

Amazing Grace
Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Readings

“Variation on a Theme by Rilke”
by Denise Levertov

A certain day became a presence to me;
there it was, confronting me – a sky, air, light:
a being. And before it started to descend
from the height of noon, it leaned over
and struck my shoulder as if with
the flat of a sword, granting me
honor and a task. The day’s blow
rang out, metallic – or it was I, a bell awakened,
and what I heard was my whole self
saying and singing what it knew: *I can*.

from *Immortal Diamond* by Richard Rohr

Grace is what God does to keep all things God has made in love and alive—forever.
Grace is not something God gives; grace is who God *is*. If we are to believe the
primary witnesses, an unexplainable goodness is at work in the universe. (Some of
us call this phenomenon God, but the word is not necessary. In fact, sometimes it
gets in the way of the experience, because too many have named God something
other than grace.)

Sermon

As I pondered the word “grace” this week, I realized how many ways it can be
used – from grace in a dancer to the grace of forgiveness and much else.

In music, for example, we have what are called “grace notes.” As the musicians
among us know, a grace note is sort of an add-on to the basic melody, a little extra, a
musical ornament.

But just as it is better to experience grace than to talk about it, it is also better to
experience grace *notes* than to talk about them.

So, listen to this passage, played twice (by our guest soloist Sarah) – the first time
without grace notes and the second time with grace notes.

Well, the general meaning of “grace” as I understand it has to do with anything
that is a free gift, undeserved, unmerited, sometimes coming out of the blue. A “grace
note” is somehow in that category – unnecessary to the flow of the music, but a lovely
free addition.

And just as music would be a little less interesting without grace notes, so would
our lives be less interesting, even less worth living, without moments and times of grace,

experiences of beauty and love that come unbidden and undeserved, reminding us that life itself came to us through our parents (most directly of course through our mothers – Happy Mothers Day!) as free gift.

Further, I don't know about you, but when I experience the free giftedness – whether of a moment or of life itself – I'm able to relax a bit more into the moment, into life, feeling for a while anyway more open-hearted, less anxious or worried about... well, whatever.

The sort of experience I'm talking about is sometimes quite simple, we might even say mundane... but even so, wonderful, beautiful... if we're paying attention. (Paying attention being part of our part of the bargain...)

Simple example: At those times of year when the end of my morning run concludes just as the sun is rising, I'll marvel to myself: Free show! Every day! What a gift!

Words which, more than naming the fact of the matter, the reality that I had nothing to do with making the sun to rise and certainly had done nothing to merit such extraordinary ordinary beauty... words which name my *experience*, which is an experience of a small grace... which then morphs into gratitude: Grace... gracias.

To put it in an utterly inarticulate way, it is what I would call an "ahhh" experience. Sort of: "Oh, this is how things are! Thank you for the reminder!"

Such an experience can be even more powerful if it follows one or another sort of hard or sad time. Which also is sometimes pretty simple.

For example:

Decades ago, when we were living in the Bay Area while I attended seminary, I contracted a truly miserable case of poison oak. You don't want me to describe it any further, other than to say it's worse than poison ivy. Well, I remember the misery, but I also remember equally vividly, maybe even more vividly, my first day outside mostly free of the itching and blistering... I recall so clearly the experience of this particular beautiful day in Berkeley, walking near my school, views of San Francisco Bay, everything crystal clear as if it was the first time I'd been bathed in sunlight and a warm breeze, or as if it was the very first day. Waking up to life as if for the first time.

Grace!

It wasn't a feeling I had to force; that's not in fact how it works. It was just my response to the free gift of a beautiful morning following days inside feeling miserable (did I mention I had been miserable?).

This said, I don't want to gloss over an important point here: I did play a small part in enabling, shall we say, this moment of grace. I did this simply enough by putting myself in a place where I might be more likely to be graced with such an awakening. In other words, I went outside on a beautiful morning in a beautiful place.

I think that's how it sometimes, maybe always, works. We can't force grace. But we can create conditions or remove obstacles. Lift up our heads to a beautiful day, get outside when the sun is shining. Nature does the rest.

Now, there are of course far worse times than a rainy day or a poison oak rash. The rain will end, and the rash will, after all, go away all on its own, or with a little help from warm baths and medication.

