

Grace Explored: Amazing, Earned or Nonexistent

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2/6/2011

Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found. Was blind but now I see.

I love this hymn. I have loved it every since I was a little girl and my fondness for the hymn and its message has only grown as the years have gone by. A couple of times of I have heard renditions that I have found particularly moving, like hearing a tiny sliver of the actual divine.

During my commute to work a few months ago, I was playing a CD that Marty, my husband, and I bought during a visit to New Orleans late last fall. The CD contains a version of Amazing Grace performed by a street performing acapella group and it is a version of the song I particularly like. During this drive I caught myself playing Amazing Grace over and over again. I paused for a moment and began thinking about why I like this hymn so much.

Do I love it for its familiarity? Maybe, but that is not the whole story. Do I love it because as a little girl I remember my dad often playing an album with Amazing Grace performed by a group of bagpipe musicians? I remember the song sounding so regal. That is a fond memory, but I don't think this is the reason. Do I think that I am, that we all are, grave sinners saved only by the grace of god? No.

So, what is so amazing about this concept of grace? And what is grace anyway? The dictionary defines grace as the freely given, unmerited favor and love of god. Or the influence or spirit of God operating in humans to regenerate or strengthen them.

This morning I am going to talk about grace from three vantage points, drilling down into the concept well beyond the dictionary definition and hopefully I will leave you with some thoughts of your own to wrestle with.

The three vantage points I will discuss include:

1. A very brief look at some the major world religions views and concepts of grace.
2. A picture of grace created by looking at a couple of examples
3. Grace and the human quest for spiritual growth and development.

The major world religions seemed like a logical place to start when thinking about a philosophical and theological type of concept. But, by and large, each religion fell short in providing a concept of grace that resonated with me.

For the most part, the Christian faith considers grace something that is God-given, made possible only by Jesus Christ. Grace is unmerited mercy that God gave to us by sending his son to die on a cross to give us eternal salvation.

According to some Hindus, something akin to grace is needed to gain release from the cycle of reincarnation caused by karma. Karma is the consequences of past actions, in this or previous lives. So, at some point grace is needed to break the cycle.

Although there is no Christian notion of saving grace in Judaism, it is taught that God always offers even the most evil men the possibility of repentance. After such repentance one can atone for one's rebellion against God by positive action.

In Islam, salvation comes through strict adherence and obedience to the directives given in the Koran.

Although the Hindu, Jewish and to an extent the Muslim concepts of grace make more sense to me than the Christian concept of grace, none of them really resonate. None of them offer an explanation as why I never tire of hearing the words "I once was lost, but now am found, Was blind, but now I see."

Finding limited guidance from the major world religions, I decided that it made sense to learn a little more about John Newton, the man who wrote the song I love so much. What exactly inspired him to write these words? Maybe his reasons for writing the words are my reasons for loving them.

John Newton's father was a captain of a merchant ship in the Mediterranean trade. From a young age he encouraged John to follow in his footsteps. John began as an apprentice on his father's ship at the age of 11 and by 18 was seemingly heading up the ranks in the maritime world. However, he began rebelling which resulted in vigorous punishment by his captain. At the end the captain of the HMS Harwick, the ship to which Newton was commissioned, decided to trade Newton to an East India ship. This trade would have resulted in a five year voyage for Newton and fairly grueling circumstances.

Newton was outraged by this and toggled back and forth between plans of suicide and plans to murder the captain. As luck would have it, a slave ship crossed paths with the HMS Warwick and the slave ship captain wanted to trade some of his mutinous men for a few naval sailors. Newton volunteered enthusiastically to be traded and bounced around in a few different positions within the slave trade for the next handful of years. His official religious conversion took place in 1747 on a slave ship heading back to England. The ship encountered a terrible storm and nearly sunk. Newton accepted Jesus as he savior in a prayer that night...sort of a "there are no atheists in a fox hole" type of conversion.

In 1750 he became captain of his own slave ship, the Duke of Argyle. His first voyage was violent and volatile. The slaves Newton purchased and were transporting back to England were treated with brutality and many died during the voyage.

