

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE PEOPLE OF GRACE?

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OPENING WORDS

You, Reading This, Be Ready

~ *William Stafford*

Starting here, what do you want to remember?
How sunlight creeps along a shining floor?
What scent of old wood hovers, what softened
Sound from outside fills the air?
Will you ever bring a better gift for this world
than the breathing respect that you carry
wherever you go right now? Are you waiting
for time to show you some better thoughts?
When you turn around, starting here, lift this
New Glimpse that you found; carry into evening
all that you want from this day. This interval you spent
reading or hearing this, keep it for life -
What can anyone give you greater than now;
starting here, right in this room, when you turn around?

May this time we share offer to each of us, one such New Glimpse.

STORY FOR ALL AGES

Chin Chiang & the Dragon's Dance ~ *Ian Wallace*

(A young boy is worried that he is too clumsy to be the tail of the dragon in the New Year's celebration.)

READING

~ *Anonymous*

Here is what I know about grace. I know sun breaking through clouds and calling me out of my spiral of worries. I know stars splashed extravagantly across an expanse of dark night sky reminding me that my life is really rather small and fleeting in the grand scheme of things. I know the weight of a sleepy, contented baby in my arms inviting me to rest in the beauty of a moment. I know the kindness of a friend reaching across the miles to soothe my wounded spirit. I know the beauty of a match lighting a candle in the midst of the dark winter, illuminating a table with enough. I know the warm embrace that comes sometimes here in our sanctuary when something in the music or the prayer or the ritual or the silence catches us just right and it is clear that we are all right here, together in crafting something that is truly of worth.

And I know this about grace, too - it cannot be controlled. I can't craft it into our worship. I can't will it into being when I need it. I can't conjure it for myself or for anyone else. It cannot be bought or commanded or bargained into being. Grace works on its own terms, terms that are utterly mysterious to us. Grace comes when it comes.

MESSAGE

When my friends and I bought a little cabin together some twenty years ago, it came furnished. One of the quirky little 'furnishings' was a bit of folk art in the form of a painted rock. On one side, it read "Please turn me over." And when you did, the other side read, "Thank you. That felt good."

So let me offer you a sweet little moment of grace as we begin. Imagine yourself to be that rock. Heavy. Immoveable. Stuck. Worn down by eons of water and wind. One side baked hot, the other cold and shivering. Now imagine that somehow you are dislodged, loosened, turned over...so that your underside is exposed to sun and fresh air. Ah...doesn't that feel good?

I expect that many of you are familiar with the movie of a couple of years ago..."The Imitation Game" starring Benedict Cumberbatch. It tells of the life of Alan Turing, who decrypted intelligence codes for the British government during World War II. The main story line is about the building of a huge pre-computer device attempting, though unlikely, to decipher messages sent via a diabolical German 'enigma machine.' One big problem being that the encryption codes changed daily.

The device Turing and his colleagues built was room-size, comprised of hundreds of cog-like dials, which methodically clicked through their digits, trying to find the just-right combination of zeroes and ones that would unlock the way in which the enigma machine worked. Given the working speed of this invention, at least as I understood it, it was impossible in a 24-hour period, for every combination to be tried, making every day something of a crap shoot. And, since every day there was a deadline by which it would either succeed or fail, every day there was a moment when all hope for an exact right alignment was focused on watching the machine's rotations as the last seconds ticked by, knowing that if it succeeded, thousands of lives would be saved. And if it failed, well...

I wonder if the words to "Amazing Grace" ever ran through the minds of that group of brain-iac scientists as they stood there, waiting, watching. And, when it finally succeeded, what did they feel? Celebration of their human undertaking? A magical moment of serendipity or synchronicity? Maybe they said a prayer of gratitude or just felt incredibly lucky. Did 'grace' show up for them in that moment?

In the traditional Christian theological understanding, grace is the 'free and unmerited act through which God restores his estranged creatures to himself.'¹ Yet the word grace has many meanings and uses; you might receive a 'grace period' to extend a deadline. A musical score can contain 'grace notes'... nonessential but pleasing little musical flourishes. You leave something a little extra for a service provider...a gratuity...another kind of grace note. Extending hospitality is referred to as being gracious. When we are well thought of, we are held in someone's 'good graces,' and conversely, we can fall into disgrace. My own favourite image of grace is the physical beauty of a creature that moves with ease and fluidity...gracefully.

