

REFLECTIONS ON “GRACE” AND ITS MEANING FOR UUs AND UUCR

Siddhārtha Gautama, born about 400 BCE, was the son of a king in the north of India. Destined to a luxurious life as a prince and wishing for Siddhartha to be a great king, his father shielded him from religious teachings or knowledge of any human suffering. Prince Siddhartha thus spent 29 shielded years.

At the age of 29 and against the objections of his father, Siddhartha left his palace in order to meet his subjects. Despite his father's effort to remove the sick, aged and suffering from view, Siddhartha saw an old man and encountered disease and death. Depressed by these sights, Siddhartha fled his palace, leaving behind his royal life to become a wandering beggar, a sadhu, and eventually as we know, attained enlightenment. Thus he brought into the world what we now know as the 4 Noble Truths and the 8-Fold Path of Buddhism.

More than a biography, more than the story of the founding of one of the world's great religions – if you'll allow me to call Buddhism a religion – this is a story about grace.

Almost a millennium later a son was born to Pietro di Bernardone, a rich cloth merchant, and his wife Pica Bourlemont. Hoping that her son would grow up to be a religious leader, Pica surreptitiously had him baptized under the name, Giovanni. When Pietro found out, he was furious and decided to call him **Francesco**, in honor of his commercial success and enthusiasm for all things French. And so it is that today we know Giovanni di Bernardone as Francis of Assisi.

Francis was born to a life of leisure, if not luxury -- bright clothes, rich friends, street brawls, and love of pleasure. But in 1204, a serious illness started a spiritual crisis. At this time, he claimed to have had a mystical experience in which an Icon of Christ Crucified came alive and said to him three times,

" Francis, go and repair My house which, as you can see, is falling into ruins". Thinking this to mean the little ruined church in which he was presently praying, Francis sold his horse and the cloth from his father's store, to assist the priest

there. Indignant with what amounted either to theft or embezzlement, Pietro hauled his son before a tribunal either to give up this religious foolishness or for punishment. Instead, Francis renounced his father and his patrimony, stripped himself naked of even the garments he was wearing, and returned them to his father. For the next several years he lived as a solitary beggar in the region of Assisi, restoring several ruined churches, among them the Porziuncola, the little chapel just outside the town, which later became his favorite abode and the mother-church of the Order of Friars Minor, better known as the Franciscans.

More than a biography, more than the story of the founding of one of the world's great religious orders, this too is a story about grace.

What is "grace"

Before we go down this road much farther, I suppose it would be a good idea to define what it is that we're talking about – "grace." If you look up the topic in, say the Catholic Encyclopedia, you'll discover how grace-less a discussion of grace can be – sort of like reading a literary critique of a Susan Windle poem, instead of reading her poem. But if you did look it up, you'd find grace explained as:

... a supernatural gift of God to intellectual creatures (men, angels) for their eternal salvation Grace is of two kinds: Actual grace is granted by God for the performance of salutary acts and *sanctifying* grace, which causes a state of holiness, so that the mutual relations between these two kinds of grace are the relation between *action* and *state*, not those between *actuality* and *potentiality*.

Well, that explains it! No? We'd better unpack it a bit. First, notice that the concept of that grace implies "gift" -- something that one receives from another -- although I suppose that you can give yourself a gift, but in this case we'll have to accept the proposition that it's received from outside of yourself. Second, it's a gift from god, so we'll have to deal with that issue. And finally, that there's allegedly some necessary distinction between two kinds of grace -- actual and sanctifying. We can start the simplifying by getting rid of "sanctifying" grace.

This idea had to be thought up by Christians because some mechanism had to be invented to purify humankind's presumed debased nature – as demonstrated by original sin – and restore harmony with God. The sacraments of Baptism and Confession are the mechanisms that would channel this cleansing grace into the soul. No original sin ... no debased nature ... no need for “sanctifying” grace.

Now let's go back to the “gift of god” problem. It would be completely understandable if some UUs objected to the relevance of grace, something so rooted in a notion of god's benevolence. If no original sin, then no sanctifying grace, then so too, if no god, then no grace? This is a conundrum because some notion of God, or Spirit, or Divine Force is necessary to make sense of grace. It needn't be the Supreme Being of the Old and New Testaments, but it does need to something greater than you or me. What that is to me is hinted at in these lines of the Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas:

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower

Drives my green age

The force that drives the water through the rocks

Drives my red blood

After a vision, Black Elk, the Oglala Sioux holy man, says something similar:

I was standing on the highest mountain ... and round about me was the whole hoop of the world ... I was seeing in the sacred manner the shape of all things of the spirit ... and the shapes as they must live like one being

“*Like one being.*” I believe that. All is one being, the rocks, the trees, the suns and moons, humans and all else and all is alive – one great being, one great living organism of which all are living parts. God, to me, is both that life form – cosmically large and microscopically small – and its life force. Grace only makes sense to me when I put it in the context of this living and life-giving Cosmos. Grace is part of its biology.

Consider that our bodies desire only the well being of its parts – our bones, and skin, and minute cells of every organ. Desirous of such well-being, the body

creates what it needs for its nourishment and healing. Now, don't get tripped up by the unhappy facts of illness and injuries. These realities don't change the fundamental fact that our body *desires only the well being of its parts*. To realize that nourishment and healing, our body creates the energies it needs and it creates something to deliver those energies. For example, our bodies create red blood cells to deliver the energy in oxygen for nourishing metabolism, and it creates a variety of specialized cells to deliver the energies for overcoming infection and illnesses to name just two.

