

Gift, Grace, and Letting Go

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Delivered on Nov. 28, 2010

A few years back, I went with my family in North Carolina to a big amusement park. After turns on the merry-go-round, the water slide, the roller coaster, our sights turned towards the bungee jump. My sister, my nieces and I stood watching the huge crane lifting up and up, two people at a time, then dropping the height of a 10-story building towards the pavement. My sister Kathy and niece Kailey immediately said “No way!” My niece Lauren and I stepped bravely forward.

We lay down on our stomachs on a mat, strapped into connecting vests with a large metal hoop on the back. The bungee cord hook clicked in, and the crane started to wind us up in the air slowly. The parking lot, the Ferris wheel, my family, were getting smaller and smaller. My adrenaline started to flow, and the fight or flight instinct kicked in fiercely. I had an overwhelming feeling of wanting escape, yet there was nowhere to go. My niece, only 13, started to whimper, then cry. “I can’t do this, Aunt Louise,” she squeaked. “I want to get down!” “It’s too late, Lauren—they can’t hear us,” I said. “We are going to have to let g...”

The word “go” stopped in my mouth because we were plunging rapidly to the earth on a bungee cord. The air was whipping by our ears and all was a blur. I felt a surge of true terror, shut my eyes tightly, and screamed spontaneously at the top of my lungs, along with Lauren. We dropped endlessly it seemed, and then, at the bottom, something fantastic happened.

We bounced up and down, and then launched into flight. The bungee cord contraction and release sent us into an arc, and we were going back and forth like a pendulum. Our eyes flew open in astonishment—after the horrible seconds of falling, was exhilarating flight, the flying of birds, or planes, or vivid dreams. We gazed out in delight and laughter, watching the amusement park swing by, the larger landscape to the horizon, all the way to the distant toy skyline of downtown Charlotte. It was quiet and peaceful, absolutely calm. We had completely let go—no choice really, once we hooked onto the cord and crane—and the result was a freedom to fly that we had not imagined. We saw the entire Earth below us.

In this true story you know I see a metaphor, because it landed in my sermon! The bungee cord, the plunging, the bouncing: all of that is life. The arc of the pendulum, the flight after you are forced to let go: that is grace. It's not what you expected--it might come after a hair-raising drop or challenging event—and still, grace arrives as a gift you did not know you would receive. Perhaps you have your own description of the sensation. Grace is the absolute calm of being caught. Grace is the peaceful knowing you are beloved. It ending your scream, opening your eyes, and smiling at a new landscape. It is opening up to something ineffably larger than your own story.

Thinking about grace as tied to Judeo-Christian religious tradition might limit our embrace of the experience, so let's explore those roots. In the Hebrew Scriptures the word is often translated as "favor." We hear stories of the one God, Yahweh, showing favor to those in the Israelite covenant. When Moses comes down from his time on Mt Sinai, he is said to glow with the light of Yahweh's favor, illuminated by grace. Grace is also the kindness and mercy of the Divine One—Yahweh stays faithful in the Psalms, through all sorts of hardship and attack. In the Dead Sea Scrolls, from the Jewish ascetic Qumran community, there is talk of "covenant loyalty." Staying faithful to spiritual practices brings the graciousness of Yahweh, who is slow to anger, full of abiding love, for those who offer steadfast loyalty. Yet throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, people do mess up, sometimes spectacularly. The gracious Yahweh might be angry for awhile, yet always come around. The favor of the one God is not permanently lost, even after a breach.

In the Christian New Testament, the Greek word *charis* is translated as grace. *Charis*, or grace, brings delight and joy. It is the good fortune bestowed by God, and the light that shines within in right relationship. The words *charismatic* and *charism* come from this Greek word. In the Apostle Paul's letters to early followers of Jesus, charismatic gifts are the ones with which you were not born. They are gifts given by the Spirit, mysterious abilities that are particular to individuals—the ability to prophesy, or discern negative energy, or even to speak in strange tongues while praying.