His second voyage began in 1752 and he had a new ship, the African. It was between his first and second voyage that Newton began a spiritual transformation of some magnitude. He began adapting a fairly pious lifestyle and actually tried converting much of his crew. Conversion attempts that were not all that well received in most cases. His religious zeal, however, seemed to be a bit misplaced. He spent many of his spiritual energies praying for a profitable voyage and for the protection of his own life against mutinous slaves. Hardly, the type of prayers we might think of when we think of mature and loving communication with the divine.

His third voyage, from a spiritual point of view, has a similar tone to the second. A great deal of piety, but little compassion. After all, he was still purchasing and transporting enslaved human beings. However, just prior to setting sail for a fourth voyage, Newton suffered some sort of stroke and was forced to forfeit his career as a slave captain. He stopped trading, not for spiritual or religious reasons, but for health reasons and it would be quite a number of years before he would make any critical statements what so ever of the slave trade.

From 1755 to 1760 Newton was surveyor of tides at Liverpool, where he got to know George Whitefield who was a deacon in the Church of England and an evangelistic preacher. Newton became Whitefield's enthusiastic disciple. During this period Newton also met and came to admire John Wesley the founder of Methodism.

Newton studied to become a priest and after a period of frustration finding a sponsor for priesthood, he finally became a priest in 1764 and remained a priest...actually a quite successful one until his death in 1807.

Newton wrote numerous hymns, including Amazing Grace, but his most important writing was on the slave trade itself.

In 1788, 34 years after he had retired from the slave trade, Newton broke a long silence on the subject with the publication of a pamphlet entitled "*Thoughts Upon the Slave Trade*", in which he described the horrific conditions of the slave ships during the Middle Passage, and apologized for "a confession, which... comes too late....It will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me, that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders."

Newton's story is one that is filled with a certain amount of hypocrisy to be sure, but the aspect I find interesting are the stages of grace or stages of

transformation he experienced....stages or steps I have experienced in my own life, of course relating to issues with much less moral weight.

It seems to me that the stages of grace include:

- ◆ Lack of awareness—either willful lack of recognition of the moral implications of a set of choices or an actual lack of knowledge that something is wrong.
- ◆ Denial and justification
- ◆ Revelation that leads to change
- ◆ Process of Change
- ◆ Lasting change

Although the exact points of true and lasting change cannot be precisely identified in Mr. Newton's life, the reality is that over the course of his life he transformed from a rebellious youth, to a brutal slave trader, to a more pious slave trader, to a surveyor of the tides and student of theology, to a priest, to a supporter of sorts of the abolitionist movement. Quite a journey I would say. He came truly full circle. In his own way he followed the stages of grace from a willful lack of recognition that he was doing something wrong, to denial in which he failed to apply the love and compassion Jesus taught to his career choices, to a process of change to lasting change in which he ultimately helped to end the trading of slaves all together.

To me the grace, the amazing grace is not the same grace John Newton likely believed in. I am amazed by the process of transformation. This is where I find grace. The invisible hand, whatever that invisible hand might or might not have been, guiding the long transformation from master of enslaved men, women and children to a voice supporting the abolitionist movement is truly amazing.

There have been many periods and areas of transformation in my life as I suspect there have been in yours. Fortunately for both my conscience and for my karma, I was never a slaver and have never committed atrocities on that scale. On a much smaller scale, in more "run of the mill" ways I have headed in wrong, unkind or unproductive directions plenty of times in my life.

To date, the life path I have taken with the most clear sign posts was my journey from being a pack a day cigarette smoker, to a non-smoker. I don't think any of us would consider smoking on par with participating in the slave trade. However as nonjudgementally as I can say this, I do believe that smoking is a crime of sorts to oneself and to the people who love us.

I began smoking as I think most every smoker does, as a young person trying to fit in. I associated smoking with freedom, a little rebellion, youth, parties, friends and good times.

I knew quite well that smoking was not good for me, but I was so young. Smoking didn't kill someone until they were like 70 or something...plenty of time to quit. Oddly enough, for most of my 20's I toggled back and forth between being a long distance runner in outstanding physical condition to being a heavy smoker. I realize that being a distance runner and a smoker does not sound like a natural pairing, but that is a story for another time I suppose.

I injured my knee fairly substantially when I was 27 during a half marathon run. Perfect...the runner, smoker internal battle no longer needed to be waged. Now I am just a smoker.

