

If Grace is True
Reflections by Maryann Wiborg, Church Member
Sermon by Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska
Unitarian Universalist Church of Minnetonka
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Reflection One

Maryann Wiborg, Church Member

Good morning, my name is MaryAnn Wiborg. I am privileged to have been a member of this congregation for four years. I am presenting the following reflection, following one of the seven Unitarian principles by participating in a free and (hopefully) responsible search for truth and meaning.

A friend of mine once remarked that it was interesting to him how many times people use words that they could not - if challenged – accurately define. I believe that this is true of the word GRACE. I have always been fascinated by the word –even the sound of the word is beautiful - but the definition can be somewhat illusive and highly subjective. How would you define it? Surely there must be an objective meaning.

Merriam-Webster provides eight definitions that move from the mundane to the sublime. Grace can mean something as simple as a sense of propriety, a musical trill, a short prayer before a meal, three sister Greek goddesses, a title or reference for a duke, a duchess or an archbishop, or a charming or attractive trait or characteristic.

Then it gets better. Grace can mean approval or favor – as when you are in someone’s good graces – or an act of kindness, courtesy or clemency. It can be a reprieve, as in that period when your library books really are overdue but you won’t have to pay a fine just yet. It can be a special favor or a privilege; the archaic definition means mercy or pardon.

And then it gets great.....because Merriam Webster says that grace its primary meaning - is an unmerited divine assistance. I like all three of those words. Who can’t use assistance? Who can’t use divine assistance (and isn’t assistance almost always divine)? And who doesn’t want to think – to hope, to pray – that we can receive divine assistance even when we don’t deserve it? Especially when we don’t deserve it!

As a Unitarian Universalist, I believe that that I can learn from a direct experience of a transcending mystery and wonder. In the case of grace, I am proposing the following: I may not know the textbook definition of grace – or the dogmatic or traditional religious meaning - but I do recognize grace when it touches my life. And I am guessing that you do as well.

Reflection Two

Maryann Wiborg, Church Member

I have experienced grace in my life.

I have two children. They are adults now but there was that moment – many of you may recall a similar one – when the newly arrived baby is put in your arms. You inspect this small package with its tiny expressive face and the wildly flailing limbs and you think: there is nothing that I have done in my life to deserve this miracle. This baby is mine by grace.

On another part of the circle of life, I experienced grace when my mother held on until my brother and sister and I could be with her as she took her last long breath. In the following days, I knew with certainty that despite my many failings as a daughter – the missed opportunities, the regretted words – my mother loved and forgave me. More importantly, I knew that SHE also knew that I loved her. I felt her presence as she existed on a plane that I was able to touch with my heart. So while I was grieving those days of her death and funeral, I was also rejoicing. I was walking in grace.

My last reflection on grace is that it can also be found in the mundane. Let's face it: work frequently fits that definition. I was a beneficiary of a moment of grace at work twenty years ago that I'll never forget. I was working for a telecommunications company and had completed a project that involved many months of efforts installing a phone system in a large law firm in downtown Minneapolis.

One Saturday night not long after the installation was completed, I was settling in to watch the World Series. My son was a baby and he was sleeping – yay! I didn't care who won the game – the Twins weren't in it – but I was looking forward to one of my favorite pastimes when the phone rang. It was a co-worker and he sounded a little tense. He told me that he had done a hardware upgrade on the phone system at the law firm and had experienced some 'difficulties.' He asked if I would be willing to go in the next day – this was before remote access was common – and just 'tool around' the software system a little bit and ensure that everything looked okay. I reluctantly agreed.

Early the next afternoon I headed to downtown Minneapolis. When I got into the equipment room and logged into the system, my heart immediately began to pound. There was not one bit of working software in the system. There was no trace of the 700+ phones and their multitudes of features, there were no routing tables, there were no software instructions at all. What this meant in practical terms was that unless we could reload the software from a tape, the entire system would need to be rebuilt. No rebuild, no dial tone come Monday morning. Three hundred lawyers unable to make or receive calls: you get the picture.

I called the technician who had contacted me the night before and now I got the real story: he admitted that he had not done a tape back-up before proceeding AND that the tape back-up he then retrieved from storage was corrupted and could not be used. Since he did not know how to rebuild the software, it defaulted to me. I immediately started to put out calls for help but being pre-cell phone times, I wasn't able to reach anybody. I called my patient and sweet customer contact and she joined me. We sat in the cold and noisy computer equipment room and rebuilt every phone, every forwarding instruction, and every feature for 700 phones. On breaks I continued to make increasingly desperate calls to co-workers but to no avail.

In the late evening, my customer went home as she couldn't provide any more assistance to me. What remained to be built was that part of the software that I was not familiar with, the routing tables. Without that part of the program, the lawyers would be able to make or receive internal calls only. I was not out of the woods. By this time I was so tired that I could barely function.

