

“Calling It Uneven”

The Rev. Shawn Newton
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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Meditation

“Now is the Time” by Hafiz

from *The Gift* - versions of Hafiz by Daniel Ladinsky

Now is the time to know
That all that you do is sacred.

Now, why not consider
A lasting truce with yourself and God.

Now is the time to understand
That all your ideas of right and wrong
Were just a child's training wheels
To be laid aside
When you finally live
With veracity
And love.

You are a divine envoy
Whom the Beloved
Has written a holy message upon.

My dear, please tell me,
Why do you still
Throw sticks at your heart
And God?

What is it in that sweet voice inside
That incites you to fear?

Now is the time for the world to know
That every thought and action is sacred.

This is the time
For you to compute the impossibility
That there is anything

But Grace.

Now is the season to know
That everything you do
Is sacred.

Reading “The Lanyard” by Billy Collins

The other day I was ricocheting slowly
off the blue walls of this room,
moving as if underwater from typewriter to piano,
from bookshelf to an envelope lying on the floor,
when I found myself in the L section of the dictionary
where my eyes fell upon the word *lanyard*.
No cookie nibbled by a French novelist
could send one into the past more suddenly—
a past where I sat at a workbench at a camp
by a deep Adirondack lake
learning how to braid long thin plastic strips
into a lanyard, a gift for my mother.
I had never seen anyone use a lanyard
or wear one, if that’s what you did with them,
but that did not keep me from crossing
strand over strand again and again
until I had made a boxy
red and white lanyard for my mother.
She gave me life and milk from her breasts,
and I gave her a lanyard.
She nursed me in many a sick room,
lifted spoons of medicine to my lips,
laid cold face-cloths on my forehead,
and then led me out into the airy light
and taught me to walk and swim,
and I, in turn, presented her with a lanyard.
Here are thousands of meals, she said,
and here is clothing and a good education.
And here is your lanyard, I replied,
which I made with a little help from a counselor.
Here is a breathing body and a beating heart,
strong legs, bones and teeth,

and two clear eyes to read the world, she whispered,
and here, I said, is the lanyard I made at camp.
And here, I wish to say to her now,
is a smaller gift—not the worn truth
that you can never repay your mother,
but the rueful admission that when she took
the two-tone lanyard from my hand,
I was as sure as a boy could be
that this useless, worthless thing I wove
out of boredom would be enough to make us even.

Sermon: “Calling It Uneven”

In 2001, Bono, the lead singer of the rock band U2,
told the graduating class of Harvard College:
“I am a sworn enemy of the saccharine,
and a believer in grace over karma.”¹

“I am a sworn enemy of the saccharine,
and a believer in grace over karma.”

It was a quick line in a stream of random details about himself,
but it contains within it a deeply powerful theological statement.

So often when we speak of grace—
if ever we speak of grace—
we describe someone handling a situation with finesse,
of a person showing courteous goodwill and refinement,
of a movement or motion that’s stunning in its elegance,
or of a prayer that’s hastily uttered
before we consume Thanksgiving dinner.

But, unless one is a believer of a certain type,
there’s not much talk of grace in our day to day—
even though grace abounds and gives shape
to so much of who and what we are.

Perhaps a definition is in order.

¹ Chance Hunter, “Grace Wins in the End,” *UU World*, Spring 2011. This article was enormously helpful to me in putting together the concepts of grace and karma.

What, after all, does a theologically liberal, agnostic Humanist mean by grace?

What I mean by grace is the gifts that come to us unmerited,
the many kindnesses that fall into our lives
without our earning them
or having necessarily done anything to deserve them.

Grace doesn't require a divine being in my definition,
but it does demand a certain humility—
a recognition that we benefit from far more
than we have coming to us out of our own efforts.

Grace is knowing that there are gifts that bless our lives
that we could never possibly buy.

And it is knowing that we bear a debt of gratitude
that can't in any way ever be repaid.

I believe that we—each and every one of us—lives in a state of grace.

I say that even as a firm believer in karma—
the Buddhist notion that we actually do get exactly what we deserve,
the view that the world is ordered by cause and effect,
the belief that our every action has consequences.

That you reap what you sow.
That “what goes around comes around.”

In our modern scientific worldview,
it's relatively easy to find a comfortable home for karma.

It speaks to us of fairness, of justice being served—
of everyone, for better or worse, eventually getting their just desserts.

And, yet, it doesn't always quite work out perfectly.
At least not if you believe there's only one life to live
and don't expect there to be more to come—
some distant day when punishment and reward
will finally be doled out accordingly to the deserving
who don't always seem to be getting what's there in the here and now.

Now, if you're thinking these two concepts—grace and karma—
are at odds, you're right!

If you're thinking they're ways of seeing the world
that completely clash with one another, you're right again!

Karma and grace are, however, very useful words to describe
two enduring contradictions at the heart of our existence:

Sometimes we get what we deserve, and sometimes we don't.
Sometimes we get more than we deserve, and sometimes we don't.

Who knows, perhaps in the fullness of time there really will be
a great cosmic settling of accounts.
Perhaps one day there will be genuine justice on earth.

But in the meantime I find I'm with Bono.
I want to believe in grace over karma.
In fact, I do believe in grace over karma.

It's not that there's not horrible suffering in this life. There is.
Every edition of the paper, every newscast confirms
that this life is fundamentally unfair.

Bad things happen to good people.

