

Grace for the Long Haul

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Reading Aimee Van Ausdall

"This morning I have been pondering a nearly forgotten lesson I learned in high school music. Sometimes in band or choir, music requires players or singers to hold a note longer than they actually can hold a note. In those cases, we were taught to mindfully stagger when we took a breath so the sound appeared uninterrupted. Everyone got to breathe, and the music stayed strong and vibrant. Yesterday, I read an article that suggested the administration's litany of bad executive orders (more expected on LGBTQ next week) is a way of giving us "protest fatigue" – we will literally lose our will to continue the fight in the face of the onslaught of negative action. Let's remember MUSIC. Take a breath. The rest of the chorus will sing. The rest of the band will play. Rejoin so others can breathe. Together, we can sustain a very long, beautiful song for a very, very long time. You don't have to do it all, but you must add your voice to the song. With special love to all the musicians and music teachers in my life."

Reading **Still I Rise** Maya Angelou

These are the words of Maya Angelou, in introduction to her poem:

"Everyone in the world has gone to bed one night or another with fear, or pain, or loss, or disappointment and yet each of us has awakened arisen – somehow made our ablutions, seen other human beings and said, "Good morning, how are you?" "Fine, thanks. And, you?" It's amazing, and wherever that abides in the human being there is the nobleness of the human spirit, despite it all – black and white, Asian, Hispanic, native American, pretty, plain, thin, fat, vowed or celibate, we rise."

Still I Rise

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,

With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.

Sermon

Grace for the Long Haul

the Rev. Anne Bancroft

Welcome to February on this rain-soaked morning that's not so terribly cold, but still smacking of New England winter! Perseverance seems like a good theme for this month, actually, as we are practicing "steadfastness in doing something despite difficulty or delay" We are practicing showing up (!) and some semblance of cheerfulness through it all, maybe.

Our perseverance this month has to do with getting out of bed, putting one foot in front of the other no matter the temperature or outside conditions, with the hope, the expectation, that warmer days are ahead. This season won't last forever, and so . . . we persevere through the long haul of winter's challenge.

And, the good humor, if we have it? The cheerfulness? Maybe that's the grace part.

The word, the very idea of "grace" captures the imagination, doesn't it? And it is a lovely word, all by itself; but, what do we mean by it, exactly? What is grace, after all – and does it have any message for us, in our especially rational and pragmatic tradition? I think it's worth a bit of time this morning, to consider how we might expand our use of it, and to recognize the way it offers a gentleness to our times of dogged persistence.

In our offertory this morning, Max Kapp lends words that make me imagine the mystery of what Grace might be – what it might be for us. Having gone to the shore and gazed upon infinity . . . *there came a sense of peace, some whisper calmed my soul. Some ancient ministry of stars had made my spirit whole.*

Isn't that lovely? Grace as a whisper, and an ancient ministry of stars that makes the spirit whole.

I've mentioned before that Max Kapp was originally a Universalist minister – later, Unitarian Universalist. He closes his hymn with the words, "Upright, I rose from bended knee to meet the asking years," which I think must have come from Zora Neale Hurston's seminal work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God.*" She writes: There are years that ask questions, and years that answer. (Chapter 3)

If I had to guess, we are in the former – we are in the years that ask questions of us, like . . . what the heck is going on? Where are we headed? For some of us, when will this confusion end?

Years ago, I preached a sermon with the Rev. James Ford about those times when we have the feeling that we are not in Kansas anymore. And this was clearly long before our present political concerns, so that we can be assured this is not the first time we have dealt with feeling estranged from our comfort

zones. In fact, we may feel that way for any number of reasons – maybe very personal ones (losses or changes in our lives) even as we MAY be feeling them for the turn of events that are our daily news.

“One of the most interesting books I read in seminary,” James said, “was by . . . Robert McAfee Brown [a Presbyterian minister, and leader in the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 60’s]. The title was *Creative Dislocation – the Movement of Grace*. Brown observed, ‘dislocation, with all its risks, is surely preferable to stagnation, which is the temptation when we cling too powerfully to what we have. When we do that, growth ceases.’”

Ford continued, “Brown then pointed out the alternative, being open, allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, while it has its own dangers, is also to open ourselves to the movement of grace.”

It’s true that for many of us, these times we are experiencing feel very much like something other than the Kansas we thought we knew. We feel, using Brown’s word, dislocated. As I said, there may be many reasons for any one of us to feel that way at any given point in time. AND, it is also true that the long haul has many definitions. The experience of time is relative. The long haul may mean persevering with adversity for the rest of your life; it may mean persevering for the next 20 minutes. While I would not wish the former on you, I also hope it is not the latter that feels like such a long haul!

But times of adversity, of challenge, are not linear or even, necessarily, a function of measurable units. They may be a day, a week, a year. They may be generations. They may be a moment. We wonder sometimes, don’t we, how did I survive that moment?

But they require tenacity and determination. Where does that come from?