In an act of desperation, I called the vendor technical support line that is answered in Plano, Texas. Why was that an act of desperation? The function of the vendor technical support was to answer specific questions. I didn't even technically have the right to call this center as I was not a licensed technician and didn't have the required vendor-awarded certification. This particular vendor made sure that the pecking order was understood and reinforced and in this scenario, I was low low low. But what choice did I have?

The 800 number was answered by a man who identified himself as “Buddy.” Despite the affably canine name, Buddy sounded anything but friendly. In fact, he sounded just like I expected him to: cold, distant, imperial. I don’t remember what I said or how I said it. I was completely at his mercy. He had every right to decline to assist and I fully expected him to do so.

But after an uncomfortable silence, what Buddy said to me was – “You sound tired.” I said that I was. He said – “You sound scared.” I assured him that he was correct. He told me that this is what is going to happen: that he was going to modem in to the system and that he would build the routing tables. “They won’t be fancy, they will be simple. You can have somebody make them fancy tomorrow.” He said that it would take him a couple of hours, more if he was interrupted by other customer calls. He told me that I should go get something hot to eat and come back in an hour, that he would call me when he was done and we could test the phones together.

Now the tears came. Between blowing my nose and gulps for air, I asked him if this couldn’t get him in trouble. He said that maybe it would, maybe it wouldn’t but in either case, I shouldn’t worry about it. A few hours later we were wrapping up and I was trying to think of how I could thank this man. When I tried to do so, he told me to shut up and go get some sleep. He pointed out that we had just rebuilt a phone system from scratch and that 300 lawyers were going to be using it tomorrow: maybe I better get a good night’s sleep.

By the way, the co-worker who had made the mistake and only reluctantly owned up to it got in absolutely no trouble whatsoever. And I received no special recognition. I didn’t care. I felt so lucky. I could see then – and I remember now – that grace can visit you anywhere, anytime, even in a drafty and sterile computer equipment room. It can even have a Texas twang.

Recorded Music

IF GRACE IS TRUE

*words and music by Neal Hagberg
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If grace is true, God will save you
And all the Jews, and Hitler, too
Those with an overflowing cup
And those who want to blow us up

All little children will get in
With those who stole their innocence
Who once were children just like them
And will be children once again

But we know grace is not fair
And that is something we can’t bear
So we take eternal truth
And snuff it out that’s what we do

Replace it with a temporal flame
One that we control and tame

And here’s the rub, though we have stayed
And say we’ve kept the narrow way
And kept the unclean ones away
God welcomes us in anyway

If grace is true

If Grace is True Sermon by Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska

One of the great debates in religion, particularly Christianity, is whether humans are saved by grace or saved by deeds. Support exists in the Christian scriptures for both positions. In a letter by the apostle James he writes, “Dear brothers, what is the use of saying that you have faith and are Christians if you aren’t proving it by helping others? ...Faith that doesn’t show itself by good works is no faith at all – it is dead and useless.” Yet, in the apostle Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, he writes, “For grace are you saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; [grace] is the gift of God, not of works, lest any person should boast.”

Perhaps it is not surprising that historically the Unitarians – and most of the authentic social justice movements of Western Christianity – were influenced and motivated by the belief in being saved by good deeds. In our own tradition, what is now called the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee originated with the Unitarian denomination during World War II. The Universalists also engaged in social justice work, but their theology was one of grace and eventually became embodied in their name. Universalists believed that humans were inherently good, that hell did not exist, that God was benevolent, and that ultimately, everyone was saved – that is, universal salvation. As Neal Hagberg sings, “If grace is true than God will save you, / and all the Jews and Hitler too.”

As modern Unitarian Universalists, we do not give much thought or attention to the issue of salvation. Many UUs do not believe in an afterlife, and if we do, it is not as important as the lives we live each day, and not as important as the needs of people in this world, here and now. For most UUs, the notion of “heaven” and “hell” are not about what some eternal entity has created for us after we die, but are words that articulate the quality of the lives we live or create in this world, here and now.

I believe “salvation” is real, but for me, it describes the quality of life based on the quality of individual relationship with the world. Personally, I am allured more by the notion of salvation by good deeds than by grace. Yet I am haunted by an ever-growing recognition of the fact that I do not control much in this vast universe. From the movement of planets to presidential elections to the behavior of my child to the way my wife squeezes the tube of toothpaste, there’s not much I am able to control. And if I am not in control, that means I am dependant on an awful lot of grace from other people and from the universe.

