves to shine. We may have some reservations about the possibility or even desirability of being truly inclusive of all, unsure of what it might require of us. We may even doubt that we are worthy. And yet, connection may be our holiest word. Humans seem to have a very basic need for connection...not necessarily to the same degree or in the same ways...but still, a need to connect with other people, a need to connect with our source or our deeper selves, a need to connect to a sense of purpose and meaning. Simply put...and not insisting that the how or when or where needs to be the same...we all have a need to connect. A need to feel that we have a place within some container or purpose or community. A need to know we belong. So what if providing such a place for others is our...meaning this spiritual community’s...holiest and most important work? It’s no accident that grace is imbedded in graciousness, that ability to welcome and host all who enter...saying, in essence, ‘mi casa es su casa’, or ‘my spiritual home is your spiritual home’. So I invite you to consider this each time you enter the doors of this building. Remember that you are coming home...that you’re not a visitor, but a host...not a participant but a facilitator...not just passing through, but rather the one who looks to welcome others and to help all to feel comfortable here. I predict that in welcoming others, your own personal ‘belonging index’ will go up as well. You see, endeavouring to soften our own hearts to make space for that spirit of connection and belonging is also holy work. Truly, just as it is difficult for us to love

³ Rev. Douglas Taylor <http://uubinghamton.org/2010/03/grace-knots/>

others when we cannot love ourselves, it is difficult to strive to include and welcome others when we don't feel that we ourselves have a secure place within the community, or the family, or even the universe. Belonging and welcome, connection and acceptance, are intertwined and interrelated, mutually dependent. You belong. I belong. We belong. All belong and are welcomed. I am connected. You are connected. We are all accepted and have an irrefutable place in the interconnected web of all existence. The more we affirm this as true, the truer it will feel. For all. Again I ask. What if our most important task in the world was to bring into being that full and inalienable sense of connection? If it were, then I believe that here we can be loved into feeling that connection for ourselves, that here we can love and accept others into feeling this connection, and that as we create this place of belonging, we are serving the family of humanity to the very best of our ability. May we each rest into the grace of acceptance and connection. So be it.

***CLOSING WORDS**

~ Bernadette R. Burns

For the joyful, may jubilant songs echo in our hearts well beyond fading memories.

For the sorrowful, may gentle songs of solace bring lasting healing to our hearts and minds.

For the angry, may we join our voices together in songs of protest and hope.

For the mindful, may we sing the praises of Earth's beauty and honour the unique songs of all beings.

For all of us here in our community, and our world, may we sing to the morning and evening stars as they guide our journeys.

Go in beauty. Go in peace. Amen.

EXTINGUISH THE FLAME