

WHAT HOLDS US? A MOTHER'S DAY SERVICE

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Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
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OPENING WORDS *Life Lessons* ~ Phillip Booth

Lie back, daughter, (son,) let your head
be tipped back in the cup of my hand.
Gently, and I will hold you. Spread
your arms wide, lie out on the stream
and look high at the gulls. A dead-
man's float is face down. You will dive
and swim soon enough where this tidewater
ebbs to the sea. Daughter, (son,) believe
me, where you tire on the long thrash
to your island, lie up, and survive.
As you float now, where I held you
and let go, remember when fear
cramps your heart what I told you:
lie gently and wide to the light-year
stars, lie back, and the sea will hold you.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *Three Ducks Went Wandering* ~ Ron Roy

(Three young ducks wander off from the barnyard, and they keep narrowly missing the dangerous situations that lurk around them before returning home to nest under the wings of their mother.)

READING *from On This Shining Night* ~ Rebecca Ann Parker

This personal story, in an abridged form, comes from Rev. Rebecca Parker's book, "Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now."

My despair and isolation came to a crisis on night. I was past living one day at a time...and was down to the question of whether I would be willing to continue to live at all. In the depths of that sadness...I left my house and walked. (It was after midnight) The city was quiet. My face was wet with tears...I was determined to walk into the lake's cold darkness and to find there... consolation....

At the bottom of the hill, the street ended and the lakeside park began. I walked across the wet grass and climbed the last rise before the final descent to the water's edge. As I crested the rise, I discovered a line of dark objects between me and the shore. I didn't remember this barricade being there before...but as I edged closer, I discovered it was a line of human beings, hunched over some...spindly equipment. Telescopes. It was the Seattle Astronomy Club...a whole club of amateur scientists, up and alert in the middle of the night because the sky was clear and the planets were near. To make my way to my death, I had to get past an enthusiast... He assumed I had come to look at the stars. "Here, let me know you," he said, and began to explain the star cluster his telescope was focused on. I had to brush away tears from my eyes to look through his telescope. There it was! A red-orange spiral galaxy....

I could not bring myself to continue my journey. In a world where people get up in the middle of the night to look at the stars, I could not end my life.

I know there is grace, because my life was saved by the Seattle Astronomy Club.

When I think about that experience, I realize it holds many clues about how to trust grace... That night, I was saved by people who held fast to their desire to see the beauty of the universe, in spite of the cold or the late hour... I was saved by the human capacity to love the world... I was saved by one particular human being who assumed I shared a desire to see the stars... I was saved by the stars themselves, by the cool green grass under my feet, by the earth, the cosmos, its presence, which won me over and persuaded me to stay.

I believe that we must doubt our doubt that there is grace. We must open ourselves to the possibility that there are sources beyond ourselves that sustain us, transform us, save us, that hold us tight in the arms of life. I believe that we must open ourselves to the possibility that this grace is already here, that it has been given, is being given, and will be given.

MESSAGE *What Holds Us*

Here is a myth from my childhood. (Remember what Joseph Campbell said about myths...that they are something that never happened but are always happening.)

I am one of six children, and each of my parents have many siblings. Sadly, we never lived close to our relatives, so I didn't know my extended family very well, and they didn't know me. One summer, all of my zillion cousins and aunties and uncles gathered for a picnic at some big city park, a place I'd never been. But after the initial introductions, we all fell into a shared assurance that we all belonged together. We couldn't keep each other straight, but it didn't matter which mother picked up the small one who skinned her knee, or which adult I asked to pour me another lemonade. It didn't matter if we knew the names of everyone on our kickball team. It didn't even matter which adult asked you to slow down, or to say please...since each adult had that kind of authority over each and every kid. We played and ran and yelled until, I suspect, we were all just one blur of colour. But still, there came a moment when a rather scary aging aunt with her red lipstick askew, took me by the shoulders, gave me the googly eye, and asked, "Now, whose are you?"

(I'm not sure this ever really happened, but I know that it did.)

Rev. Victoria Safford's poem, "Whose are You?" contains many questions, among which are these:

Whose are you? When you walk out of your room, out of your house, into the sunlight of the day, to whom in this wide world do you belong? Where is your allegiance, by whom are you called?