One advantage to having a thoughtful wife who also grew up with a father who was a minister, is that she provides me with some wonderful insights. So one day this past week as we were taking our son Parker for a walk, I asked her what she would like to hear about grace. Immediately she said, “That I am already perfect so I don’t need grace!” So I said, “Let me reframe the question...”

Well, we ended up talking for a while about personal grace, the grace that we extend to, or withhold from, ourselves. It seems to me that the decision, or the ability, to extend grace is based on our awareness of our relationships. When we are unwilling or unable to extend grace, we are focused solely on our own ego, our own needs, fear, anger, pain, or resentment. The context in which we are behaving is too small. A moment of grace occurs when we are able to recognize the small context we’ve been acting in, and then in response, enlarge the context.

For example, in traffic we may be quick to yell at other drivers. But when we enlarge the context and imagine a possible emergency in the life of the other driver, a moment of grace occurs. Or we may hate ourselves because we tell ourselves we are “too fat” or we’re “always a

failure.” But when we enlarge the context we may discover ways that our parents raised us without grace or ways that life experiences ground us into the dirt. If we can enlarge the context, we may discover that our body size is normal and that, in fact, there are plenty of times we do things well. In that discovery, a moment of grace occurs.

In her reflection, Maryann said that the primary dictionary definition of grace was “unmerited divine assistance.” We could spend a lot of time debating what “divine” might mean to each of us. But at the moment, I am more interested in the word “unmerited.”

Most of the time, we tend to move through life interacting with the world through a veil. The veil provides us with an illusion that we control of our lives. It is the illusion that allows us to believe if we work hard enough for 65 years, we will have a financially secure and emotionally fulfilling retirement; it is an illusion that allows us to believe good people do not get hurt or die young; it is an illusion that allows us to create balance sheets – money paid for goods or services rendered, immortal reward for mortal good behavior.

Rabbi Harold Kushner once wrote a book called, “When Bad Things Happen to Good People.” The book is a personal narrative about the death of his son at age 13, and how the Rabbi came to terms with a loving God in a chaotic universe. When it comes to grace, though, someone could just as easily write a book called, “When Good Things Happen to Bad People.” When things go wrong or turn painful, we often quickly begin to ask “why me?” But consider the chain of events – none of which were under our control at all – that it took for us to exist in the first place: a big bang, exploding stars spewing chunks of rock into orbit around them, one-celled carbon based existence arising from primordial swamps, the trial and error through millennia of crawling, walking, hopping, jumping, flying, swimming life forms, life form spawning life form, each next surviving generation a true miracle. What amazes me is not that sometimes people get hurt without reason or die early, but that we even exist at all. I am amazed by the grace of our existence. “Unmerited divine assistance.” If evolution isn’t some form of unmerited divine assistance, than I don’t know what is.

For me, at least part of the meaning of grace is wrapped up in an intentional recognition – a submission of my will to the workings of the universe – that just about everything, except for most of my own actions, are beyond my control. One of the most visceral examples of grace I can imagine occurs each morning when we see the sun rise. The sun doesn’t rise only on the people who have worked the hardest, or saved the most money, contributed the most to society, loved the most people, or only on those who follow the teachings of Mohammed or Moses, or those who have been saved by their belief in Jesus Christ. Whether we like it or not, the sun also rises and shines on everyone, even murderers, thieves and abusers.

Whether we like it or not, good things do happen to bad people. Whether we like it or not, gravity holds all of us – liberals and conservatives, peacemakers, warmongers, racists, psychopaths, natives and invaders, young and old – on to this chunk of rock. We all get to feel the sun and breathe the air.

We humans, especially in Western culture, love our balance sheets. But whether we like it or not, grace – like illness and early death – is not fair. If grace is true, then grace, like God, is not something we can put in a box and make it behave the way we want it to.

For me, grace is that moment when the veil is lifted, and for a few moments we genuinely see that we are not in control, and yet – through no effort or work of our own – we also experience being accepted in that moment for exactly who we are: just one more stumbling human doing the best we can with what we’ve got.

Grace can turn us around. Grace can fill us with grateful humility. Grace can change our lives and set us in a new direction. When I was in 10th grade I went with my father to see Arlo Guthrie in concert for the first time. At the end of the concert, while playing his piano, Arlo Guthrie began telling the story of a ship captain by the name of John Newton. John Newton lived many years ago and made his living as a slave trader. On one trip he went over to Africa and filled his ship with human cargo and began sailing for the shores of the United States. Halfway across the ocean he was struck by the larger context of how wrong his work was. Right then and there, as Arlo Guthrie tells it, this ship captain turned his ship around and sailed back to Africa, setting all the slaves free when he got there. After that experience, Captain John Newton sat down and wrote the words to “Amazing Grace.”

I am amazed by the grace of our existence, by the sunrise, by oxygen. It is completely beyond our control, and when we recognize it, we are transformed.