These same biological forces, spread cosmically large, are at work, I believe, in the great being that we know as the Universe. Like our own bodies, the living and life-giving universe itself *desires only the well being of its parts* and like the bodies we inhabit, that living universe creates the life-giving energies it needs and the means to deliver those energies to itself. We'll come back to that. But first let me tell you another story.

When my now 22 year old daughter, Ellie, was 7 we had a conversation that I'll never forget, although I do forget what brought it up. We were talking about some of the really big questions, and I eventually asked her, "Why do you think we're here?"

Without a moment's hesitation she answered, "To solve some problem or to answer someone's question."

"What problem or what question?" I continued.

After a short pause, she said, "You don't know until you do."

When I asked "then what?" she immediately replied, "Then you die."

We – you and I – are part of the living Cosmos' way of tending to itself, nourishing itself, growing itself, healing itself, learning about itself, enjoying itself. Grace is what the Universe creates for that growing and healing and learning and enjoying. Each of us is the life-giving Cosmos' way of delivering those graces to itself – that is, to ourselves and each other. Each of us is a grace that carries a

grace. Each of us is a gift and the bearer of the gift. This is what Rumi, the mystic Sufi poet, meant when he wrote:

We are the mirror as well as the face in it.
We are tasting the taste this minute of eternity.
We are the pain and what cures the pain.
We are the sweet cold water and the jar that pours

And the bonus is that, as we serve that purpose, we get to enjoy those gifts for ourselves and each other, too. This is exactly why prayers or invocations of intention often end with the words “for my good and the highest good of all.”

So then, grace is what the Universe creates to sustain itself – and being part of that Cosmic being, to sustain us as well – whether that be that knowledge, wisdom, healing power, compassion, generosity, courage. Whatever. Creatures of reason, we are vessels of that grace. And these graces – these gifts, talents, abilities – are already in us. We were born with some; others have been forming in a lifetime’s living. They lie within us awaiting a moment – a moment of grace – to call them forth. Summoned, as Ellie said, to solve some problem or to answer someone’s question.

That’s the big mystery, of course: what is that particular problem or question for which you and I are the specific answer? Our daily challenge is first to keep ourselves open to the call of the Universe, the signs it uses, pointing us to our way and, second, to have the courage to answer the call. And I say “courage” not merely willingness because, as Ellie said, “then you die.”

In his moment of grace when he escaped the confining walls of his palace-prison and discovered suffering, Gautama died and Buddha was born. In his moment of grace when, during an illness he had a vision of the beautiful “lady poverty,” Francis the gad-about died and Francis the saint was born. This is the transforming power of grace which can change everything that you thought you knew about your world and yourself.

That certainly was the experience of Michelle White from Lebanon, PA. The 34-year old learning-support teacher thought she understood the challenges as well as the potential of special needs children. That is until a sunny afternoon in September 2001 – the day a powered parachute in which she was the passenger crashed on takeoff into a cornfield at a small Lebanon County airstrip. Her head crashed into the pilot’s helmet, breaking a vertebra in her neck, injuring her spinal cord and confining her to a wheelchair for the rest of her life. Yet Michelle now says:

“It’s helped me understand the needs of kids with disabilities a lot better. You can go through a million different courses and training, but until you really have to confront it yourself, you don’t really understand.”

As a way to explain the injury to her young students, White spent the next two years writing *New Opportunities*, a tale about Spiney the porcupine, who on “a beautiful, late summer afternoon” headed out with a friend for an excursion on a small craft just like the one in which White rode. In addition to her self-published softcover and another book in the planning stage, White visits schools to speak about her experiences and teaches a weekly class titled “An Introduction to Exceptionalities in Children and Youth” at Lebanon Valley College.

September 2001 brought Michelle’s moment of grace – though not one anyone would hope for. This accidental grace put Michelle at a crossroads from which she would never be the same. She would either sink into depression or become something more than she ever had been or was expecting -- or maybe even wanting – to be. That’s what grace does. That’s what moments of grace have to offer.

We instinctively know that, I think, and that’s why most of us resist being fully open to it and to fully embracing it. And yet we also instinctively know that way can lead to our greatest joy. This is what philosophers call the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*: we desire it and yet we fear it; we approach, only then to retreat. This is the truth-basis of the Buddhist maxim that one’s true path is toward your deep fear and uncertainty. This is what Rumi reminded us in today’s reading:

Remember the deep root of your being (Don't waste) your valuable keenness ... foolishly ignoring your dignity and your purpose.

Keeping that truth in mind, if we reflect on our own lives, how many moments of grace – the Universe calling – have we felt intuitively – in our hearts – only to have them overruled by our fears in rational-ropes or our self-absorption?

Restoration Friends, we are without doubt in a moment of turbulence. A moment filled with anger in some of us – sadness in all of us. A moment of great uncertainty. A pivotal moment to be sure. To be sure, a moment of grace. I have no doubt that the Universe is calling us as a community to move ahead “remembering our deep roots ... our dignity ... our purpose.” But the Universe is also calling each and every one of us to answer that call each in our own way.

I'm going to bring this sermon to its end now. I'm not going to wrap it up in some grand unifying thought or gesture. Instead I'm going to ask for some moments of silence while you reflect on what you're being called to do in this moment of grace.

In the pews you'll also notice some pencils and slips of paper. After brief reflection I would invite any who are willing to write down your intention, or your hope or your gratitude on that slip of paper – anonymously – and drop it into the basket that will be passed around. These will be kept on or at the altar for the balance of this church year.

Join together now, linking our hearts, in reflecting on what the Universe is asking of you, for your good, our good and the highest good of all.

Blessed be!