

**“Amazing Grace: A Meditation on a Song and a Movie”**  
**Rev. Dr. Arvid Straube**  
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There is an amazing story behind the beloved song “Amazing Grace”. The man who penned the words in the 1700’s, John Newton, used to be a slave ship captain, someone who treated human beings like cargo. When he was caught in a storm off the coast of Africa and almost died, he had a change of heart. He repented his former profession. It haunted him for the rest of his life, all the sufferings that he had caused, and he was converted to Christianity. He became a minister, and he wrote the words to “Amazing Grace”, and when he said “. . . sav’d a wretch like me” he was only being accurate and descriptive. “I once was Blind, and now, I see”, the irony was that he ended his life physically blind.

In his parish was a young boy, son of a wealthy merchant, very religious, named William Wilberforce. John Newton inspired Wilberforce toward the abolitionist cause and at the age of 21 Wilberforce was elected to the British Parliament. That’s where the movie “Amazing Grace”, which I highly recommend to you, begins.

Wilberforce was inspired towards the abolitionist cause by an ex-slave named Olaudah Equiano, who wrote a best selling book about his experiences in slavery. William Wilberforce introduced a bill into Parliament to end slavery in Britain. It took 20 years for that Bill to pass, but it did pass in 1807. Another Bill passed outlawing slavery in all of the British Colonies, the whole British Empire in 1823, decades before our Civil War freed the slaves.

And during that time, Wilberforce was struggling with a very painful illness. He had colitis. There weren’t very many good treatments for that, so he took a common patent

medicine which is really opium, and then he had to struggle with that addiction. And through that whole thing he never gave up.

I was inspired by this movie in a lot of different ways. It is really a beautiful movie. It is critically acclaimed as well, and usually these “do good” movies don’t go over that well with our cynical critics, but this one did. It is beautifully written, beautifully acted, beautifully filmed.

It inspired me along these lines. First of all, it inspired me about what it has to teach those of us who are dedicated to a more just and compassionate world, who do try to work on changing the world for the better. And there are several lessons that come from that movie and the life of William Wilberforce and his friends and allies, and the first is “Persistence”. You know through Parliamentary tricks, that Bill almost passed, and then didn’t, died on the floor through betrayals, and then because of the money and interest, you know having financial stake in slavery, it would not pass and be defeated by large margins yet again. And Wilberforce never gave up. He created alliances with corrupt politicians to get the Bill passed. So that’s the first thing.

He almost did give up, but the second thing was, if we are to do this work of social change we need allies, and we need to find them wherever we can. So first of all, he had this rag-tag group of allies, of Quakers, and Unitarians, and Evangelicals and renegades from the established church and ex-slaves and whenever he was ready to give up, they held him up and inspired him, and he kept going with that help. So we need allies, we don’t, and can’t do this work alone. As human beings there are times when we will despair, and we can help each other keep our eyes on the goal again. But the most important element that Wilberforce had in his battle against slavery and Britain and the British Empire was faith. Faith, it was

based on his view of God's will, it was based on his view of what the moral universe demands of us and that's what kept him going and inspired him. It came from a depth of spirituality, nurtured by his childhood minister, John Newton and his encouraging example, nurtured by his other faithful friends of many traditions, nurtured by prayer and study, it was by faith. So rent the movie, when it comes.

You know this story made me think about something else as well, and that is how well our American society has faced up to the great suffering that slavery represents in our history. You know those slavers who treated their human cargo as if they weren't human, had figured out exactly how many human beings could die on the journey to make the most profit, to keep the food bill down. And that was just the cost of doing business when human corpses were thrown overboard. And arriving to the colonies and the United States, half starved, beaten, sore from the shackles, then endured centuries of bondage, brutal beatings, rape and lack of dignity in their conditions of living. And when slavery ended the indignity continued through institutionalized and lawful discrimination.

I hear some white people say, "That's history, you know we're over that and black people ought to get over that, and just get on with it." We should look to the future. Let me tell you something, we are not over it as a country. We are not over slavery. If you think that racism doesn't exist anymore, if you think that discrimination doesn't exist anymore, if you think we are not struggling with a legacy, a direct legacy of what slavery has done to all of us, socially, psychologically, and spiritually, you're wrong. We haven't dealt with this. So, all you white folks, am not I telling you to feel guilty. I don't feel guilty. I'm not guilty. I'm grieving. I'm grieving that we have not yet reached the promise that our founders have set before us. I'm grieving that people are still suffering from discrimination and poverty and

family disruption because of the legacy of slavery. I'm grieving because we will not face the pain of our past so that we can go forward confidently into our future. I'm grieving that we have not owned what has happened and is happening today.

You know P. L. Travers who wrote *Mary Poppins* said that guilt is a cheap punishment that we give ourselves for not doing something that we are responsible for. So maybe guilt isn't the way to go here, maybe facing the truth is. You know our racial problems are complicated in our society. Well meaning people vehemently espouse different answers to this problem, there are competing analyzes, social, political, sociological. There is some psychological research now that is shedding some light into racisms and xenophobia what's quite interesting.

And there is one dimension that isn't mentioned much, which I think is the most important one, especially after seeing this film and especially after hearing our UUA President, William Sinkford from this pulpit on Martin Luther King Sunday talking about not facing up to the spiritual legacy of slavery. We need to do what the wisdom traditions of humanity have prescribed for us when we are not in right relations. We need to repent and atone.