Another theme is the one we often associate most with the word grace: God's favor shown to sinners via the sacrifice of Jesus, resulting in eternal life. However, this is not a predominant theme in the New Testament—it later became the emphasis of the institutionalized Christian church of the 3rd and 4th centuries. For most of us, that idea of grace is too narrow, as it was for early Unitarians and Universalists. We see the spark of the divine in all, and honor the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Therefore, Unitarians focused on original blessing, splitting from the

Trinitarian Congregationalists over original sin. Universalists declared that salvation was God's ultimate knowledge, not a human pronouncement. Then 20th century UUs added the seventh principle, naming our connection to the interdependent web of creation, receiving the beauty, light, and even grace, of the natural world of which we are a part.

Any UU sense of grace may be wider than one tradition, and so we can reclaim a word sometimes limited by our Judeo-Christian associations. One source might be a verse from the Yoga Sutra by Patanjali, a Hindu text which most scholars date around 200 BCE. Yoga is one of the six philosophical schools of orthodox Hinduism, and includes much more than the physical poses, or *asanas*. In Sanskrit, this verse is *ishvara pranidhana va*. What is compact in Sanskrit is complicated in English! One translation: True, complete, and total surrender to a higher power brings enlightenment. Another translation: From letting go into the creative source from which we emerged, the coming of samadhi is imminent. *Ishvara* can be translated as divine energy, God, soul, higher power. It is the creative source from which we emerged, and the light we hold within us. *Pranidhana*, is practicing devotion and dedication to fully surrendering to *ishvara*. *Samadhi* is the center of consciousness, the place where we lose our sense of individual struggle, and let go into Oneness, the collective consciousness.

Patanjali felt he was not just articulating philosophy and experience for Hindus. He said that *ishvara* was universal, that the concept was of use to those of any religion, and atheists and agnostics. For *Ishvara*, the creative source, pre-dates any human formulation of ethics or religious culture. It is a lot like the interdependent web of creation, the Spirit of Life, the spark of the divine within. *Ishvara pranidhana va*, complete surrender to that Source, is in the Yoga Sutra as the first, and most direct, path to steady the mind and be free from agitation and suffering.

Complete letting go is in our American culture as the surrender to a Higher Power in 12-step groups, or the *Let Go and Let God* of Christian congregations. It is also the direct access into Oneness spoken about by those who hike to a very high mountain summit or travel out into space as astronauts. It is the experience of those who sing prayer or mantras for long periods of time, seeking to immerse in an endless river of sound flowing since the birth of human beings. It is the feeling of flying, after a long bungee cord drop, the gift of grace that comes after letting go entirely.

We will close our service by singing *Amazing Grace*, a well-known hymn with words written by John Newton. Unitarians debate whether to say *wretch* or *soul* in the first verse, worried that we are buying into original sin. However, Newton was writing about his conversion experience on a ship about to capsize, after many mishaps in his still young life as a seaman on slave ships. He went on to become an Anglican priest, and much later in life, an abolitionist who said his wretchedness was his failure to see the humanity in every person.

In debating the first verse, we often miss the last: *when we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun*. This is another form of *ishvara*, out of time, out of Earthly space, completely one with the creative force in us all. The Gayatri mantra, from the Hindu *Rig Veda*, speaks of this *ishvara* as Divine Mother, the Sun which is the most luminous example of Source:

We meditate on that wondrous Spirit of the Divine Solar Light, which shines in every dimension of life. May that Light inspire and guide our inner vision.

May it be so for each of us, on this first Sunday of Advent, in the Christian season where people look East in expectation of the Light of the World.

May it be so for each of us, as we approach the Winter Solstice of the Sun, the longest night that leads to the turning of longer daylight.

May you surrender to the Spirit of Life and receive all the grace which is waiting for you, in each and every form.

Blessed Be and Amen.