

GRACE

This morning's sermon was brought into focus for me by some material of Rev. Fredric Muir and by the reading from Rev. Herndon.

My earliest memory of hearing anything about grace was while I was in college. I attended a college youth group at a Methodist church. The leader was a leading insurance man in the community. He likened the grace of God to the period between when the insurance premium is due and when the company will no longer keep the policy in force. It is a time when the insurance company continues your coverage even though you have not met the agreed upon payment. This worked as an illustration, for me, until later when I realized that if the company does this once for one policy holder it becomes obliged to do it always for all policy holders. What was once a generous gift quickly became an entitlement. For a long time that realization ruined the analogy for me, but then I suddenly saw - that makes it an even better analogy. Don't most of us just expect good health? Isn't happiness and joy what we expect and don't we feel put upon when our lives take, even a slight, downward tick? I frequently take my personal privileged status in the world as my just entitlement.

While the word grace comes from the Christian tradition, the experience it names is common to virtually all human spiritual traditions. In her book *States of Grace*, Charlene Spretnak says:

When we experience consciousness of the unity in which we are embedded, the sacred whole that is and around us, we exist in a state of grace. At such moments our consciousness perceives not only our individual self, but also our larger self, the self of the cosmos.... Grace is considered by nearly all theologians to be a gift that is given.

Or as Unitarian Universalist minister Peter Fleck wrote in *Come As You Are*:

Grace is a blessing, a blessing that is undeserved, unsolicited, and unexpected, a blessing that brings a sense of the divine order into our lives. The ways of grace are mysterious, we cannot figure them out. But we know grace by its fruits, by the blessings of its works.

And lastly, in *Listening to Your Life*, Frederick Beuchner adds this:

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.

In our culture, behind these three understandings of grace - a consciousness of unity, a sense of divine order, a listening to life - there stand thousands of years of history, reflecting several contexts for the blessings of grace to happen. Largely influenced by St. Augustine, western Christianity sees grace as a private matter almost entirely to do with individual sin and redemption. This is the theology from which the Hymn *Amazing Grace* was written. Its author, John Newton, was an English slave trader. After noticing that he was blessed with grace he wrote: "Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now can see." And upon seeing, Newton left the sin of trafficking in human beings and shared his redemption by being an ardent supporter of abolition.

Eastern Orthodox Christianity believed grace was present throughout nature. The essence of this belief is captured beautifully by Alice Walker in *The Color Purple* when Shrug says:

My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree my arm

would bleed. And I laughed and cried and I run all around the house, I knew just what it was. In fact, when it happen, you can't miss it.

In our Unitarian Universalist heritage, we see the blending of Eastern Orthodoxy's grace in nature with Western Christianity's grace as a private matter in our transcendentalist roots, now emerging as contemporary paganism. The individual in nature is a major theme not just in Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and Emerson, but in current writers. In Richard Bode's essay in *First You Have to Row a Little Boat*, some words that could have come directly from Thoreau "I once met a man who said he had visited every exotic place from the Grand Canyon to the Great Wall, but when I questioned him closely I discovered he hadn't seen the songbirds in his own backyard." Bode, like the transcendentalists and today's pagans is telling 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 blessings will come, it is undeserved - there's nothing you can do to earn grace, and yet it is everywhere, all around you - you don't have to be in the right place, timing means nothing.

But Frederick Beuchner tells us, "There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you reach out and take it." As if driving in the fast lane of the expressway, he suggests that you've got to pull over, you've got to take your foot off the gas - which is all to say, you've got to do something. I think what this means that if you are paying attention you will notice grace happening more often. I think that grace is very common, we just aren't paying attention. It is related to beauty. And sometimes we finally see something that has been in front of our eyes for a long time, as in this mornings reading from Herndon.

Grace happens, if you'll reach out and take it, or notice it.. Hence the mystery that makes

grace amazing, while on the one hand you can't do anything to force grace because grace just happens, at the same time if you don't pay attention, if you're not open to it, if you're not willing to receive it, then you don't notice, and effectively, you miss out on the joy of the grace in your life.

Now whether you want to think of grace in the Eastern, Western, transcendentalist, or modern context, I have some suggestions about taking the first step forward, ways to pay more attention, ways to open the window so the warm winds of grace have the opportunity to blow in.

Call it centering, mindfulness, focusing - or maybe you've got another way to describe it - I believe we need to shut out all the background noise, the ongoing daily Muzak, the weekly distractions of life in the fast lane in an Information Age. To give grace a chance some meditate, others read, or walk, or jog, or even fish early in the morning. It is that time we hold as sacred - when for an hour or ten minutes, we ignore and disregard whatever fills our day. This is important because the consequence of indifference to the little wonders of the world is a lessening of, at least the quality of, our life.

