GRACE HAPPENS
August 3, 2008
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Nearly 20 years ago, while living in Manhattan, I experienced an encounter that stays with me to this day. I was crossing 6th Avenue during lunch hour on 23rd street. Sixth Avenue is a wide one-way street, spanning four car lanes and two bus lanes. When the traffic is moving, it creates a formidable wall of rushing vehicles.

As I was crossing the street, I passed a woman who was moving slower than I was, and, by my calculations of the blinking "don't Walk" sign, I knew that she was not going to make it to the curb before the lights changes. I also noticed a cab driver on the far corner lane who was filling out a chart, unaware of the woman. Without thinking, I stood in front of the taxi. My sudden change of motion caught the driver's attention. I pointed to the woman who was close to entering his forward field as the light changed. The sea of cars surged forward beside us. Startled, he acknowledged to me that he would wait her out. The woman saw that she was safe and I simply moved on.

This happened very quickly, without fanfare – a simple moment before getting on with the day. I took three steps on the curb and was suddenly aware of a peculiar draft of air. I stopped again, surprised by the shift in atmosphere. It seemed to gently surround me, creating a stillness, a kind of tender embrace, even in the midst of the lunch hour bustle.

The sensation felt like a hand passing through me, gently calming all the molecules of my being, communicating a calm and ultimate logic – a universal love that transcends the words I am using.

At the time, I thought of it as a message – an affirmation – for the direction I was taking, for the direction I was going was far different than the course I had been on. I needed to feel affirmed – truth be told – because I was moving out of free lance film production to ministry – a counter intuitive leap, an unlikely choice. So, frankly, I personalized the moment – I gave it a storyline to fit my ego need.

In retrospect, I see it still as an affirmation, but not one individually directed at me, exactly, nor any kind of confirmation of my worth or designation or choosing from "above". It was merely a moment when I was open enough, when my will aligned with the grace of the world.

"The grace of the world" -- This is a phrase most beautifully set out by Wendell Berry:

"When despair for the world grows in me and I wake in the night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be, I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feed. I come into the peace of wild things," Berry tells us, "who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief. I come into the presence of still water. And I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light. For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free."

…"I rest in the grace of the world, and am free…"

Grace is often thought of as a gift bestowed by an overseer – someone who watches your every move and judges you – deems you in or out of grace. It is often thought of as a message of encouragement or reward from a higher being – a comment on your life as good and loved.

"There but for the grace of God I go"….

This is a phrase that one resident theologian lifted up as not ringing true, as being offensive, even, in certain situations. As if those who were not as fortunate or in the same place as the one who claimed "grace" on their side was less worthy, less loved by God.

Was the Tennessee Valley Church less worthy, less loved, less endowed with Grace? Is that why such a tragedy occurred? Of course not. In fact, in reading the descriptions of

the event, the wisdom of grace filled the sanctuary, as people worked swiftly, grace-fully to end the madness of the shot gun blasts. The sense of life that knows no death was in those who protected others with their bodies and their quick thinking. The affirmation of being was fierce in its response…..

The confusion, I think, is not whether grace is a gift – which it is – but how it is received. Grace is an ever available presence that we catch wind of now and again. It's not something done to us, it is something we come in contact with. So when we discover the presence of grace, we sometimes project all sorts of intentions and feelings of entitlement and judgment onto that experience.

One of the universal aspects of "grace" is that it cannot be captured in words: it transcends our attempts to master it by description.

We are born with an extraordinary gift – the gift of consciousness. We have the ability to be conscious of Life. We have the ability to know God. I use the word "God" to describe the presence of life in each molecule, the life affirming logic of the universe, the generating principle of all things. My reference to God is a reference to that in which we live and move and have our being. It is realized in many different ways and given many different names – none of which fully express the mystery beyond our knowing.

The minute we talk about "God" acting in a certain way, we are no longer talking about grace. Now I know that is different than how it is usually referred to in our Judeo Christian society, but I believe we miss the boat when we think "grace" operates through our logic.

In fact "grace happens" to us outside of our ordered lives or daily routine, outside of our need to control, beyond our expectations, overriding our judgment. That's why it feels like a comment from something else. It catches us unaware.

"there are moments in our lives," writes Rebecca Robison, "that stand still in time while all the frantic hours and years surrounding them have blurred into an obscurity of grayness." An experience of grace, Robison commented, "was as if a thread of light flowing through the moment pierced me to the soul, connecting me to a higher realm."[1]

Grace is a moment, or sensation, when the larger wisdom – the transcendent Being enters our consciousness. We then sense a deeper connection to existence and to our ability to be wise. It opens us up, as Ram Dass once commented, to the healing connection of all things.

Most of you know the story about the writing of "Amazing Grace"…when John Weston, captain of a slave ship, felt grace overwhelm him in the midst of a storm, till he saw that what he was doing with his life was wrong, and he literally changed course.

(Amazing Grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me – I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see)

Ram Dass, a renowned spiritual leader, held an interview 5 years after suffering a major stroke. For all those who think that grace is bestowed only on the fortunate and that a good life proves a kind of spiritual favoritism (there but for the grace of god…) they may be puzzled by Ram Dass' explanation of "fierce grace".

He believes that Grace comes to bring you back into the presences of God, or Oneness. That it is a gift because it helps you get out of your own way.

"I felt that the stroke was healing me from my cultural tendency to get bogged down in materialism, fame and so fort, "he said, "Stroke. And bump. Here I am, naked….It is a fierce teaching but it opens you up."

[1] Robison, Rebecca. Parabola, Fall 2002, p.40

So there are two aspects to an experience of grace. One, you somehow get out of your own way, out from behind your ego-dramas, or control machinations and two, you sense the life affirming logic of the universe.

It can happen when you notice beauty or come to a startling awareness, or even when you hold a moment in gratitude.

It doesn't necessarily happen when things are going well.

(Jon – bubble thank you story – ad lib)

Grace is available not on our terms, or in our time, or even for our purpose. Grace, as Thomas Moore describes it, is the support and inspiration offered by life itself. (Parabola Fall 2002).

Even though the essence of "grace" cannot be mastered by definition, I offer a few descriptions from reading or reflection that may resonate.

(Introduce as meditation)

Grace is:

Remembrance of our primal knowledge that all is well.
A gift of recognition of the healing pulse within each moment.
A gift of recognition of the unlimited strength of kindness in each breath.
Grace is:
A sense of life that can restore you to balance.
A pause from isolation into radical connectedness
A force that calms the storm to stillness.

Grace:

Helps us pay attention
Alleviates indifference and despair
Helps us see beyond our own experience
Signals the inner life to recollect itself.

Grace is the moment when we dissolve into beauty.

It is outside of our ordered lives
A reality in spite of our daily routine

It lives beyond our control
Without our expectations
Unaffected by our judgment

Grace Happens…..

May it be known by you and all who dwell in consciousness.

This I pray. Amen.