

GRACE IS AMAZING
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As an inherently religious person who is deeply skeptical, as an inherently religious person who is deeply skeptical, and loves language, I get jazzed when I get to watch us humans struggle to get at some of the most amazing things that we experience. *Deja vu*, love, serendipity.

The skeptic in me loves how it is impossible to ever say exactly what any of those things are, or why. And the spiritual romantic in me loves how persistent and enduring those experiences are. It is a commitment to ones answer to those experiences that makes someone a person of faith I suppose. And, I suppose it is my commitment to those eternal questions, that makes me a UU.

Grace, of course, falls into this category, and both under the microscope and up on the pedestal today it goes. It is one of my favorite words. If I ever have a daughter, I might name her Grace.

We mostly, or maybe once, thought to define grace first in exclusively religious terms, and Webster's Dictionary first defines it as the "unmerited divine assistance given humans for their regeneration or sanctification." I like that. Grace is "the unmerited (or unearned) divine assistance given humans for their regeneration or sanctification." Implying that it is a gift we are given to be a better human.

Amen, Webster's.

I like how that sounds like it is always there, because for most of us religious "grace" is experienced when we believe God has saved our bacon. I love that unearned part of it.

But its not just about God, or unmerited divine anything, because grace can be felt when a kindness a person can have towards someone is felt. You have at some point likely been in someone's good graces.

So, divine or no divine, grace is something that we don't have to earn, that can save us, and when we get it we feel special or favored. To me it's so cool that human's frequently and regularly enough have that experience that we need a word for it.

But it gets better because grace is even better than that. Grace has an elegance and beauty to it too, right. As we know, a well performed waltz has grace, as does its namesake personality Grace Kelly,

But wait, it even gets better.

Grace has onomanopia to. Grace even sounds like the poetic, kind, and pretty things it describes. I mean the elegant actress turned princess who bears the name of our virtue was not after all called Snookie Kelly. She was Grace Kelly.

To say the word is to calm yourself.

Everyone, ready, say it. "Grace." Ahhhh

See, I told you.

Grace dignifies and sacramentalizes our food and the gatherings around them.

And as Severin must well know, but I recently discovered a year or two ago, but there are things called grace notes built into some musical scores. Grace notes are not essential to the piece, but make it soar and shine.

I love it.

So, for something to have, or to be grace, it has to be redemptive, it has to do something resembling blessing us, and to offer us the chance to improve ourselves at a spiritual level.

However, to be grace, it has to be poetic, smooth, and feel like a bonus. The period between a due date and any penalties after all is called a grace period. Grace is one of the cherries on top we get to experience for being alive

So, in no particular order, my former little friend Grace, who I still remember sitting on my lap watching "Good Night Moon" videos, is named for something that is smooth, benign, generous, kind, and silently saves us from selves. That's a lot for my former little friend to live up to. Come to think of it, she was a cherry on top.

I think it is also fair to say that that if its not amazing, it is not grace. In fact, true to form, In Bill Moyers' film about the famous song "Amazing Grace" there is a scene filmed at a large English stadium concert that was celebrating the end of Apartheid that exemplifies the very concept. It was the late eighties and in keeping with the times the concert was one of those huge multi-band, live-aid type affairs. The stadium was packed with young fans calling out for hard rock band Guns and Roses.

However, despite the crowd, as scheduled the opera singer Jessye Norman, took the stage and without any music behind her Jessye began to sing "Amazing Grace", starting very slowly: "*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound....*" She quickly stilled the crowd, and by the second verse, "*'Twas grace that taught my heart to*"...the soprano had the largely young crowd in her hands, singing along. Jessye later confessed that she could not describe exactly the power that descended on Wembley Stadium that night, but certainly something did.

John Newton's well-known hymn "Amazing Grace" is popular enough to be in nearly every hymnal made. And outside a handful of our favorite Christmas Carols, that just doesn't happen. This most famous of songs that most famously exemplifies the word was written in England, years after the saving experience that Captain John Newton reports he had on board his wave-wracked slave ship during a storm that no one on board thought they would survive.

As the story gets handed down, during a big storm Newton did not think they would survive. Newton gave in and let God take over. Believing to have been spared by God, the chronically self-described mean-spirited captain not only survives, but as often happens with such experiences, opens his heart and in so is capable of seeing the error of his ways.

"Amazing Grace" is by most accounts a poignant tune. I suspect Robin Patterson could explain why it's chord structure might move us, but I believe most of its appeal is connected to the fact that being suddenly awakened to who we are, and in that moment more importantly who we might be, is a universal human experience.

Whether we have experienced it or not, Captain Newton's report in song that like he was, we can shockingly and powerfully be shocked and cleansed, rings true. I particularly like how for most of the song we get to hear about the religious principal, as he experienced it, and in sensory terms no less. "*'Twas Grace that taught my heart to feel. 'Twas blind but now I see.*"

I think it is interesting that "Amazing Grace" has no reference in it to Jesus and that the only reference to God in it is in the fourth verse, and as it turns out was written in by a later editor. Are those things coincidental, maybe? But, I suspect that the song's sensory, personal, and non-theological nature is part of why it has such universal appeal.

I love the song, and unlike many UU's I even like the wretch part. Sometimes we just need to see our wretchedness.

So, what made Captain John Newton, who truly seems to have been the "wretch" he confessed to be, change. What made this tough slave running orphan who went to sea at the age of

eleven, and soon enough had such a nasty mouth that fellow sailors years his senior complained about his language. What?

