

Something Opens Our Wings
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Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley
The Rev. Judy Welles©; Kathy Ellis, Worship Associate

Invitation to Worship

“What did I do to deserve this?”

Kathy Ellis

In my counseling office, I have often heard people ask, “What did I do to deserve this?” **This** is always a difficult or negative experience: illness, injury, or significant loss. Often, the individual continues, “I’m a good person, why has this happened? I don’t deserve this.”

I agree – she or he didn’t deserve it. You haven’t deserved your misfortunes or tragedies either. They are simply part of life.

Sometimes, they ask again, “what did I do to deserve this?” They may explore this more, looking for past misdeeds or things that they feel ashamed or guilty about. But at some point, I will say “I don’t think that you did anything to deserve **this**. I don’t believe that you are being punished. Everyone has difficult experiences and losses in this life.” Depending on the person, I may even go a little farther and say, “No, I really don’t believe that ‘everything happens for a reason’ or that there is some specific lesson for you to learn.”

But what I **don’t** say to my clients, although I believe it, is that we don’t **deserve** all of our wonderful life experiences either. We don’t deserve life, health, love and joy.

Deserving is about earning. It’s about action. It’s about doing. Many of us, as mostly middle class, mostly white, and mostly American, get way too invested in doing, producing, earning, meriting.

How could we ever earn the gift of life? What if we had to earn being loved? We’d probably never survive infancy! All of us have received the gift of life and some measure of love.

Every day, just by being alive and paying attention, we receive undeserved gifts. Gifts of astonishing beauty – sunrise, sunset, the calls of the birds. Gifts of sensual comforts – the warmth of the sun on our skin, or the touch of a light rain, the touch of a gentle breeze. Gifts of love – both loving and being loved.

Today, we are talking about unexpected and undeserved gifts, about grace. About happiness. Come let us worth-shape together.

First Reading

“Life Itself Is Grace
Frederick Buechner

I discovered that if you keep your eye peeled to it and your ears open, if you really pay attention to it, even such a limited and limiting life as the one I was living on Rupert Mountain opened up to extraordinary vistas. Taking your children to school and kissing your wife goodbye. Eating lunch with a friend. Trying to do a decent day's work. Hearing the rain patter against the window. There is no event so commonplace but that God is present in it, always hiddenly, always leaving you to recognize [God] or not... but all the more fascinatingly because of that, all the more compellingly and hauntingly....

If I were called upon to state in a few words the essence of everything I was trying to say both as a novelist and as a preacher, it would be something like this: Listen to your life. See it

for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.

Second Reading

from *The Fatigue Artist*
Lynn Sharon Schwartz

A few seven-year-olds are learning to ride bikes with the training wheels removed by eager parents who trot along behind, one hand steadying the back of the seat. At some arbitrary moment the parents let go. Immediately, the children feel the withdrawal of the hand anchoring them to the earth, rooting them, and they hastily concentrate all their efforts on keeping the wheels balanced. Their blood turns to fear; they can't relinquish their concentration and let the wheels roll, and yet it's the surfeit of concentration that undoes them. No longer spontaneous, like infants, they're sabotaged by effort, the mind turned in on itself. The bicycle starts rocking from side to side while the parents shout encouragement in English, Spanish, and Chinese: Just let go, relax and pedal. But the weight of concentration collapses in on the children; their panicky feet abandon the pedals and grope for firm ground. There they stand, shaky and forlorn, as the bicycle clatters to the pavement between their spread legs. Yet how persistent they are, how bravely willing to climb back on, because for one immeasurably small instant between the removal of the steadying hand and the blood turning to fear, they felt the exhilaration of balance in motion, the blissful absence of effort, the joy of doing without doing.

Sermon

“Something Opens Our Wings”

I was in seminary in the San Francisco Bay Area during the early nineties. It was a time of cynicism and pessimism, and a region of the country where competition was everything, where I always felt crowded and rushed, where the cost of living was high and my income was low. It was in many ways a very tense environment.

There was a bumper sticker I saw a lot in those days. You probably know the one I mean — it said “Shit Happens.” There was this bumper sticker all over the place, which fit well with the times and the locale.

Sometime during that first seminary year, a different bumper sticker appeared at school. It was green with white lettering, and it said “Grace Happens.” It made me feel good just to look at it, and of course I got one for my car, as did many of us Starr King students. This bumper sticker struck a harmonious chord with a lot of people; I can't tell you how many times someone would pull up next to me at an intersection and call out their window asking where they could get one for their car. There was such a hunger for that simple message: in the midst of all this striving and tumult, grace happens, too.

It does, you know. Grace happens and fills our lives with unexpected and undeserved blessings, and much of the time we don't notice it. So as a follow-up to Duane's sermon on “wandering” last week, and because summer is upon us — the time for slowing down and noticing — I want to talk with you this morning about grace, my understanding of what it is and how it happens, and invite you to listen to your life, to touch, taste, and smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of your life and see grace reflected everywhere.