Now let's look at these traditional, theological terms. There really aren't any other words for them. But what repent actually means is to turn around, to face a different direction, to change your prospective, literally it means going from blindness, willful denial, not looking, not seeing our past and our present to opening our eyes and changing our attitude and moving in another direction. That's repentance, literally to turn around.

And then atonement comes next, at one meant. What does it take to be one, to find our common humanity, to make amends, to face the truth. That's what we need to do. We

haven't faced the whole horror of slavery. We have not as a Nation, yet had anything close to the equivalent of Desmond Tutu's, Truth and Reconciliation Commission, now doing its work in South Africa.

There are other stories that do need to be told and acknowledged here, and I'm not going to tell them today. The stories about the treatment of the ancestors of other non-European Americans, like the genocide of the American Indians, land seizures from indigenous Mexicans, continued mistreatment of immigrants from Latin America, the exploitation of Asian immigrants and denial of citizenship for them because of their racial background until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These stories need acknowledgment, but today we need to stick to the story of slavery and its legacy for us.

As individual human beings we cannot be spiritually whole while we are denying our history. If we are to be spiritually whole as individual people we need to look back on our past to see our wounds clearly, to heal them with compassion and truth telling. We need to take the whole of our experience and history into ourselves and reconcile. We need to face up to the way that we have hurt ourselves and others. Seek forgiveness, and forgive ourselves. We need to do that as people, individuals, if we are to be whole. And that is what we need to do as a country as well, as America. This is the only nation in the world that was founded not on a language, or ethnic, or colonial basis, but on the basis of spiritual ideals. Our founders founded this Nation on a set of principles that were intended to create the conditions for human beings to reach their potential. Our founders had a vision of a society that would allow and protect the ability of human beings to grow in wisdom, to transform, to reach their full humanity. And while their vision was flawed, it is still the vision that drives us today. It is the vision along with faith that drove the civil rights

movement, and when that faith was lost the movement became less effective. As Jacob Needleman puts it, in his wonderful book “The American Soul”, in his chapter on Fredrick Douglas “Look at yourself” says Douglas to America. “Look at what you are and measure it against what you imagine you are, and what your fathers, that is your conscience tells you, you must be. Be shocked America, be stunned, be overwhelmed by what you see and feel at the center of your being the purifying fire of remorse. Douglas is calling for the rarest of movements a human being can make, a fusion of inner opening and decisive outer action. Feel the truth of what you are America and at the same moment risk yourself for what you know is right or true.”

So the next moment in our spiritual journey as a nation founded on belief in humanity is to open ourselves inwardly. There are some hopeful signs. Whereas only about a decade ago there was a big boycott of the State of South Carolina because that legislature refused to haul down the symbol of slavery and oppression from the State capital of the Confederate Flag saying instead it was heritage and pride, now, and believe me, if you have lived in the South, you know how important and what a big deal this is. Two state legislatures by large margins, Virginia and North Carolina have passed bills, apologizing for slavery, and as a state government taking responsibility for it. That is a hopeful sign. That is a big deal. That is a shift. And Don Imus got fired for thoughtless and racist statements. And people say his free speech was violated, I tell you we own the airways, the public does. Have we forgotten that? The fact is that he’d been getting away for years with racial and ethnic slurs, and people kept coming back in the show and getting insulted because you know they had some power, well this time Imus attacked some people who didn’t have power, young women who were playing their hearts out, and studying their hearts out and had great hopes for their

future and they made it very clear what the story was when they had their press conference and showed their integrity and their courage and their moral superiority. And so now, finally Imus had to pay a price, and that's a good thing and a good sign. And even though, because of racially inspired threats, Barack Obama has had to take a secret service detail this early in the campaign, the fact is that there is a viable and serious African-American candidate for President today and that is a good sign. Grace might be amazing, but it is not cheap. We've been in denial because the past has been painful; it's really hard to look at what human beings have done to other human beings, what some of our ancestors have done to some of our ancestors, to really face that. We need to face it, we need to make amends, and we need to look at some ideas like reparation. There was an attempt to do that in Unitarian Universalist history, where the Unitarian Universalist Association in 1968 voted to give a lot of money for development in the black community to some African-American Unitarian Universalists. Well, the UUA almost went bankrupt, the money had to be pulled back, there was a lot of acrimony and it is a long and complicated story. There were some other important stories in our history we need learn from and face. In fact, we will be the test congregation for a new adult curriculum called "Building the World We Dream About". We can learn about this. It is based on the Welcoming Congregation, which allowed our Congregations to be open and accepting in a new way towards gays, lesbians, bi-sexual and transgender people. Slavery and legal discrimination has left a legacy of poverty and social destruction and things are not okay now. We need to face it, individually, but most importantly as a society, a commonwealth, a beloved community, a Nation. The problems of racism, I firmly believe, won't be solved without a spiritual approach of repentance and atonement.

We're about to embark on a ritual of atonement. If the words which we are about to utter represent a clear and inner conviction, it can be a very powerful moment for us. If they are just words, they are cheap grace and they have no magic. But if they do, look at the work we have to do. And look at what the ideal of America is calling us to do, and look at what the World needs, and then we can forgive ourselves and each other and begin again in love.