¹ According to Van Harvey's "A Handbook of Theological Terms" page 108)

You may, or may not, be interested in pursuing a personal understanding of the concept of grace. But Paul Tillich, a great theologian and liberal Christian, said this in his book, "The Shaking of the Foundations:"²

"But there is a mysterious fact about the great words of our religious tradition: they cannot be replaced. All attempts to make substitutions, including those I have tried myself, have failed to convey the reality that was to be expressed... There are no substitutes for words like "sin" and "grace." But there IS a way of rediscovering their meaning, the same way that leads us down into the depth of our human existence. In that depth these words were conceived, THERE they gained power for all ages; and THERE they must be found again by each generation, and by each of us for [them]self..."

This I see as one of the goals and values of theme-based ministry...to take words that have assumed great meaning in other contexts and traditions...to take words that tell deep stories of the experiences of others in other times...to take these loaded words and examine them in the depths of our own lives. If they are to have any meaning for us, or perhaps better stated, if we are to use these words to accurately describe our own very real personal experiences, we must rediscover, maybe even re-define, the meaning of such words for ourselves.

And so we begin such an exploration of 'grace' today.

I am inspired by the challenge I hear in Tillich's words...that is, to plumb the depths. To go down into the depth of human experience and to find there what I might learn of grace. You may have heard the story of the circumstances out of which Amazing Grace was written. In his book of meditations, "A Temporary State of Grace," David Blanchard tells us that:

"A fair amount of myth and mystery surround the actual events that may have put pen to paper to create this hymn, but this much is known. The author John Newton was active in the slave trade between West Africa and England in the nineteenth century. Arlo Guthrie likes to tell that Newton had a revelation and turned a loaded ship around to return to Africa. That probably didn't happen. What we do know is that his written accounts of the slave trade were instrumental in bringing about the abolition of slavery in England. He experienced a turning of the heart that led him to a life of service in the Church of England. And he wrote a hymn about what it means to experience transformation."

Amazing grace. Something unexpected that turns us around. Something surprising that breaks into those times when we feel wretched and undeserving. Something unforeseen that offers us a new glimpse of another way. Some mysterious opening where we had felt closed. Some little bit of oil when we feel rusty and stuck. When you think about it this way, can you say that you have experienced grace? And have you felt gratitude for its presence in your life?

About a dozen years ago, a book called "If Grace is True" was published, and a few years later, one of its authors, Jim Mulholland, spoke to a gathering of UU Christians about why people resist the idea of grace. He likened grace to being held in the hands of God, and while I wouldn't

² Chapter 19 - <http://media.sabda.org/alkitab-2/Religion-Online.org%20Books/Tillich,%20Paul%20-%20The%20Shaking%20of%20the%20Foundations.pdf>

use that language, what he had to say still gives me pause.³ Why is it that we resist the notion of grace?

The main reason Mulholland gave was upbringing in a faith that tells stories of dualism... stories about being lost or saved, sinful or good...stories about love being conditional. He spoke of theologies of favour...teachings that say we need to earn whatever rewards we get. And, he also spoke of theologies of hate, where one's enemies are those who reject the truth as we see it, which allow us to identify some as unacceptable or unlovable. And whether or not you were brought up in a religion that taught these things, most of us WERE raised in a culture that reinforces these ideas...of those who have and those who have not, those who deserve what they have and those who haven't earned it, those who are favoured because they can pull themselves up by their own bootstraps and those who are not because they cannot...

And so, grace, which is by definition unearned, is a dangerous concept to the status quo because it can threaten to undermine all that we have 'worked' to deserve. (I actually see this feeling of threat as something very present among Trump's followers.)

But many UU's, I think, have a different sort of resistance to grace, which can be captured in our response to the word 'wretch' in the hymn Amazing Grace. We choke on that word so much that our hymnbook editors offered us an alternative. We believe that we are each worthy (not wretched) and loveable (not wretched.) To accept that we are wretched and in need of being saved feels like we have been judged, and that we are not good enough. It's just not a UU view of human nature.

But what if this is just dualism disguised as its opposite? Are we really so content and unflappable that we never feel wretched? Are we really so capable and diligent that we never need help? Are we always so self-assured and mentally healthy that we don't experience despair? Are we always so protected and blessed that we don't feel pain, or struggle with illness, or experience devastating loss? Are any of us capable, really, of building the intricate device that will solve all of our problems?