Whose are you? At the end of the day, through the longest night, in the valley of the shadow of death and despair, who holds your going out and coming in, your waking and your sleeping?

Who, what, holds you in the hollow of its hand?

You might have heard the echoes of a biblical passage in her words. Many people find great comfort in Psalm 121...which begins, "I lift my eyes to the hills. From where will my help

come?" and ends with "he will keep your life. The Lord will keep you going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore."¹ It's a passage of assurance...when in need, look to the hills, and find there the strength and the ability to trust that you are held and known.

It occurs to me that there is a strong connection between the experience of grace, our theme for May, and a feeling of belonging and assuredness...that feeling of being held, no matter what. Grace visits us in that moment of remembering when, no matter what...no matter our screw-ups, no matter our accomplishments, no matter our abilities, no matter our name...we know that we are held and that we belong within the container of all that is. And so, our big question for today is this: IF there is something that holds us, what is it? At least for me, this is one of the biggest theological questions of all time; you might think of it as a UU version of the "is there a god" question. Is there something that holds us, and if so, what is it?

Mother's Day...however complex it can be...and believe me, I know how complex it is...is an appropriate time to consider this idea of "being held" because of our iconic archetypal perceptions of a mother's love...at least in its perfect state. I know that not all of us have experienced this, at least not with our birth mothers, and perhaps have even been subjected to its antithesis. Some of us struggle with how imperfect we are as mothers. Some of us want desperately to be mothers, and are not. Some have offered a mother's love where it is not well-received. Some have lost their mothers, or their children, and cannot find their way back into the grace of mother-love.

And while I hope that each one of us has experienced being loved unconditionally by someone, at some time, I suspect that one of the main reasons Mother's Day can be so complex is because we tend to hold this day, and all our expectations of mothers, up against an incomparable ideal of perfect grace and love...that experience of being held and accepted and adored without having had to earn it in any way.

What holds us? I'm going on the record to say that I'm confident there is something that holds us, yet I'm pretty sure that it can't be easily defined or named. So, let's suspend words and labels for a moment, and instead, I invite you to reflect on your experience in the world. When have you experienced grace? When have you felt held in the arms of belonging and acceptance? (pause)

Theologian Paul Tillich wrote this about the concept of grace:²

"Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: "You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!"

I ask again. When have you known grace? When have you felt held in the arms of belonging and acceptance? Can you recall how it felt? (pause)

¹ NRSV

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

Now, what if you could just trust that this feeling is ever-present and available to you? What if “grace is a standing invitation” ...an invitation offered in the form of “the universe outstretched as a hand.”³

It was Rev. Dr. Edward Frost who expressed this understanding of grace as an invitation, but he also suggested that we too often beat against that invitation until we are finally able to rest into it. I think I understand what he means. We are a faith, a people, with a refreshingly positive anthropology. We believe in a radical kind of self-sufficiency and have a not unsurprisingly high estimation of ourselves as human beings. These beliefs are a large part of what defines us as Unitarians...a belief in our ability to act and reason...our capacity for transformation and growth...our inherent worth and basic good nature. This is our strength, AND a consequence of this strength can be a corresponding weakness in an ability to see and receive, or even to ask for, grace.

So, when grace offers an outstretched hand, maybe we respond like a willful two-year-old... “No, do it myself. Julie do it.” Take a breath. Relax. Accept a bit of help and support and assurance. Lift your eyes to the hills. Once again, imagine, remember, those times, or even that one time, when you felt deliciously held...when you could just rest into grace.

Poet David Whyte writes, “The first step...is to admit that the world has a soul also, and is somehow participating with us in our work and destiny. That there is a sacred otherness to the world which is breathtakingly helpful simply because it is not us.”⁴ There is a sacred otherness. There is a universe with an outstretched hand. There is something that is not us, and it can hold us in breathtakingly beautiful ways.

Rebecca Parker, whose experience was told in the earlier reading, seems to conclude that what holds her, even saves her, is the beauty of the universe, the human capacity to love the world, a desire to see the stars. She speaks of being held by the stars themselves, by the cool green grass under her feet, by the earth, and by the cosmos. Do you ever feel held in that way?

In “The Peace of Wild Things,” Wendell Berry writes of those times “when despair for the world grows in me and I wake in the night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be” that he then goes to lie down where the great heron feeds. “I come into the peace of wild things...” he writes, “the presence of still water...(and above him)...the day-blind stars waiting with their light. For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.” Do you ever lie down by still waters and feel the grace of the world?

