

December 6, 2011
Beyond Naughty & Nice
Two Rivers Unitarian Universalist

Story – Amazing Grace, adapted from various sources

A lot of people know the song we're going to sing in a few minutes, "Amazing Grace." But even if you know the song, you may not know the story behind the song.

"Amazing Grace" was written by a man named John Newton, who began his career as slave trader in England in the early part of the 18th century. Several years into his career, he and his crew ran into a terrible storm. His ship was thrown so hard in the waves that despite the fact that he wasn't a religious person at all, he was so scared, he called out to God for mercy. Just imagine. These were slave traders. They earned a living selling human beings they had just kidnapped and lured from Africa. They had with them human beings who they were taking to Europe so they could "live" as someone's property. And here they were, facing imminent death. They must have been terrified.

And so John Newton called out to a God he wasn't sure he even believed in to let the storm pass.

And amazingly - the storm passed. He had miraculously survived. And with this miracle, Newton suddenly saw his life in new ways. He was a changed person, and he decided his life needed to reflect that. Over the course of the next couple years, he gave up profanity and drinking, and eventually the slave trade entirely. And he became, an Anglican priest. In his ministry, he wrote several popular hymns, including "Amazing Grace." He also mentored a young man named William Wilberforce, a politician who led the campaign for Parliament to abolish the slave trade – the campaign that ultimately led to the Slave Trade Act of 1807, ending slavery in the British Empire.

The song, "Amazing Grace" offers a message of forgiveness – of being forgiven and released from your worst self. Your wretchedness. Many scholars believe that Newton used that word especially to reference the slave trade. "I once was lost but now am found/ Was blind but now I see," Newton writes, as if confessing the way he came to know slavery as evil.

We will never know for sure if Newton meant to write a song about abolition and freedom, but that's how many people have taken "Amazing Grace." The song was used several years later in the American anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and later became a popular spiritual during the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

“Amazing Grace” is a song of redemption. It reminds us that no matter how terrible things have been, no matter how many mistakes you have made, there is always hope for the future. It's a song we as modern-day justice seekers can learn from.

No matter how much we as a society have oppressed the many to benefit the few, no matter how we have overlooked and ignored the marginalization and degradation of people – through poverty, through prejudice, through abuse of power – there is hope we can change.

After all, if John Newton went from trading in human beings to writing one of the most powerful songs about freedom and redemption ever, there is certainly hope for all of us.

Reading - “Who do you think you are?” by Rev. Victoria Safford

When we were all singing "Amazing Grace," and we got to that bizarre moment in the first verse where our Unitarian Universalist hymn book slaps down an asterisk and a choice, what did you do? Which did you choose to sing: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me" or "....that saved a soul like me?"

It probably depends on how you are feeling today, how particularly wretched or soulful. I know of no other hymnal in print that virtually stops the singing in mid-measure to debate within the mind and heart of every singer. And right there quickly, because the pianist isn't going to wait for you, the congregation isn't going to wait for you, Sunday rolling on its way to Monday isn't going to wait for you, you have to stake your claim, make your mark, testify - all the while wondering if the person singing next to you will take offense if you confess at the top of your voice your own wretchedness and even our common condition as a fallen, faulty species. Or will your neighbor be annoyed, or maybe shocked, if you stand there warbling on about what a pleasant soul you are, what a nice, well-rounded, full individuated, sin-free, guilt-free humanist soul? There you stand, frozen in time, and the music plays on while you hastily cobble a theology.

We sing our song in different keys and cadences. We are on our own to make a faith out of nothing, which is to say, out of everything we have. That is daunting, lonely work, demanding and relentless work, the work of a lifetime, and I suspect it is the very scope of it that keeps our tiny movement small. Not everyone wants to stop singing in the middle of the song and consider once again and all alone the nature of the human soul and God, infinity without and infinity within. It's a lot to ask of people on a Sunday morning.

Sermon – “Beyond Naughty and Nice” by Gretchen Haley

Now that the children have left for their classroom, it's time we had a talk about Santa.

There's something we all know about Santa, something we all wrestle with. It goes like this.

He's making a list. He's checking it twice, he's gonna find out who's naughty and nice.

And this: *He knows if you've been bad or good. So be good for goodness sake!*

In just a few little lines, this popular holiday song about Santa Claus coming to town pretty much nails the main hope of all parents:

that somehow, we can instill in our kids, the sense that no matter where they go, no matter how much they think they've covered their tracks, their choices will matter.

That what they do has real impact. A thousand wisdom stories from world religions work hard to convey this message – and here it is, direct and ready for a 2 year old's consumption.

He sees you when you're sleeping, he knows when you're awake. Which I guess means, you better be nice in your dreams, too.

And all this, is what we need to talk about.

We need to talk about the fact that it isn't true.

It isn't true that where you fall on Santa's list has that much to do with whether or not he delivers presents to your Christmas tree.