So, are we not in need of a bit of grace from time to time? That moment of trusting that all shall be well...the knowledge of being held in the beauty of the world...a deeply-felt sense of belonging to all that is...a reassurance of our worth. However you would describe the feeling, no matter if you can name where it comes from, whether or not you believe it to be always present or eternally illusive...are we not all in need of a bit of grace from time to time?

In the coming weeks, we'll explore grace from a couple of different directions...we'll look at where grace might come from, and also consider what core experiences could be likened to grace. (And we'll also explore it in our Journeys group tomorrow night...at which you are all welcome.) But for now, allow me to offer you one UU-ish perspective on grace... which is that grace is something we can both access and help to create if we choose to commit ourselves to it. I tell a story in my 'blog' for May about my unlikely witnessing of such grace in action at Costco a couple of weeks ago. I won't re-tell the story now, but suffice it to say that it involved seeing someone practicing graciousness in such a way as to bring grace into the moment for someone

³ <http://uuchristian.org/Articles/ResistingGrace.html>

else. And even though I wasn't the intended recipient, just witnessing it brought a bit of grace into my life. By virtue of simply being in the same space, we were holding hands in a dance that involved giving and receiving...the passing of both grace and gratitude between and among us. From this experience, and others, I know grace to be a visceral and emotional experience. Think about those moments, however rare they might be, when you feel graceful. Your joints are almost liquefied, and you move on the earth in complete synchronicity with everything. There is no sense of precariousness or danger, but rather of being held in a pattern that is much larger than oneself. There is no sense of resistance, but rather of complete belonging. I believe that this graceful interconnectedness and interdependency is both something we can receive and pass along to others in our interactions and relationships.

In Greek and Roman mythology, a Charis (k^háris) or Grace is one of three or more minor goddesses...most often named as Splendor, Mirth, and Good Cheer.⁴ They have been depicted as sisters dancing with arms entwined. Margaret Visser, in her book "The Gift of Thanks," says that these sisters represent a kind of graciousness... "the social obligations of giving, receiving, and returning gifts and favours. They danced holding hands because a benefit passes from one person to another and eventually returns to the giver."⁵ For me, this image implies that as we offer grace into the world, we receive it in return. As in our story today, some of us dance the head, some the tail, some as teachers, some as learners, and together we make the dragon dance.⁶ As we work to create gracious experiences for others, we make it easier for all, including ourselves, to feel held in the loving arms of the universe.

"The Imitation Game" included a second, disturbing storyline involving Turing's homosexuality...another thing he had struggled to decipher and solve. Near the end of his life, he was prosecuted for indecency, and accepted treatment with chemical castration as an alternative to prison.⁷ It is unclear whether he accidentally overdosed or chose to end his life; if the movie was an accurate portrayal, the way he was treated by society denied him access to feelings of grace, even after a lifetime of incredible scientific successes.

Grace is not mechanical like a clockwork machine made of moving dials and cogs. It doesn't rely on things falling into perfect alignment, although a rare bit of synchronicity might contribute to a feeling of grace. It doesn't depend on what we do, because it can't be earned. And, while we may not be able to control its presence, we CAN create the conditions in which grace can flow and dance.

In every moment that we offer unconditional love, there is grace. Every time we open ourselves to a new perspective or let in a sliver of light, there is grace. In every instance where we demonstrate that all are included and valued, there is grace. Every time, however fleeting, that we notice that our lives are held in beauty and connection, there is grace. Amazing grace. So may it be. Amen.

⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charites>

⁵ Visser, Margaret, *The Gift of Thanks* (Houghton Mifflin: Boston/New York: 2008) p. 87

⁶ Chin Chiang and the Dragon's Dance, by Ian Wallace

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alan_Turing

POEM

~ Jane Hirshfield

Three times my life has opened.
Once, into darkness and rain.
Once, into what the body carries at all times within it and
starts to remember each time it enters the act of love.
Once, to the fire that holds all.
These three were not different.
You will recognize what I am saying or you will not.
But outside my window all day a maple has stepped from her leaves like a woman in love
with winter, dropping the colored silks.
Neither are we different in what we know.
There is a door. It opens. Then it is closed. But a slip of light stays, like a scrap of
unreadable paper left on the floor, or the one red leaf the snow releases in March.

CLOSING WORDS

We Receive Fragments of Holiness

~Sarah York

We receive fragments of holiness, glimpses of eternity, brief moments of insight. Let us
gather them up for the precious gifts that they are, and, renewed by their grace, move
boldly into the unknown.

Go in peace and grace. Amen.