There are various ways of understanding what grace is. Though the word itself comes out of the Christian tradition, the experience it names is common to many religious and spiritual traditions. It's the English translation of a Greek word meaning ‘that which brings delight, joy, happiness, or good fortune.’ I was relieved to learn this, because a lot of my reading on this

topic has revealed that “grace” is very frequently expressed as an attribute of God’s interaction with humans. You don’t see just “grace” in the essays, you see “God’s grace” or “divine grace.”

Another common but too-narrow understanding of grace is that it is the antidote to original sin. “We are saved through God’s grace.” That kind of thing. For Unitarian Universalists who don’t believe in original sin, and for many UU’s who don’t even believe in God, such a narrow definition of grace leaves them out entirely. Yet it’s a wonderful concept: that which brings delight, joy, happiness or good fortune. It’s something we all can experience, especially if we are paying attention and are open to receive it when it comes our way.

Here’s the way Anne Lamott defines grace in her wonderful book, *Traveling Mercies*.

Grace is the force that infuses our lives and keeps letting us off the hook. It is unearned love — the love that goes before, that greets us on the way. It’s the help you receive when you have no bright ideas left, when you are empty and desperate and have discovered that your best thinking and most charming charm have failed you. Grace is the light or electricity or juice or breeze that takes you from that isolated place and puts you with others who are as startled and embarrassed and eventually grateful as you are to be there.¹

So I want to encourage you, if you find that your teeth are ever so slightly on edge at the sound of this religious word and the old connotations it has for you, to forget about the word and focus on the experience.

What was in that moment when your father let go of the back of your bike and you kept going, sailing along without exertion, keeping your balance, moving through the world almost effortlessly, in perfect equilibrium with all that is? What is it that occasionally gives you a momentary awareness of the oneness of the universe, and the way all the pieces fit so cunningly together? Which are the times when you come to the hidden and holy heart of your own life and understand that it is well, that all is well. What is happening when you are filled with the awareness of love — love coming toward you, love surrounding you, and love flowing from you — so that it seems in that instant that love is all there is? You can call it what you will. I call it grace.

I see a range of grace events, different experiences of grace that vary in depth and intensity. Let me paint you a few pictures to explain.

This is a story about plain dumb luck, and how it’s not quite the same as grace, but close. I was walking down the sidewalk on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley one afternoon when I looked down and saw money at my feet. It turned out to be \$42 — two twenties and two ones, all folded together. I picked it up and looked around, but I didn’t see anyone who looked as though they had just dropped \$42. I even went into a few nearby stores and did some eavesdropping, but I didn’t hear anyone talking about having just lost some money. Truth be told, I didn’t want to find the owner. As I said earlier, I was a low-income grad student in a high cost of living area, and \$42 looked pretty good to me.

Then I thought of a friend who had recently lost his job after living paycheck to paycheck, and didn’t know how he’d be able to pay the rent or even buy groceries. Forty-two dollars wasn’t going to pay his rent by a long shot, but I knew that it would give his spirits a lift, so I typed his address on an envelope and mailed the money to him from a different town, hoping to remain anonymous. Of course he figured out pretty quickly where the money had come from,

¹ Lamott, Anne, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, Random House 1999, Anchor Books 2000.

and he told me a few days later that it had come at a moment when he was in deep despair. We both knew that his life situation was much worse than \$42 could fix, and that the dark days were not over for him. But just getting that unexpected gift in the mail was a reminder to him that the possibility of better times was out there somewhere, and that his wretched situation was likely to be temporary.

I got lucky, then my friend got lucky, then we both remembered that grace happens — even in \$42 increments.

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Years ago a friend told me a story about something that had happened to him in childhood, a story that still had him shaking his head in wonder thirty years later. When he was about twelve years old, he participated with his school glee club in a choir competition that involved traveling to a different city and staying overnight. All the choirs were staying at a hotel with lovely grounds, and late in the evening, after a day of intense rehearsals and singing, there was an explosion of twelve-year olds out of the hotel and onto the grounds for a game of hide and seek.

By this hour it was dark, and the excitement of the game was intensified by the unfamiliar surroundings and the sheer relief of tension. My friend was dashing away to hide where he wouldn't be found, running full speed toward a low hedge that was about knee-high. He pictured himself lying flat on the other side of the hedge — a great spot to become invisible — and readied himself to jump over it and fall to the ground behind it, when at the last moment he changed his mind, and veered off to hide somewhere else instead.

The next morning he happened to pass that spot, and saw that the low hedge marked the edge of the hotel property. It grew at the top of a concrete wall, and immediately on the other side of the hedge was a twelve-foot drop to the paved sidewalk below. Had he jumped over it the night before, he would surely have broken at least a leg, perhaps his back; perhaps something even worse would have happened. Talk about saving grace...