We sing the song, and we tell our kids, but we all know it. Whether or not those gifts come – usually has little to do with whether you've been good, or bad, or naughty, or nice.

Kids get presents based on how much money their parents have.

They get them based on whether or not their families observe Christmas.

They get them based on their parents' philosophy about giving gifts at Christmas.

They get them based on their parents' philosophy about giving stuff at all.

They get them because of where they live, because of their culture and context – and because of a bunch of other reasons that have pretty much nothing to do with whether or not the kids themselves were in fact, naughty or nice.

But this truth about Santa - it's just the tip of the iceberg. Because what we really to talk about – what we *really* need to come clean about this morning - is that life's gifts – material and otherwise- have a way of finding us – or not –not nearly as often as we might think in a straight-line relationship to how we behave or think or act.

The sun comes up. The snow falls. Light breaks into darkness.

These brown eyes, these hands, this temporarily able body.
Your grown son caring for your mother, right along side you.
Your friend arriving at your door step, the moment you needed her most - how did she know?
That book you return to, even just that one line on that one page, that keeps helping you make sense of your life when life otherwise makes no sense at all.
Your leap into the unknown, where you find life receives you, and way opens before you, again, and again.
And air keeps on filling your lungs, filling you with life, and it and you are changed as you pass it on, again and again, moment by moment.

These are the gifts of the universe, the gifts from the Big Everything, the Big Everyone - the active expression of that all-encompassing Spirit of Love we spoke of last month.

These are the gifts from no one person, and yet all persons, not from any single life or any single act, and yet from all life, from all acts - gifts from our ancestors, from all of us alive now, moving forward, making choices, brimming with love and hope.

These are the blessings of our lives – revealing not that our individual actions and effort have no effect on who or what we are, but that who and what we are is determined by so much *more* than just our own behavior.

These are the gifts we call grace.
They remind us, we drink from wells we did not dig.
They remind us, we did not, we do not make ourselves.

Tom Owen-Towle says the idea of “grace,” makes Unitarian Universalists nervous. In his book that I am recommending to all of you, *Theology Ablaze, Celebrating the 50th Anniversary Year of Unitarian Universalism*, he says, “There may be no more slippery and unnerving theological concept for Unitarian Universalists to address than ‘grace.’ Slippery, because grace is a blessing beyond our grasp, and unnerving because grace is beyond our achievement.”¹

Traditional Christian theology would agree grace has nothing to do with our achievement. But instead, it asks us to do the opposite of achieve.

To experience the gifts of grace, it says, we need to know how totally unworthy of them we are. It’s why our religious ancestors, the Puritans, spoke about the steps of conversion as beginning with a confession of sin.

And sometimes actually, I get this logic. I mean, what does grace mean if we believe our life is just fine as is? What other way than coming to humble recognition of your own limitations

¹ *Theology Ablaze: Celebrating the 50th Anniversary Year of Unitarian Universalism*, by Tom Owen-Towle, Flaming Chalice Press, 2011, pg 127.

would a person be able to know just how many gifts life has given them? Why would someone seek cool, healing waters if they don't believe they are hurting?

In our brokenness, or sinfulness, loneliness, separation, pain – any of these things - we awaken to grace's presence. At our most vulnerable, we see things differently. We stop fooling ourselves into believing we're self-sufficient, independent creatures, capable of living out this thing called life, all on our own. We know we need help. Being a mess, and knowing it, it can be awfully good for receiving the gifts of grace.

In her essay, "On this Shining Night," Rebecca Parker tells the story of grace finding her in such a moment.²

It had been for her, a year of grief and guilt and pain.

Time was not healing her, and she spiraled into deeper and deeper despair. One night, in the depths of sadness, she left her house after midnight, and walked towards a local lake.

She says, "I was determined to walk into that lake and find there the consolation that I could not find within myself."

She goes on: "At the bottom of the hill, the street ended, and the lakeside park began. [She] walked across the wet grass and climbed the last rise before the final descent to the water's edge. As [she] crested the rise, [she] discovered a line of dark objects between her and the shore, a barricade [she] was going to have to cross to get to the water."

She says she didn't remember the barricade before, and in the darkness she couldn't even tell what it was. But as she got closer, she discovered "it was a line of human beings, hunched over some strange-looking, spindly equipment. Telescopes. It was the Seattle Astronomy Club."

She realized then, if she was to make her way to her own death, she had to get past one particular enthusiast who upon seeing her, "assumed [she] had come to look at the stars. As [she] got closer, he said, 'here, let me show you,' and he showed [her] the star cluster his telescope was focused on."

She "brushed tears from her eyes, and looked through the telescope. There it was! A red-orange spiral galaxy. And then he turned it to Jupiter."

She says, as she peered at that "giant, glowing planet, [she] could not bring [her]self to continue her journey." She says, "In a world where people get up in the middle of the night to look at the stars, I could not end my life."