While we all can and will find our own ways, I don't want us to overlook the opportunities created for us in communities. Too often we think of religious experience as a private individualistic thing. So we undervalue or dismiss outright corporate contexts, like church, as opportunities for grace to be experienced. But sometimes I have some of the most powerful, grace filled moments in community. Immediately after Nancy died I was immersed in the feeling that the whole of the UU community was hurting with me. I have promised myself that I will tell that to everyone I hear say that they can be a UU alone. There are frequently grace filled moments during community activities - like political rallies, or the "Celebration of Commitment", which included Gay and Lesbian commitment, last summer or the Martin Luther

King Jr, march. Charlene Spretnak describes it thus:

Sometimes the consciousness of grace comes on quite suddenly and so intensely that the moment is never forgotten. More frequently, we experience slight versions of it as in group singing when the alignment of vibrations evokes in us an awareness of the vibratory ocean of flux and form in and around us. Touching the ultimate truth in that way, and many others, brings us joy, release, connection, and peace.

Whether it's in a private or a corporate setting, I can't separate the blessings of grace from knowing and experiencing unconditional affirmation. Part of that blessing - a sense of divine order, a consciousness of unity, a listening to life - is knowing, believing, and telling that, in Jesse Jackson's words, "I am somebody." But it almost seems like we've gone in just the opposite direction. I hear stories from people, stories from the classroom and the office, from the dinner table and dates, from legislatures and board rooms, stories of back-stabbing, disrespect, and running people down, does anyone remember the last election campaign?. All of this runs contrary to the blessing of grace.

As with Unitarian Universalism, grace is the affirmation that worth and dignity are inherent to who we are as human beings. Regardless of the mistakes we make, the tensions we might create, regardless of what society might tell us, we know we are valued. In more orthodox language, this is what a Christian means when they share what was once the distinguishing message of Universalism, a message characterized by Frederick Beuchner like this:

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.

That's a very powerful message - perhaps overwhelming - in part because of the negative messages we can't seem to turn off; the larger culture's gospel that preaches that our worth, our value, is measured by how much money we earn or have, by what we think, for whom we vote, by what we produce, by the color of our skin, by our age, our gender, our sexual orientation. Society frequently reminds us that it does not affirm us merely for being human. But the blessings of grace declare and affirm the *inherent* worth and dignity of every person.

I am convinced that children - especially young children, experience the blessings of grace - an affirming, unifying, and ordered consciousness - far more than adults do. The division of life, and the logical reductionisms of the natural world that we as adults take pride in (and hope that our children will learn) are often foreign to them. For children the barriers to grace are not as many. What we spend time relearning - how to embrace the natural world and people - they take for granted. It's just that they don't talk about it because what they experience doesn't feel out of the ordinary. For children, grace isn't amazing, in fact it might be rather routine. It's only after they've been taught by adults that they slowly relinquish their grace-filled experiences, only wanting to recapture them again when they reach middle age.

Theologians seem to overlook or ignore what I think of as societal grace. I remember once at First Church, the music director something by Bach as an offertory and that day it struck me powerfully. I commented, before continuing, that I didn't deserve Bach. What I meant was that I didn't do anything to earn Bach. His music has just been there for my use and enjoyment my whole life. I just rarely took special notice. Lots of important stuff has just been there for my use, unmerited, unearned, just a gracious (grace filled) gift from generations before me. Things I rarely even think to be thankful for. Important things like the public library, indoor plumbing, the museum, street lights, and playgrounds, baseball, radio, tons of great music which isn't Bach,

and a school system that didn't require me to pay anything. All of the uncounted gifts just left to my generation by earlier generations. All the really valuable stuff that can never be paid back but which creates a moral obligation to pay forward.

I'm not sure how to categorize learning to accept love and to give love which came mainly from Nancy, Lorella, and Linda, but, to me, it feels unearned like the other categories of grace.

How many times do we have the opportunity of grace and we miss it, we don't see or feel it, we dismiss it as just the everyday, the commonplace, the usual, no big deal. The transcendentalist, Mary Oliver, in her poem *The Sun* reminds us to take notice of the small things.

Have you ever seen / anything / in your life / more wonderful / than the way the sun / every evening / relaxed and easy / floats toward the horizon , and into the clouds or the hills / or the rumpled sea / and is gone - / and how it slides again / out of the blackness / every morning, / on the other side of the world / like a red flower / streaming upward on its heavenly oils, / say on a morning in early summer, / at its perfect imperial distance - / and have you ever felt for anything / such wild love - / do you think there is anywhere in any language, / a word billowing enough / for the pleasure / that fills you, / as the sun / reaches out, / as it warms you / as you stand there, / empty-handed - / or have you too / turned from this world - / or have you too / gone crazy / for power / for things?

The blessings of grace - a consciousness of unity, a sense of divine order, a listening to life - will come only when you're not focused on the big experience. It comes when you are open to noticing, I don't think it can be forced, but it probably comes every day, in the everyday.

