



### **Theological Concepts: Grace**

Reverend Annie Foerster  
First Unitarian Church of Cincinnati  
536 Linton Street  
Cincinnati, Ohio 45219  
513.281.1564  
October 3, 2010

It was years ago and I was hiking by myself along the Appalachian Trail one day, somewhere in North Carolina. I had carved four days out of a work schedule—I borrowed a Friday and a Monday that had been promised to a corporation in exchange for sustenance, and taken them to wrap around a weekend that already belonged to me.

The weather on Friday, after a perfect Thursday, was weekend damp. It was no soothing rain that fell, no dramatic thunder and lightening; just sopping air. Thick, milky, clouds of condensation hanging in the air and hiding the land. I could, quite literally, see the shape of the air, leaden with moisture. It perfectly matched my grey and sodden mood; or, rather, my mood matched it.

I plodded on. It is what you do when you have borrowed days to spend. My walking stick beat on stones and moss which I could barely see beneath my feet. Dimly perceived peripheral clues kept me to the path but gave no hint of the beauty I suspected lay on either side of the trail. Even when an occasional stray daisy sprang into view, it quickly disappeared, and did nothing to lighten my mood, nor pierce the visible air.

Hours passed in gloom. I pressed on, moving upward. My guidebook told me I was going up and so did my sense of balance and the pull on my leg muscles. Go or stay didn't matter. Forward or back was an equal choice. The fog was everywhere, inside my head and outside as well.

I reached a plateau where the ground seemed steady and level. My guidebook suggested a mountain meadow, but I could not see it. In the deep haze I bumped into a boulder, and chose to sit upon it, rather than risk colliding with another. If I brought my arm to my face, I could see my watch. Eleven-something. Close enough. I might as well eat lunch.

As I chewed, in a cadence that matched my feet's former weary pace, something caught my eye. Not so much a light, as a lifting of the air. Mysteriously an invisible hand drew back a sliver of cloud on my right and revealed one distant peak. I paused in amazement. It was as if I had forgotten I was in the mountains until then. Another unseen hand drew back the air like curtains on the left, and another crest was seen. As if choreographed, the patterns of air shifted, became as light as toe dancers, swirled and pointed and mocked and revealed. The stage before me was lit in perfect revelation--fields of flowers, bedecked with boulders, strewn with trees, surrounded by elevations of majestic beauty. My inner climate changed to match this new panorama, this new shape of the air. I wanted to drink it, embrace it, keep it as part of me forever. And somehow, I have.

As I watched, out of my childhood memory came a thought—though I had not the language to define it nor the wisdom to believe it. Out of some distant, indistinct recollection came an explanation—*Grace. I am experiencing God's grace.*

At that time in my life I had already rejected the religion, the theology, the god of my childhood. I had already thrown away the entire package, flawed as it was because it did not match my expectations nor my experiences. I had thrown away that kind of language along with the rituals and the practices, because I did not know how to sort things out from one another. I did not know I could keep some and not others. I did not know there were treasures buried in that old religion; nor how to find and evaluate them.

I think my experience is not unlike others who came to Unitarian Universalism out of another religious tradition. And I am discovering that those who came here out of no religious tradition have just as incomplete a comprehension of theological concepts and language as I did that day on the mountain. Many who were raised within the UU tradition have language from another era, or have forgotten it. As a whole, we are steeped in ignorance, bruised with disagreement, and devoid of a common theological language. Often when we need it most, we have nothing to say.

I do not remember how I came down off the mountain that weekend or how I returned home and went to work the following Tuesday. What I do know is that it was the beginning of a long journey that eventually brought me here. And on part of that journey I began to look for the meanings of the words that came back to me in fractured significance, called by experiences that had no labels of their own. Words like *Grace, Sacred, Salvation, Ave, Humility, Creation* and *Forgiveness*. I have plodded among these words that point somewhere to something hidden, as I once plodded up the trail toward unseen revelation. They have been, at first, as misty and indiscernible as the mountain air, and then, after patience and persistence, the fog surrounding them has been pulled back and I see new landscapes of possible meaning.

