

WISDOM CIRCLE JANUARY 2013

Encounters with Grace

Grace that moment of gratitude before eating a meal. Grace, the actions of a dancer moving across stage. Grace, “that which saved a wretch like me.” Grace, an experience of unexplainable goodness and holiness.

For Unitarian Universalists, grace can be a challenging concept. As Rev. Tom Owen-Tolle explains, “grace is a blessing beyond our grasp and unnerving, because grace is beyond our achievement. To complicate matters, grace appears too mystical for our rational side and too passive for our activist bent.” (*Theology Ablaze* 126). Many UUs are skeptical about grace – what does it mean, where does it come from, what is its purpose?

The concept of grace originated in the Christian tradition. It has complex associations for many today. As inheritors of Universalism, we are called to remember, and remind others, that we are held by a love that will not let us go. We are marked not by original sin, but by original blessing.

This notion of grace, however, is distinct from *providence* – a concept that God grants/does things for humanity that we don’t deserve. Many people struggle with what it means to “deserve” love or compassion. An important question might be in this situation: Do we have to consider ourselves undeserving to acknowledge grace?

Leslie Jarbonski, a Unitarian Universalist Jewish chaplain, writes about how the closest term to Grace in the Hebrew scriptures is *chesed*. Chesed has been translated to mean loving-kindness, or a covenant of love. Chesed is described as a fountain flowing into human vessels, vessels that happen to have holes in them. As human vessels, we are unable to hold all of that goodness and love, and it overflows around us.

Acknowledging grace requires embracing humility. Grace is simultaneously where we recognize our limits as human agents in the universe and where we encounter benevolence beyond our capacities. Grace enters through the heart, not through the intellect.

Grace is a very prevalent theme in music, with Amazing Grace being one of the most well-known songs in the US. Jonathan Aitken, a biographer of John Newton, the author of Amazing Grace, estimates that it is performed about 10 million times annually. The song’s popularity reflects the longing among people for an assurance of redemption and love. In more recent times, grace has been utilized by singer songwriter, Paul Simon, in another well-loved song, Graceland. A song that uses traveling South as a metaphor for a spiritual journey, Paul Simon sings,

For reasons I cannot explain
There's some part of me wants to see
Graceland
And I may be advised to defend
Every love, every ending
Or maybe there's no obligations now
Maybe I've a reason to believe
We all will be received
In Graceland

Grace is perhaps most describable and accessible in nature and art forms. The majesty of a redwood grove. A flock of flamingo balancing in the water. The elegance of a dancer. The shape of a sculpture. It is in these moments of appreciating the sheer beauty and blessing of life that grace is present.

SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

Life is full of unexpected events. How one responds to life, to all the unexpected events, is a spiritual task. Personally, I believe in a god who loves surprises. God is a term to me that is the creative life-sustaining energy of the universe. Grace is God's sweet surprises. Perhaps, almost like a surprise birthday party, this surprise nature is what makes grace so meaningful and powerful.

During your day, note two or three unexpectedly wonderful events or blessings. Later, reflect on these things with a loved one or friend.

QUESTIONS TO WRESTLE WITH

1. What images come to mind when you hear the word grace? What sounds?
2. When in your life have you experienced an unexplainable wonderful event?
3. How is *grace* different from or similar to *providence* in your theology?

WISE WORDS

I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief... For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Wendell Berry

To hit bottom is to fall from grace.

Douglas Horton

Christian, Jew, Muslim, shaman, Zoroastrian, stone, ground, mountain, river, each has a secret way of being with the mystery, unique and not to be judged.

Rumi

I am not fussy about forms or spiritual geography. Whether help comes the outside or inside, by praying or willing, it is not important. What is important is that help can come!

Greta Crosby

The miracle is not that we do this work, but that we are happy to do it.

Mother Teresa

To speak of grace is to say that our lives are finally not our own, that we're not only recipients of an existence we didn't create but also throughout our whole earthly travels we're granted gifts we don't deserve.

Rev. Tom Owen-Tolle

Grace is the beauty of form under the influence of freedom.

Friedrich Schiller

I do not at all understand the mystery of grace - only that it meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us.

Anne Lamott

Grace is available for each of us every day - our spiritual daily bread - but we've got to remember to ask for it with a grateful heart and not worry about whether there will be enough for tomorrow.

Sarah Ban Breathnach

Rain is grace; rain is the sky descending to the earth; without rain, there would be no life.

John Updike

As a surgeon you have to have a controlled arrogance. If it's uncontrolled, you kill people, but you have to be pretty arrogant to saw through a person's chest, take out their heart and believe you can fix it. Then, when you succeed and the patient survives, you pray, because it's only by the grace of God that you get there.

Mehmet Oz

For me, every hour is grace.

Elie Wiesel

I'm becoming more and more myself with time. I guess that's what grace is. The refinement of your soul through time.

Jewel