Newton was reported to have so disagreeable a temperament that one time when he fell overboard his shipmates refused to be troubled throwing over a lifeboat and instead opted to throw a harpoon overboard near him that he eventually hauled himself in on.

What accounts for that change? I don't know exactly, but as Newton testified to in his song, Grace will do that to you.

One night on an all-night train ride from Poland to Germany I couldn't sleep, and found myself walking between the train cars. Each car was separated by a large hydraulic doors that, in order to open, one needed to first tug to activate.

Don't ask me to explain the mechanics, all I know is that after tugging a few times on one of these doors that seemed stuck, I dropped down, secured myself, and yanking on it finally pulled hard enough to initiate the hydraulics to life. All good except that I didn't let go fast enough not to have my forearm jammed between the powerful door handle I was gripping deep in my palm and the metal door frame my elbow was stuck in.

For what I imagine was ten seconds, but was probably just a few, the door was putting both too much pressure on my hand for me to release my grip, and too much for me to slip my arm out of the door frame and essentially to let go. In that helpless moment I sincerely believed that I was about to watch my fore-arm snap in half before my eyes. I was trapped and terrified.

Until the door slid back.

I don't have any idea why that door released. And by that I mean none. I don't know if it was God, or luck, or physics, or some hydraulic safety feature. What I do know was that was in one moment as my little friend Grace would say in a truly "Askary" (scarey) situation, and in another I was not. For that I was HUMBLE, GRATEFUL, THANKFUL, and BLESSED.

I ended up slouched on the floor of a dirty train bathroom, thanking God I still had my arm.

But like all religious or spiritual things, my experience of "grace" is not nearly as important as your own.

So, how about you?

Have you ever experienced something you would identify as grace? Maybe you were blessed when you were in great pain and restlessness? Or, perhaps when walking through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life? Found a sorta miraculous window of meaning

Or, maybe when you felt disgusted, indifferent, weak, hostile, and lacking in direction and composure. and have felt something bigger than you step in and change you?

It is human to have experiences that are bigger than our reason can answer, and that is fine! And as we teach here in this UU church it is fine to poke and prod at them, to question and challenge the answers and explanations we have been handed.

It is also a UU thing to talk about them.

We are free here to ask if there some power woven into the fabric of reality that acts on our behalf to save us. I hope so. That would feel graceful.

We are free to ask and free to believe that grace is or there is not something that swoops down from the heavens. We are free to believe that grace is just the pretty but vague word for that appreciative feeling of well being you can have, when you get lucky.

You are welcome also to believe that grace is nothing more than the emotional release you can get when you are snatched from the jaws of defeat.

But maybe, even if those questions are our first instinct, maybe discerning what grace is, is not the most important question we can ask. Maybe the best question is to ask how can I/we court this vague beautiful thing we have labeled grace. In life we have experiences that change our life, and in doing, cause us to see, and act, and think, and believe in different ways for having had them.

Like all good things religious, the nature of grace is a curiosity isn't it. It seems to me that reason cannot answer the question of whether grace exists, comes from a source, etc. The tellers of the stories and myths of the many different religions through their diverse sources of wisdom literature and scriptures have tried their very best to picture for their readers the grace that they experienced.

But it cannot be passed on that way. You just can't demonstrate or prove what people have experienced. And, using words to get at the experiences like grace has within it the accuracy that searching for your keys with thick mittens on does. It might feel safe to describe grace as Einstein described quantum phenomena, "as spooky action from a distance." But I'm not even sure that the distance part is right. Perhaps that feeling of being blessed and deeply in the right spot can feel like activity from the outside when perhaps it is exclusively an inner experience.

For me, I prefer to look at grace in a more experiential, existential and earthly way. Mostly, for me the feeling of grace is now most associated with a guiltless feeling of being alive in the here and now. Grace for me is mostly the feeling of really believing that I and we are a special, unique part of the larger interconnected web of life. More simply, that I and we are special and belong.

The great story of the development of the universe and the evolution of life here on earth really has presented a glorious "pageant of blessings" for us that is completely and totally beyond our grandest imagination. I feel blessed when I am aware of the astonishing improbability of me even being here, on a planet the perfect distance from the sun, and you know the rest.

I can taste grace when I remember that, as the German Ecologist turned theologian Legal Rue says, "If this delicate imbalance had varied by a factor as small as one part in a billion, then we would not be here."

As one UU colleague of mine (whose name sadly got lost in my notes) compared the way we rest in the universe to the way waves rest in the ocean—the ocean taking care of each wave does not demand that the wave believe anything about the ocean. And, the truth is we are, as weak as a wave on the ocean. And in this embodied form, vulnerable and special.

Whether grace is a purely psychological revelation or release interpreted theologically, or grace really describes the hand of God, or as I like to think of it, some magic strings in the way the world is constructed get plucked, or whatever, grace is amazing, and this thing called grace will—hell it does—save people's bacon in surprising way and in doing make them better people.

Like everything truly spiritual, the experience, when you get it, does not naturally come with an answer as to why or where. It just comes, and it doesn't even do that reliably, or always noticeably. And that is a great, perplexing and fun mystery.

However, as we approach another season of "Dancing with the Stars" we will all be looking for that extra hard to define grace in the way someone moves. Your homework is to watch them, look for grace and flow. Beyond the high leg kicks and quick turns see if you can find grace. Can we do that same thing in the way we live?

If you want to practice grace, as one of our own here advises, you can go outside and look at the sun, and the trees, the way the wind blows and take it in and feel that grateful feeling. You can feel the grace from within from the beauty around me and just say "Thank You."

Amen.