I invite you to come with me to look at the language that comes from religious traditions, traditions to which we might have belonged or not, but with which we have surely come into contact. I, myself, still struggle with and against some of these concepts. I invite you to share with me during the next three months the ones that stick to you like burrs—annoying and persistent in rousing your antagonism. I have learned that ignoring them does not diffuse their power to give pain. One has to peel away the dross and come anew to their revelation of meaning in order to find relief from them. One has to name them again as we name each new day and name ourselves. One has to shut the door on skepticism to see how an old concept might be useful to a Unitarian Universalist on a path to understanding all of life. Perhaps, together, we can lift one strand of air surrounding just one scene of our spiritual misunderstandings.

And so, to *grace*. I had intended to talk first about *humility*, a concept that I still wrestle with once in a while. I thought I'd jump in, admitting my own defeat in this exercise of reclamation I recommend to you. But *grace* insisted I start with her. I feel warmer toward the idea; just the opposite of the cold fog of that mountain trail. But, just as I don't recall coming back down the mountain, I don't remember exactly how I got to be friends with *grace*.

I do remember a story that stuck to our family, although it did not belong to us. My grandmother had a friend whose daughter died as a child. The mother was overcome with grief. She continued to set the table for the girl, to keep her room as it was, to lay out her clothes, to scatter her toys about the house, as if she would return at any moment. The child's name was Grace. Whenever a sound would echo through the old house, whenever a door would open from the pressure of a passing breeze, the mother would look up smiling and say, "Come in, Grace."

This phrase echoed through my own childhood because my grandmother took it up in sympathy or ridicule; I don't know which. In response to creaks, and opening doors and unexplainable noises, we would say, mocking this woman's gentle craziness, "Come in, Grace." And somewhere in my Sunday School teaching, the concept of Christian grace became confused with the idea of a ghostly presence, lurking just outside my view. Perhaps this is why the concept of *grace* was one of the first to return to me. With my mindless ritual invitation to enter, I was somehow open to welcoming it.

In classical mythology, the Graces were the Goddesses of beauty, daughters of Zeus and Eurynome. Grace and beauty have always gone hand in hand, symbols of imagined perfection. Always they were imagined, for any assumed perfection on earth was believed to be simply a flawed imitation of the perfection of the gods. Grace, then, was seen as a gift from the gods, hints of what was possible on a higher-than-human plane. And, if the Greek philosophers imagined a set of ideal models that existed in the other world from which our own ideas were mere reflections, the Christian theologians imagined that the perfection of God was somehow transmitted to humans in individual moments of revelation. This idea of perfection-revealed became a theology of vision, a vision that God and man could be one. But the work toward this relationship was the responsibility of humanity. To seek God was to seek grace.

Angelo Caranfa, writing on the spiritual images of French poet Paul Claudel, gave this interpretation to such an argument: *To discuss the notion of grace theologically is immediately to raise the problem of image, of knowledge, of freedom, of the relationship between God and the human person. Although created in the image and likeness of the Creator, the human person is seen in the Judeo-Christian context as still steeped in evil, unable to bear the voice of God and see his splendor in the world and of himself or herself* (You see, this is where we begin to tune out; stay with me). . . . *For Claudel, . . . the life of grace [is one] by which a person is transformed corporeally and mentally to become a living splendor, a witness of God's light in the world.* In other words, the grace of God becomes the grace of humanity through God's grace and man's work. More simply put, humankind is not perfect and has to work at improvement, maturity, awareness, even kindness. The world gives, and we work to deserve its gifts—simple as that.

*The Grace of God.* When my friends and I, as children, saw someone so hideous or cruel that his actions or his words made us afraid, we were taught to say, "There but for the grace of God, go I." It was the mantra that was, I think, supposed to bring us to our lifelong work of being better people. And always, when I recall that serious, teaching memory, I recall at the same time the unsubstantiated story of Winston Churchill, pointing out to a friend one of his ardent and pompous detractors. Churchill proclaimed to the friend, "There but for the grace of God, goes God."