My friend was not one to personify whatever saved him that night. Nothing was ever said about guardian angels or the hand of God. But he did feel that he had been spared not just out of pure dumb luck, but out of something else, something mysterious and helpful, something oriented toward the continuation of life. You can call it what you will. I call it grace.

What I find particularly compelling about this story is that my friend had clearly reflected on its meaning. Even as a twelve-year old, he realized that something important had happened that was worthy of careful consideration and remembrance. The way he told it decades later revealed that he had given the experience a lot of reflection and attention; he kept this story and wondered at it for the rest of his life. He was a person who listened to his life, found meaning, understood that all life is a gift which we are called to use to make our own days glad.

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Experiences like this can help us to feel that we are somehow held in love. This is what our Universalist forebears preached — that we can never be separated from the love of God. I think that for them, this had more to do with salvation than it did with the way God acted in their everyday lives. Yet what a comfort it must have been — what a comfort it must be still — to believe that we are loved no matter what, no matter how dumb or impetuous or undeserving we are, we are loved nevertheless.

Christian spiritual writer Kathleen Norris describes an experience she had waiting in an airport one day which exemplified for her the meaning of grace.

One morning this past spring I noticed a young couple with an infant at an airport departure gate. The baby was staring intently at other people, and as soon as he recognized a human face, no matter whose it was, no matter if it was young or old, pretty or ugly, bored or happy or worried-looking he would respond with absolute delight.

It was beautiful to see. Our drab departure gate had become the gate of heaven. And as I watched that baby play with any adult who would allow it, I felt... awestruck..., because I realized that this is how God looks at us, staring into our faces in order to be delighted, to see the creature he made and called good, along with the rest of creation.²

Whether or not you can envision the image of God in that baby's smile, you can probably imagine the collective delight of everyone who encountered it, and the sense of peacefulness and joy that seeped into the atmosphere at the departure gate. When I put myself into that picture, I imagine not only my own enjoyment in watching and interacting with the baby, but the way that everyone connected with each other, sharing indulgent smiles and perhaps wisps of conversation about the cuteness of babies. For a brief moment, a community was created there in which people really talked to each other and looked into each other's eyes, and grace happened.

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Here's a little bit of grace that happened to me yesterday when I was writing this sermon. I vaguely remembered that I had started a file in my computer long ago with some ideas for a possible sermon on grace, which I hadn't yet consulted in my preparation for today. So I found the computer file, and there was a note in it that said "See Liz Hoffman's published essay" with an indication of where to find it. And then there was the essay, with a note at the top (in handwriting I don't recognize), that said "Liz is a friend of mine and of course is active in the U.U." which suggests that I received this long before I even met Liz. (Note to whoever gave this to me: thank you!)

Liz describes grace as "something other than our self-conscious will, by which we are helped." Her one-page article gives some suggestions about how to prepare ourselves to notice and receive grace into our lives. There's no need for me to editorialize or improve on this, so here's a synopsis of her ideas:

Prepare yourself physically to notice grace in your life by living wholesomely and in harmony with your nature. Get enough sleep, exercise well, eat well, don't dull your senses with drugs or alcohol, and don't overdo it on the sugar and caffeine. Notice, pay attention.

Prepare yourself emotionally in order to increase your openness to grace. Allow yourself to be open to the love of friends and mentors. Express your feelings clearly and in a healthy manner; develop trust in yourself. Laugh and express joy; play with others and have fun. Accept reality, stop trying to control or fix others, give less advice, explain yourself less. Experience intimacy and tenderness in interpersonal relationships.

Prepare yourself spiritually to notice and receive grace. Remember to express gratitude for life's gifts; practice compassion and forgiveness. Live in the present, unhurried and not preoccupied. Turn loneliness into quiet and peaceful solitude. If you are so inclined, pray or meditate regularly, and acknowledge a higher power than yourself.³

² Norris, Kathleen, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, Riverhead books, 1998, p. 150ff

³ Hoffman, Liz, "The Gift of Grace," publication source unknown

Grace is happening all around us, whether we are aware of it or not. But if we pay attention and prepare ourselves to notice it, we can live with a sense of blessing and gratitude for all that is our life. In the boredom and pain of your life no less than in the excitement and gladness of it, something mysterious drops in momentarily and takes you from that isolated place, reminding you that you are loved.

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Streams of mercy everlasting call for songs of highest praise — so let us join our voices in singing hymn #126, “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing.”

Closing Words

The Avowal
Denise Levertov

As swimmers dare
to lie face to the sky
and water bears them,
as hawks rest upon air
and air sustains them,
so would I learn to attain
freefall, and float
into Creator Spirit’s deep embrace,
knowing no effort earns
that all-surrounding grace.