

*“Opening to Grace”  
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
A sermon preached by Stephanie Gannon  
on 17 July 2016*

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Sometimes when I’m feeling a little lost and down, I go looking for grace in the lives of others. I don’t always know what I mean by this, but one place I turn is Brandon Stanton’s storytelling project “Humans of New York.” How many of you are familiar with it?

Stanton has encounters with all sorts of people on the streets of NYC. He sees them, takes their picture, and engages them in a real way. Then he posts part of their story alongside their photo on his blog. It’s fascinating. I find grace in these mini-portraits of lives. There’s beauty and depth to them. Here’s a recent example. I’m sorry I can’t show you her picture, but imagine an adorable little Latina girl about eight years old smiling brightly in Central Park and listen to her words:

I want to YouTube about my life. I’ll call my channel Happy Is Always The Answer. It will be a popular channel because I’m the only crazy kid in my house. I do a lot of hyper things that people will love like running and swimming and going on adventures. I’ll go everywhere and show people the Statue of Liberty and gardens that I find and other things they haven’t seen. I’ll probably have some paranormal videos too.

Who can’t help but smile upon reading this?

At other times I’ll turn to Louie Schwartzberg’s wonderful time-lapse photography nature video on gratitude that’s part of a TED talk he gave a few years ago. Perhaps you’ve seen it. After the adorable words of a little girl talking about her experiences of watching TV and how it stimulates her imagination, we begin hearing the voiceover of Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast, whose gentle heavily-accented voice has such a tenderness to it. Allow me to share just a few of his words:

You think this is just another day in your life? It's not just another day. It's the one day that is given to you today. It's given to you. It's a gift. It's the only gift that you have right now, and the only appropriate response is gratefulness. If you do nothing else but to cultivate that response to the great gift that this unique day is, if you learn to respond as if it were the first day in your life and the very last day, then you will have spent this day very well.

It's hard not to tear up as we see an array of different images—including, people hugging, close-ups of people's faces, a rainbow, and beautiful sunsets. Steindl-Rast keeps encouraging us to open our hearts to all the many blessings in our lives. Viewing such lovely images one can't help but feel that. Ah!!

Grace is one of those theological terms I've long stumbled over. I rejected the theology of grace that I knew from my Catholic childhood that seemed ever-elusive and not to touch on my life. As a guilty sinner, I somehow never felt worthy of receiving it, however freely it might have been dispensed by God. I felt excluded and left out of the religious competition for grace. In late adolescence I left the Church and never looked back. Along with all the other trappings of my faith I left behind my ponderings about the concept of "grace" too—that is, until I found myself drawn to Anusara yoga.

That was about a decade ago. I immediately fell in love with this style of Hatha yoga, which is very therapeutic and based on B.K.S. Iyengar's principles of alignment. I felt safe in the postures because the teachers gave lots of detailed instruction and seemed to know anatomy well.

But what most drew me in was that each class had an uplifting theme and that Anusara was so heart-oriented. When you got involved in Anusara, you were joining a "kula," or so-called community of the heart. We did lots of backbends and inversions, or at least tried to! The physical alignment was central, but so was the focus on how energy was flowing in the poses. I figured out pretty early in my practice that *something else was happening* besides just stretching and twisting.

The Sanskrit word "Anusara" is translated as "to flow with the currents of grace." When I heard this my first question was, What do they mean by "grace"? Then I wondered, Where does this flow come from—the divine, the breath, nature? The first thing we learned was that it's important to swim with the current. But what exactly was "the current"? I quickly learned that this was supposed to be the divine that was inside me. But what if I wasn't ready to

accept that? Good Unitarian that I am, I needed more information about this nondualist theology before I could accept it.

In fact, I didn't grasp the first principle of Open to Grace for years into my practice. How could I teach something well that I myself didn't understand? I remember my teachers telling us in our teacher training that we could spend our entire teaching careers just teaching this first principle. As I heard that I distinctly remember decorating the margin of my notebook with question marks: Huh? I didn't get it. I thought the other principles were more important and that my students would get bored if I concentrated on the first one. I was convinced that I was a more advanced teacher who could speed past the basics. Well, guess what? I was wrong!

As a New Yorker, I was a little pushy and competitive. I wanted to master more advanced poses and take as many classes as possible. I strove to prove that I was an excellent student. The first principle seemed irrelevant to my initial go-getter approach to yoga. Later on, as an instructor, I assumed my students would be equally bored with the first principle, even though a lot of them were fairly new to yoga and needed a lot of assistance with the basic foundation of poses.

What I learned in teacher training was that the first principle was where I should use commands like: “*Soften* to feel your breath and skin.” “*Listen* to the flow of your breath in and out.” “*Allow* grace to lead and you follow.” I'm embarrassed to say that I was resistant to this—both as a student and teacher. The key words, I think, were *soften* and *surrender*. I could neither feel this in my physical body nor emotionally. I was too anxious and fixated on doing rather than being in both my life and yoga practice. Curiously, this was the place in the practice for grounding and connecting with the divine...

Ironically it took about 10 years of yoga practice and about six months into my teaching until I really “got it” and found myself truly opening up and becoming receptive to grace. About 5 ½ years ago I experienced the second worst time in my life (my father's death from pancreatic cancer 17 years ago this weekend being the worst). In the span of about a month during the coldest winter in recent memory I went through a terrible breakup and lost my job.