God's Grace, interjected into history, and into individuals, is, in the Christian tradition, God's way of regenerating and strengthening humanity to do what it needs to do (sort of a 'powder milk biscuit from the cosmos). God's Grace includes moral strength; it included clemency and it covers forgiveness; it includes beauty for inspiration, and perfection as a goal. These are divine gifts in any religion. We may never achieve their ideals; never even come close. But their very existence in our minds and in our lives, are proof of God's love of all creation.

God's Grace, I was taught, included love; unconditional love. From this came the concept of divine gifts that were unasked for, unexpected, often undeserved—proof of God's love. "The freely given, unmerited favor and love of God," to quote another phrase that lingers out of long-ago sermon messages of my youth. To fall from grace is, by your worst behavior, your own willful errors, to become disassociated with God. Added to gifts of grace is the idea that to fall from grace is to fall from God's favor. Much is made, theologically, of this negative aspect of grace, and I find myself, like my Universalist forbearers, unable to wrap myself around that.

The Universalists preferred the grace-filled god to the one who allowed humanity to slip away from him, thereby deserving punishment. The god who gave gifts, who showed the way, who

instilled courage, who didn't give up on slow learners, was their god of choice—the universal god who did not discard the sinner, but continued teaching—through grace, through mercy, through undeserved gifts.

The Unitarians, I think, in their deepest convictions, thought God fell short of grace at times. How could he, why would he, send models of beauty and perfection, and in the same gift wrapping, include models of deprivation and ugliness, hatred and corruption? Their endeavor to find grace was to educate the fallen; educate them to see beauty and to reject ugliness. We humans could make choices that would bring grace. Still, they relied on God's gifts to keep them going in this demanding task, to give them courage, wisdom and clarity.

Words written by Unitarian minister Harry Emerson Fosdick, are included in our hymnal under the section called Commitment and Action. This poem we have sung before, possibly without considering what they meant. Consider them now. *God of grace and God of glory, on thy people pour thy power; crown this ancient church's story; bring its bud to glorious flower. Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the facing of this hour.*

*Fill us with a living vision, heal our wounds that we may be, bound as one beyond division in the struggle to be free. Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, ears to hear and eyes to see, ears to hear and eyes to see.*

Today I find in this theological concept a richness of imagery, a graceful imagination that attempts to put the best possible light on creation, in spite of the existence of shadows and of fog. My own personal image of godding—a verb form rather than a noun, if you will—is not of a transcendent parental figure, nor the selfless activities of such a one. It is rather of a universal force both imminent and transcendent, that holds all of creation together, and offers all we need, to learn, to be, to figure it out. Godding, in my understanding, comes out of an intelligent universe—that is, one that we can apprehend with our gifts of perception, intuition and imagination. We can never understand all of life and all of existence, because, we are a part of it. We can see what our eyes are willing to show us, but we can never see our eyes except in reflected image. The same is true of life, of truth, of beauty, and of grace.

For me, the concept of grace is the concept of gifts—gifts unmerited, unasked for, unexpected. Like the view on the mountain I received when my spirit was heavy and unhelpful, grace comes to us in hints both subtle and grand that there is something more than us. You will hear me speak of *gifts from the universe*; you will hear me speak of *grace*, as if we all agreed what it is. For the most part, this will be what I mean. I interpret William Wordsworth's lines, which I believe are from *Intimations of Immortality*, as his way of acknowledging *grace*. He wrote,

*And I have felt a presence that disturbs me with the joy of elevated thoughts;  
A sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting sun,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things.*

Grace, then, because it is unexpected, unmerited, and sometimes unasked for—although I expect we ask for it with every breath—is often missed. It comes to us and we don't see it as such, because we have rejected it out of hand. In her book *Pilgrim at Tinker's Creek*, Annie Dillard describes a scene so imbued with beauty that it cannot, almost, be believed. She ends her description with these words, "Grace and beauty abound whether we will or want them. The least we can do is try to be there."

Gifts from the universe abound whether we are looking for them or not. The least we can do, when we sense an unexplained presence, is to look up and say, "Come in, Grace. Come in." Hallelujah!