Mary Oliver asks: "Do you think there is anywhere, in any language, a word billowing

enough for the pleasure that fills you as the sun reaches out..." Yes there is such a word. Grace happens. Know it. Believe it. Tell it. Grace happens. Grace happens to us.

Amen

JUST AS I AM

Rev. David Herndon December 1995

I have come to a new appreciation of the old Universalist message. Originally, as I understand it, and throughout most of the nineteenth century, the Universalists preached salvation for all souls. Around the turn of the twentieth century, when the Social Gospel movement was prominent, the focus of Universalism shifted to the here and now, and with the urging of Clarence Skinner and others, theological attention was directed more toward bringing the kingdom into existence on earth. At mid-century, when in light of two World Wars, concern for harmonious international relations was growing, Ken Patton and others sought in Universalism the image of a great human family united by a religion for one world. More recently the Universalist ideal has been used prophetically in support of the human rights of people who have historically been excluded or marginalized from full respect and participation in our society.

I applaud and celebrate these social interpretations of Universalism. Indeed, social Universalism has been part of my own preaching. But what ever became of the Universalism that was originally intended to reassure individuals that God loved them? Does that personally reassuring message still have any spiritual power for contemporary Unitarian Universalists?

I believe that the journey toward self-acceptance and away from works-righteousness is an important journey for many over-achieving Unitarian Universalists. I used to wonder what part of our tradition might offer peace and comfort to the perplexed souls in our churches who base their sense of self-esteem and personal worth on their intellectual or professional achievements. Language about the availability of forgiveness through the atoning sacrifice on the cross wasn't quite the right message, although an important aspect of that message does

resemble what i wanted to articulate. Something gracious, something independent of one's own doing, something about worth and dignity transcending our accomplishments as well as our failures - - that's what I was looking for.

Now I see that what I was looking for was obvious all along, so that nobody could possibly miss it, although I did for years and years. When we speak of the *inherent* worth and dignity of all people we mean that each of us has a worth and a dignity that cannot be earned because of our good deeds nor taken away because of our misdeeds. We are loveable regardless of our conduct. I find this to be a profound affirmation of grace. In fact, it seems to me that there is at least as much grace in our affirmation of the worth and dignity of all souls as there is in the old rugged cross, or in the garden, or on board the old gospel ship, or in the story many love to tell. And our historically theological position that this grace does not come from an atoning sacrifice, as affirmed on both sides of our tradition, makes it no less amazing.

As I have come to understand personally this Unitarian Universalist message of grace - - as I have come to understand that my worth and dignity as a person are inherent, neither earned by my good deeds nor lost by my misdeeds - - I have felt some liberating and transforming change within me that I suppose is akin to what others still call being born again.

The affirmation that worth and dignity are independent of conduct however still leaves one accountable for one's behavior. If, as the original Universalist message, all souls are loved unconditionally along the vertical axis of theology all souls are nevertheless unceasingly responsible interpersonally and socially along the horizontal axis. A paradox? Perhaps. But separating unthinking personal worth from moral virtue simply sharpens the focus on the motivation to do good. We do not believe that some sufficient number of good deeds (or penances for misdeeds) buys one a place in heaven. Then why should we believe that doing good

deeds makes one a better, worthier, more loveable person? Moral virtue is its own reward, said one sage. We love because we are loved, said another, not the other way around.

We can sink no lower than the arms of God can reach, according to the early Universalists. Our worth and dignity are inherent, neither earned by our good deeds nor lost by our misdeeds. We are loved despite the tangles of our lives, nor does that life depend on our achievements. Although I have been a Unitarian Universalist all my life. I never really understood until recently that our tradition has such a powerful personally reassuring message of grace in our affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of all souls.

Just as I am. Amazing.

GRACE

Rev. Linnea Pearson

The spirit moves mysteriously now
Ebbing and flowing with the tides
And the earth turning.

Suddenly I am complete
Yearning, striving, possessing
Vanquished by this strong
Stirring of the Spirit.

Whatever, Whomever it is
That moves me
Far beyond my deepest knowledge
I Acknowledge.

Last Sunday
I returned to the church
Of many battles
To meet the provocateurs
For the first time
Since the last.

Grace abounded from the moment
I arrived.

I greeted the old ones
With a love
Generated by the power of
The bodisattva.

There is no accounting for the wonderment
I feel at the littlest things:
Pink clouds floating on blue skies,
Ships' lights bobbing on the black seas,
Children's laughter floating on the dark night's sultry air.

I've given up--
Surrendered--
All illusion of control.

My own small cerebellum
Incapable of creating
Grace
Yet when it happens
(Yes, Grace happens!)
I roll through the clover
Laughing
All the long way down
The undulating hills.

The Memorial Service was for the Gande Mere
Of the congregation
All the old mares were out
For the occasion.
Could I greet them
Without wrath?

A new woman greeted me,
Invited me to see
Her statue of Kwan Yin.
The Compassionate One
Cast her spell
Over the service.

Some would call Her
Grace.