Suddenly and without warning I felt I'd lost everything and was completely devastated.

For once in my life I wasn't the caretaker. I was the broken one who needed to be hugged and listened to. I found myself telling my story in the church kitchen. Suddenly other women with similar stories of abandonment and heartbreak gathered around me and shared what they had gone through. I no longer felt alone. I knew I was loved. I didn't have to explain or ask for much. Grace came to me in the form of community and deep listening. I didn't need to be ashamed of my tears. It was alright. I was going to be alright, maybe not right away, but there was a ray of hope. I could feel it deep inside.

By opening myself up and revealing my pain I learned firsthand about the power of vulnerability and deep connection. I became hopeful that I could find happiness and love again. Grace transformed me. I was no longer the same as I was before being utterly broken open.

Although it had taken me years, I needed to learn to let grace teach me. But to do that, I needed to soften and let go of some of my ego's desire to control things. I needed to surrender to something bigger than myself and trust that the universe was holding me somehow, even when I least believed this as I lay curled up in a ball and sobbing uncontrollably in the wake of that breakup.

I finally grasped my teacher Todd Norian's definition of grace as "the power of the universe that reveals your true nature which is joy. Grace is responsible for everything that happens. It's what makes you breathe. It makes the universe function, planets spin, and the sun rise and set. It's what makes things come into existence, stay a while, and then dissolve back into the cosmos. Grace creates and sustains the entire universe, including all of us."<sup>1</sup>  
*Grace heals.*

As a yoga teacher, I was taught to always start by looking for the good. How do to this when our default pattern is to see what's missing and broken and needs to be fixed? Shifting my perception in this way really a challenge, but I made attempts to expand this to other aspects of my life as well. As a Unitarian Universalist, this emphasis on the good resonated with me. We're

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<sup>1</sup> Todd Norian, "Shiva Nataraja: Invisible Thread of Grace" (July 13, 2016): <http://www.ashayayoga.com/shiva-nataraja-invisible-thread-grace/>.

always looking for the good in others too. That calls us back to our first principle of the inherent worth and dignity of every person. It's one of our core theological beliefs that there's always some good in people, even if they've done reprehensible things.

We can choose what we do with our experience. I was taught that the measure of your yoga is how you live in the world. I think this is equally true of Unitarian Universalism, which I see as an activist rather than armchair sort of faith. How we live is a function of our religious values. This was also one of the fundamental yoga teachings. In the yoga philosophy a "klesha" is a stain or negative experience you've had. According to my tantric lineage, the practice of yoga can enable us to transform our *kleshas* into something more life-enhancing and auspicious. Some of my yoga teachers call this turning *kleshas* into *lakshmis* (Lakshmi being the Hindu goddess of beauty and prosperity).

I'm talking about Amazing Grace, or finding the good in the most challenging of times. In her book *Help, Thanks, Wow*, badass spiritual writer Anne Lamott describes her all-encompassing daily gratitude practice. She points out that it's easy to be thankful when things are good, but not so simple when we find ourselves struggling. We can find blessing in these times too, though:

Sometimes our mouths sag open with exhaustion, and our souls and minds do, too, with defeat, and that saggy opening is what we needed all along. Any opening leads to the chance of flow, which sometimes is the best we can hope for, and a minor miracle at that, open and fascinated, instead of tense and scared and shut down. God, thank you.<sup>2</sup>

There's something mysterious about the way grace moves in our lives. Oftentimes, Lamott writes later in the essay, "the invisible shift happens through the broken places,"<sup>3</sup> when we're at our most vulnerable.

Unitarian Universalist minister Forrest Church, who identified as a Christian Universalist and understood religion as our human response to the dual reality of being alive and knowing we must die, reminds us that liberal theology is grounded in humility and openness. I think our approach to the concept of grace needs both of these qualities and may require us to stretch a

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<sup>2</sup> Anne Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow: Three Essential Prayers* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012) 45.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 61.

bit. As Church so eloquently writes, “If we can never unwrap the mystery at life’s core, we can nonetheless enrich our lives immensely by divining hints of the holy.”<sup>4</sup> Opening ourselves to grace is precisely the spiritual practice of seeing glimpses of the holy in our precious everyday lives.

My yoga teachers insist that we can find spiritual awakening in grace: everything in life is for our awakening. In our reading for today, Paul Tillich also speaks about how grace can transform us, especially in our darkest hours. It’s then that we may hear a voice (God’s??) telling us that we are accepted in all of our brokenness and disconnection.

The real spiritual work is to see and experience grace in our losses, our broken relationships, our failures and disappointments, our periods of being stuck, feeling lost, and not knowing where or to whom to turn. Perhaps you find yourself in such a place right now.

Know that you can choose to find grace even in these trying experiences. Know that you can lean on this community. To paraphrase George Odell from our responsive reading this morning, there’s grace in knowing that we need one another. I certainly realized that after my terrible breakup.

To discover a gift, the gift that’s right here in front of us. That’s grace. It’s like the flower blooming in scant soil in the sidewalk cracks that we may never take time to notice. Where does such beauty come from? How is it even possible?

Here in the middle of summer, in the midst of so much sadness in our world, may we have the courage to stay open to the great mystery that is grace. May we allow ourselves to surrender to the possibility of something greater, to soften and receive all that is our life. Let us find gratitude in our hearts for this day right here right now. Let us not be afraid to count our many blessings.

Blessed be and Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Forrest Church, *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000) 12.