² From *Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now*, by Rebecca Ann Parker, Skinner House Books, pgs 109-110.

And, she goes on, “I know there is grace in this world, because my life was saved by the Seattle Astronomy Club.”

And yet. And still. That she was a mess when grace found her, does not mean that being a mess, or even confessing what a mess we are – *creates* grace, or even that it makes it more available. It helps us to see, helps us to receive, but grace, it’s always available. Holding us, in love. Ready to partner with us, in love. Ready to accept us, just as we are.

I made this assertion once in seminary. My professor was going on and on about how sad it was that modern mainline Protestants have stopped talking so much about sin, because that made grace so much less meaningful or accessible.

I don’t get how the two are connected. Sure, sin is one way to understand and experience grace, but it’s not the only way. It’s like saying you can’t really experience the mountains unless you’re a skier.

One of my friends in the class asked for an example - one way of really knowing grace that was totally unconnected to sin. I said, *easy - my children.*

There’s nothing I did, or ever could do to deserve my children. That day we brought our kids home, it felt like this gift from the universe, these strangers who just showed up, and immediately transformed me, created me, and loved me completely, no questions asked.

That’s grace. No brokenness required. No confession of sins needed.

Grace, by its definition, is a gift we can’t cause - whether from our sinfulness or our sainthood. It’s a gift that can’t be earned or generated, not because we aren’t worthy of it, but because it doesn’t have anything to do with whether or not we did or did not do something.

And so I find our hymnal *right on* in its use of that asterisk. Because grace, wherever it comes from, whatever its source – is more like Santa Claus in reality than the myth we tell about Santa, and has not that much to do with whether we are wretched, or right, not that much to do with whether we are naughty or nice.

So, you pick. Wretched. Soulful. Sinner. Saint. A big ol combo of it all - that’s what I’d say - the gifts of life do not care.

My kids are a dramatic example, but there’s a million of them.

Mrs. Sekac, my second grade teacher, who kept saying to me, I see you.

The fact that my family served food at the soup kitchen, rather than eating there.

The hours my mom spent with me, reading to me, telling me not only that I had a light to shine in this world, but it was my responsibility to shine it brightly.

That I was born into this rich, stable country, into a family with two parents, into a home free from violence or chronic illness.

That my father was born just a couple years too late to go to Vietnam.

Oh I could just go on and on and on.

You could too, I bet.

And by now, many of you probably know the question I'm gonna ask next. Right? *What will we do with all this beauty?* For all these gifts unearned, what will we do?

Let me tell you a story.³ Perhaps you've heard it. There was this great healer and teacher, who was known as a bearer of such gifts of grace.

One day, as he was traveling, ten weary and ill people came to him, covered in the marks of disease, hoping he could offer them a cure.

"Teacher," they said, "We have heard you can help us. Please, have mercy on us." The healer saw them, and he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the best doctors in town."

And so they turned to go, thinking he'd turned them away.

But as they went, they realized, they were healed.

Their bodies were renewed, and they felt as if they were alive for the very first time.

They leapt with joy! And then, all but one quickly ran off to get busy with life.

One of the ten, however, returned to the teacher who had healed them, and said, with tears in his eyes, the only thing he could think to say: thank you.

And he knelt there, at the teacher's feet, praising the miracle of life renewed - the gift that had been given so freely, so easily, so fully.

The teacher looked at the man and asked him, "Were not ten of you healed? The other nine, where are they? Were none of them moved to respond with thanks to the Source of Life, except you?"

Like the 10 people, we too have been given new life – but not just one time – countless times, and in countless ways.

And knowing this, like the people in our story, we have a choice in how we will respond.

So many people receive the gifts of life, and then just move on, deciding it was theirs all along.

Deciding it was owed to them, that they must've done something to "deserve" it.

But the one who returned in the parable gives us another way.

³ Adapted from Luke 17:11-18

When we know we are loved, and gifted, “*beyond* our deserving” – again, from Tom Owen-Towle – “The gracious response is to give in return, give back to the blessed creation, [to the Source of Life, to the Big Everything], everything we have and are, all the way home and count not the cost.”⁴

And so as we enter this season of gift giving, of singing songs about being good for goodness’ sake, may we remember how fragile this big life all is, how dependent and interdependent we all are on its graciousness, and how it just keeps on giving us so much good.

May we know - in our darkest days, and our sweetest song, we are all held in abiding love. All of us.

May we respond to these unmerited gifts by giving in return, give back, to this blessed creation.

May we say, with tears in our eyes: Thank you.

May we share with abandon our greatest treasures, counting not the costs, testifying with our lives just how abundantly we’ve been blessed.

And may we partner with the Universe, in all its divine mystery, to keep on creating more gifts of grace for this difficult and beautiful world.

May it be so, and Amen.

⁴ pg 130.