The poor and oppressed don't always get what they deserve.
And, for that matter, neither do those who extort outrageous profits
from our shared economic and ecological well-being.

Life is cruel and shot through with injustice and inequity.

Karma doesn't always work as we might like.

And, yet, grace abounds.

It's not always there when needed,
or in quite the way we might expect.

But it shows up often enough that it merits our attention.

Now, grace is not the same thing as luck or a stroke of good fortune.
And, it's not the same thing as getting away with something
to which we could and should be held to account.

It's just a deep appreciation for whatever gifts fall into our lives,

even amid all the headache and heartache.

And, it's a deep awareness that the ledger of our lives begins,
and I believe ends, with such a overwhelming credit on the side of grace
that we can't help but to be grateful.

A friend of a friend of mine has a t-shirt that I absolutely love.
Across the front are the words: "Genetic Lottery, 1984."

And on the back, is the word: "Winner."²

She won the lottery of 1984. I won it in 1970.
Each of you has won it in your own time.

It is a miracle that each of us is here.
That we cashed in on the day we were born,
even though there are days when we might not feel so sure.

Yet, if and when we find ourselves doubting the grace of it all,
we would do well to consider our place in the grandest scheme of things.

As the philosopher Loyal Rue puts it:

"The Epic of Evolution counts out for us a pageant of blessings
that stupefies the imagination.
Consider the astonishing improbability
of a universe suitable for human habitation.
The chaotic events of the Primordial Flaring Forth
left our universe with a slight excess of particles over anti-particles.
If this delicate imbalance had varied by a factor as small
as one part in a billion, then we would not be here."

If that's not grace, my friends, I'm not sure what is.

Mary Feagen picks it up from the Big Bang:

I am a millions-of-years-old wonder [she says].
I am an international – no, cosmic – treasure.
I ought to be safeguarded in a museum somewhere
like Paganini's old violin.

² Joseph D. Moser, "Genetic Lottery 1984: New Creations and the Future of Faith," *Culture, The Graduate Journal of Harvard Divinity School*, 2006, Volume 1.

I ought to be gasped at,
talked about in hushed, amazed, reverential tones.
Viewers would touch me gently and feel lucky.

Daily newspaper headlines could say,
“Mary Feagan Exists Again Today!”
Radio and TV shows could discuss me, my ordinary events—
that I saw a bluebird with my millions-of-years-old eyes
and heard it sing with my highly advanced, evolutionary ears;
that my graceful hands with opposable thumbs
fed my sensitive mouth delicious strawberries that it tasted.

Then, without a conscious thought, my brilliant brain
directed my masterful, complex digestive system
to assimilate and use them for fuel
to wash dishes, write poems, hold babies, laugh, and give kisses.

No one would completely understand or dare to finally say
how my marvelous magical, famous, fine self exists, really.
I am just, bottom line, a millions-of-years-old wonder.
[And,] you are too.

And, what are we to do with that most profound of facts?

When reminded of the miracle that gave us birth,
when confronted with the knowledge
of the endless succession of extraordinary events
that had to be pulled off “just so” to get us here to this very moment,
what is our response?

So often it’s something like a lanyard, isn’t it?

Our sometimes meager response to the miracle of our existence
can seem the ultimate inadequate gift, the supremely insufficient response.

How easy it is to think, in the words of the poet,
“that this useless, worthless thing [we] wove
out of boredom would be enough to make us even.”

She gave me life and milk from her breasts,
and I gave her a lanyard.

She nursed me in many a sick room,
lifted spoons of medicine to my lips,
laid cold face-cloths on my forehead,
and then led me out into the airy light
and taught me to walk and swim,
and I, in turn, presented her with a lanyard.

Here are thousands of meals, she said,
and here is clothing and a good education.
And here is your lanyard, I replied,
which I made with a little help from a counselor.

Here is a breathing body and a beating heart,
strong legs, bones and teeth,
and two clear eyes to read the world, she whispered,
and here, I said, is the lanyard I made at camp.

As inadequate as our response may sometimes be,
I'm reminded of the grace to which the poet points at the poem's end.

The rueful recognition, the sheepish confession all those years later
that no offering, no present could ever be sufficient
to repay the great gift of life itself.

And, yet, in that moment of knowing,
of seeing the gap as it really is,
somehow that lanyard became all and enough.

On this day when we celebrate
all those who have mothered us,
the women who brought us into this world,
the women who have nurtured and taught us,
the women who have loved us into being,
we can't help but think of the many arts-and-crafts projects
that we've undertaken across the years of our life
in an attempt to say thank you.

Those of you who've known the joys and struggles of parenting—
as parents or honorary parents—
have surely also had your refrigerators bedecked at some point

with sacred offerings fashioned from bristle board and crayons
and stickers and yarn—and no small measure of love.

That that love is so regularly found to be more than sufficient
speaks to me of the grace of this world.

A gift beyond what our efforts would or could ever suggest.

Something that defies karma, giving us more than we would dare ask,
even if all we actually get is a lanyard.

And, so, on this day when we honour mothering,
may we seek also to honour the mother of us all.

To recognise that in appreciating the women who have mothered us,
we reverence the precious gift of life that has been passed to us—
and to see ourselves as we are,
as the characters of an epic drama
that upholds and transmits life—
as the tellers of a sacred story that started with a Big Bang
and carries on through the work of our hands and our hearts.

May we rest in the grace of the world
trusting that that work, when done in love,
is everything and enough.

Amen.