Have you, for example, ever had the experience of having done something wrong, said something hurtful, been unkind or worse... and the knowledge of your deed has brought you to a state of genuine wretchedness?

This was the experience that John Newton had which led to his composing "Amazing Grace." You may know the story. Newton had been involved in the slave

trade, then had a Christian conversion experience, realized the evil he had been doing, left the slave trade, eventually working actively as an abolitionist.

“Grace” as he experienced it really had saved a “wretch.”

I expect that many of us, in a matter small or large, have had what amounts to a somewhat similar experience at one time or another (doesn’t have to be Christian conversion, but the essence is the same): Moving from our personal acknowledgement of our wrongdoing, feeling wretched, and then finally, agonizing, gone to the person we’ve wronged or if that was not possible gone to a friend or loved one who we trust, but fear would think the less of us... yet even so confessed... and then (here’s the grace) find we’ve been understood... even more: discovered we are still loved?

I’ve had this experience. I well remember confessing as a child to my parents what felt to me to have been something terrible I had done – and guess what: They still loved me!

This was the experience of the son in Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son: The son goes off and squanders the advance he’d asked for of his inheritance, squanders it in high living, becomes in fact wretched, starving, barely surviving... then decides to return to the father who in good faith had given him this advance, returns and begs to at least be treated as well as his father’s servants... only to be (utterly unexpected, utterly undeserved) welcomed by his father with open arms and love and a big celebration, for “my son who was as if dead is now alive.”

A parent’s love transcending the imperfections, the mistakes, the sins, of the child, even the child grown into an adult who should have known better.

Now... we know life doesn’t and for one reason or another cannot always work this way. But sometimes it does.

Why? Because love *is* bigger, far bigger, infinitely bigger, than our imperfections by whatever name we call them: mistakes or sins. Love holds it all, holds us all, we might even say *is* all.

And please notice this from the stories I’ve shared: There are occasions when we have the power to bestow grace on one another, with understanding and forgiveness... and love.

You might say at such times we are channeling the larger grace in which we live and move and have our being. I think this is one way of understanding what Richard Rohr was saying in the second reading: Affirming that maybe “grace” is another name for “God” – “God” after all not the name of that reality which transcends all names, but one of whose names might indeed be Grace, which we can understand as love in action.

Now, I expect I don’t need to remind you that there are many ways and reasons to feel like a wretch, from the relatively trivial to the quite serious or profound. Which means there are many sorts of occasions, small and large, on which to feel in need of something we could call grace.

But whatever the occasion, the danger for us when we are feeling wretched – whether because we’ve done something wrong or because we are grieving or because we are ill or just a little down, or for whatever reason – the danger is that we will turn inward, not reach out and not go out, not do our part.

For though, yes, sometimes our spirit needs alone time... if the inward turn goes on too long we might just sink deeper in the mire.

So I return to the idea that though we cannot *force* grace, cannot *make* ourselves feel more alive, more connected, more loved... we can remove obstacles to grace, to aliveness... could be as simple as looking up on a beautiful day... might be asking for help... might be putting ourselves in the presence of someone we trust as we own up to something we've done. Might take the form of meditation or prayer or other spiritual practice.

But whatever we do to put ourselves in the path of grace, when grace comes, a hard heart has a better chance of becoming a softer heart, a broken heart has a better chance of becoming an open heart, a heart open once again to beauty and love and to the reality that we are not alone.

For this waking up – whether on a sunny morning after the rain or in the midst of forgiveness or when helped along the way in the midst of grief...? This waking up, it seems to me, is to the reality that yes, we are individuals, maybe sometimes feeling broken and inadequate, even wretched... but we are and have never stopped being part of one fabric of life, in religious language all children of God... in any case, surely *not* alone.

Which is precisely how grace, in the words of the hymn, can see us through dangers, toils, and snares, bringing us safely home.

Held by the holy by whatever name, source of our lives, eternal love, manifest through our hands and hearts, through our words and deeds, or manifest in the solace of nature's beauty.

Well, I suppose this sermon has been as much as anything an invitation for each of us to reflect on the moments and times of grace in our own lives, whether moments small and almost daily or times large and transformative, turning points in our lives – in any case, moments and times when we've experienced the free gift of beauty, of life, of forgiveness, of love... followed by gratitude... then followed by a natural sharing of the gifts, the graces, we can bestow on others.

So may it be.