The familiar refrain from the Book of Psalms, number 137, when the Israelites are displaced from their temple and homeland, the way we may feel displaced or dislocated in our lives at times:

By the waters of Babylon,
there we sat down and wept,
when we remembered Zion.
² On the willows^[a] there
we hung up our lyres.
³ For there our captors
required of us songs,
and our tormentors, mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
⁴ How shall we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?

How shall we make sense of what we don't understand, or of what we struggle to imagine overcoming? How shall we persevere?

And Aimee van Ausdall reminds us: "Together, we can sustain a very long, beautiful song for a very, very long time. You don't have to do it all, but you must add your voice . . ."

By the grace of our connection to each other, we sing. Together, we sing. Together, we inspire and assist and carry on.

But on our own? That may feel a bit different.

I found a blog post by a pastor from Sovereign Grace Church in Indiana. "I'm starting to truly understand grace when grace surprises me," he said.

(<https://www.biblestudytools.com/blogs/stephen-altrogge/you-know-you-re-starting-to-understand-grace-when.html>)

Unearned, he suggests. "Grace is wonderfully, surprisingly, delightfully not fair!" he assures us. And, as we might suspect, given his affiliation with an evangelical Christian church, for him, that grace is a gift of God. We often hear it so . . . God's grace.

Another blog suggests, "The single most important thing in the Bible is the concept of grace."

(<https://livingontheedge.org/read-blog/blog/2016/01/04/understanding-god%27s-grace>)

So for some of us, grace has a starting point.

But it begs the question for those of us who do not ascribe to the Christian tenets, or even to the idea of a God who offers grace, is there relevance for us? Can we be surprised by grace for ourselves, even when the idea of God does not speak to us?

Well, you know – I am always encouraging the idea of expanding our construct of God, of not limiting our understanding of what we might name the spirit of life to a hand that doles out blessings but by acknowledging awe and wonder, mystery and compassion as a function of something greater than ourselves; that we might have access to the presence of a reality that is not limited or constrained by our human understanding but rather a function of our experience in the world; that recognizes a greater whole, a greater wholeness than we can often name.

But even setting that construct aside, when we hear the words of Maya Angelou assuring us, Still I rise ... like dust, I'll rise; like hopes springing high, I'll rise; like air I'll rise ... can we experience her certainty as the possibility of grace? Can we imagine that degree of return, of rising, in our own lives as a gift unearned?

There's a great song by Cheryl Wheeler called "Gandhi Buddha." She wrote it for her wife, Kathleen – and as she tells it, had she not already written it years before, she would have written it for her when they were married.

I suppose stranger things have come to pass,
Many's the forest I can't see.
I was so down and lost and fading fast.
How did you find your way to me?

I must've been Gandhi or Buddha or someone like that,
I must've saved lives by the hundreds everywhere I went.
I must've brought rest to the restless, fed the hungry too,
I must've done something great to get to have you.

It's so poignant and lovely and dear. AND it always makes me wonder why we think good things can only come earned. If we have not been the Buddha or Gandhi – neither of whom, we might remember, was perfect – do we not deserve goodness?

Because actually, I think there IS a mystery called grace that abounds, and you don't have to believe it is meted out by a greater being – though if there is such a thing, our Universalist roots would assure us that grace is offered to any and all.

Writer Annie Lamott suggests, "I do not at all understand the mystery of grace – only that it meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us."

Might we imagine a goodness that simply exists, that arrives to us in times of need – which is, by the way, always? When can we not make use of a bit more goodness in the world? If bad things can happen to good people, and we know that they can and do, then why is it so hard to imagine that good things happen as well, unbidden and unearned – that life, on occasion, offers us beauty and comfort, and love and peace – and that we might understand this as grace, that we might accept it as a tool for our well-being, that trusting it would help us manage the tough times, the bumpy roads, the confusion, the struggle.

We are bombarded by negative these days – there is so much fear, so much confusion, so much backing into our own corners in desperate search for a reprieve from our dislocation. Have we become so cynical that we can't imagine good? Are we so wounded by life that we have lost a place for the mystery that might be grace?

Let us not submit. Let us not give in to the temptation to throw our hands up in despair, but rather be open to the possibility of an energy, a whisper, an ancient ministry of stars, a gift that lifts our resolve to persevere – but not just to persevere. Perseverance alone is just a kind of stubbornness, right?

Let our dislocations be times of opportunity for the mystery we might call grace to help us grow, to help us sing strong, long beautiful songs together; but also to be hopeful in our individual hearts. Can we be willing to feel the good that abounds so that our years, or days, or moments of long haul might be filled, as well, with all that grace has to offer – a calmness, a wholeness.

Let that be so. Let us be assured that we can be more whole, even in our wandering – that, as Annie Lamott suggests, we will not be left where we were found. There is grace, and it is there for each of us. In these asking years, when our hearts are so open and vulnerable, grace is a presence that will help to carry us through the long haul.

I know it in my heart to be so. I hope you do, too.

Let's sing it together – hymn 1015, "I Know I Can." And in the last stanza, instead of hope, let's sing grace . . . when grace awaits at every turn

I Know I Can.