The 13th-century Sufi mystic Rumi likens being held to the experience of the waves in the ocean:

“You are so weak. Give up to grace.
The ocean takes care of each wave
till it gets to shore.”

Do you ever feel held in the way you might imagine a wave feels held by the ocean?

How about when overcome with feelings of immense gratitude...that incredible heart-fullness when we witness sunsets, or puppies, or crocuses peeping up through snow, or

³ <http://jesspages.net/bestofuu/07/we-know-thatgrace-is-rare>

⁴ <http://www.awakin.org/read/view.php?tid=1000>

Northern lights?...in those moments when your awareness and wonder are tuned to blessings that have come unbidden, without your efforts, unpaid for? Do you then feel held in a sacred otherness?

And what of those moments when you are stunned by a hug or a smile or a kindness shown...when some 'other' shows up for you in ways you could not have imagined. When a touch or a moment of intimacy makes you tingle with life and acceptance. Have you ever had that experience of being held?

And then there are those other times...when it feels there is no particular impetus, when you hadn't been aware of needing any particular attention or care, when you're just going about doing what you normally do, and suddenly you are just hit with an overwhelming sense of being at home on this planet, of being surrounded by love, of having no doubts whatsoever that you belong. Has that ever happened to you?

I don't know its name. You might call it God, or the universe, or life itself. Maybe for you it's the great mystery or Creator Spirit, or the soul of the world. You might call it serendipity or gravity or even the kind of dumb luck experienced by the little ducks in this morning's story. While I understand the need for language and words, I am increasingly convinced that whatever it is that holds us, it cannot be named. Furthermore, what I might choose to call it is not what you would choose to call it. And. Still. Yet. There is something that holds us.

What if our job is simply to rest into it? I quote another great Christian theologian, Frederick Buechner:

"The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you. 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. Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too."

Change the language if you need to. Take out the anthropomorphizing of God if you choose. But still. What if we simply trusted that some sacred otherness was with us, that we are never separate from it, and that we are loved and accepted and held.

What if we stopped beating against it, and choose instead to rest into it. What if we consciously reached out and accepted the gift of grace, the gift of being held?

I loved the story Marion shared earlier, about 'handling' and 'scaffolding' babies, holding them in ways that encourage them to develop and learn...in ways that allow them to build their own capabilities, creating a foundation for trusting relationships. Maybe this is a great reason for us to allow ourselves to be held in this sacred otherness, that is, in order that we can rest in more reciprocal, respectful, and healthy relationships with each other and with all that is.

As for me, I'd love to go through the world as if at a great family picnic, knowing without a doubt that I belong, assured that I have an inherent place within the whole, comfortable with both the reality of not knowing and of being known, with or without names. Trusting. Resting. Being held.

For all that, I know that all is not well in our lives and in our worlds, I know that both beautiful and terrible things happen. Still. There is a wonderful grace in trusting that all shall be well. That we are held. And in knowing that we are not alone.

Amen.

READING *from Homecoming* ~ Linda Reuther

And the Great Mother said:

Come my child and give me all that you are.

I am not afraid of your strength and darkness, of your fear and pain.

Give me your tears. They will be my rushing rivers and roaring oceans.

Give me your rage. It will erupt into my molten volcanoes and rolling thunder.

Give me your tired spirit. I will lay it to rest in my soft meadows.

Give me your hopes and dreams. I will plant a field of sunflowers and arch rainbows in the sky.

You are not too much for me. My arms and heart welcome your true fullness.

There is room in my world for all of you, all that you are.

I will cradle you in the boughs of my ancient redwoods and the valleys of my gentle rolling hills.

My soft winds will sing you lullabies and soothe your burdened heart.

Release your deep pain. You are not alone and you have never been alone.

CLOSING WORDS *Oblique Prayers* ~ Denise Levertov

As swimmers dare to lie face to sky

and water bears them,

as hawks rest upon air and air sustains them,

so would I learn to attain freefall, and float

into Creator Spirit's deep embrace,

knowing no effort earns that all surrounding grace.

Go, knowing you are held in the grace, and the embrace, of the world.

Amen.