I knew I needed to quit, but I was still young. I set dates out on the horizon. Dates by which I would surely kick the habit. When I was 29, ah no for my 30th birthday. 35. 35 it is. Those dates came and went and I was still a smoker. Although still young, I was not 21 anymore and I needed to start taking better care of myself. For quite a number of years I was in denial that I was seriously addicted and played ongoing games with myself. Risk calculations and other silly games.

Eventually, medical examinations showed that Marty, my husband, had serious exposure to second hand smoke. I tried to convince myself that the one cigar a day he smoked was causing the unfavorable health report more than my cigarette smoking...of course a fact that I knew was not true.

I tried to ignore the look of hurt and worry in my mother's eyes. My mother who both gave birth to me and lost her father to lung cancer at a very young age.

As much as I tried to ignore feeling, ignore the facts, suppress feelings, play games with myself...one day enough was enough. The half-hearted past quitting attempts were in the past, I was going to quit for good. The moment of revelation. The moment of true commitment had arrived and via support of friends and family, my own commitment and the miracle of modern pharmaceuticals....I quit. Of course, the process of true change was long and difficult. But, it happened.

As I said, my life as a smoker and the path toward and the actual process of quitting has probably been the path in my life with the most visible landmarks. Probably not the most transformative path I have taken, but I share this example because in hindsight the stages of grace are so clear-- denial and justification, revelation that led to change, the process of change and finally, lasting change.

The amazing thing about this experience to me is not that I quit. Yes, quitting was difficult and at a certain point I became afraid that I would not be able to quit. But the amazing thing to me, the grace, and the gift was the voice always in my head. The voice that sometimes I successfully repressed and sometimes I could

not. The voice, the energy, the whatever was always there urging me toward the right path.

I think many of us, probably most if not all of us have had experiences like this. The voice, the constant nagging and nudging toward change. What a pain that voice is sometimes. But, WOW, what a gift.

After quite a lot of thought I finally realized. This is the grace, this is the gift that I have been given, that all human beings have been given and I did nothing to earn it other than being born.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear,
The hour I first believed!

A few lines down....

'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

The lyrics made sense to me and I gained a bit better understanding of why I love them so much. I am awfully confident that I am drawing different comfort and meaning from the lyrics than John Newton had in mind, but that is O.K. Amazing Grace. How sweet the sound.

Now let's move to the last point I want to make relating to grace and the human quest for spiritual growth. I have concluded, as I just mentioned that grace is not a gift of magical salvation. To me grace is not the gift the Christian tradition in particular outlines. It is not salvation given to human beings in the form of the Son of God dying for our original sin. The amazing grace, the true gift is an innate quality in human beings. The desire to grow, to evolve, to better ourselves, better our community and to better the experience of our lives. What other living being has these desires? Although we cannot be 100% sure that dogs, cats or other beings don't have the desire to improve themselves on some level, it appears that this is a uniquely human quality.

Where do these desires come from? The answer to this question is a topic for another sermon or perhaps a lifetime of theological study. But, to me it is difficult to make an argument for pure evolutionary biology. Plenty of learned biologists and likely some of you could effectively make the argument that our desires to grow, change and evolve merely help us to assure our continued existence as a species. Maybe, but I think that it comes from somewhere else. Perhaps it comes from the collective unconscious as Carl Jung argued. Jung said, "My thesis then, is as follows: in addition to our immediate consciousness, which is of a thoroughly personal nature and which we believe to be the only empirical

psyche, there exists a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This collective unconscious does not develop individually but is inherited. It consists of pre-existent forms, the archetypes, which can only become conscious secondarily and which give definite form to certain psychic contents." The collective unconscious could explain several theological concepts, but perhaps the human drive for growth comes from a life force of some kind. Maybe the spirit of life. Maybe this wiring comes from God. I don't know and while I have made conclusions for myself, your conclusions are your own.

Despite the gift of the urge to grow, change and evolve that is seemingly embedded into us as human beings, why do we too often not make the changes, not set out on the paths we know deep down we should?

Despite how hard most of us work in our lives at our jobs, raising our families and the other day to day tasks, we are all often lazy. Change is a more difficult path than the status quo. Fear of change, fear of the effort it will take to change is often what prevents us from taking the leap. As M. Scott Peck stated in his 1978 book "The Road Less Traveled," "It is the force of entropy within us, pushing us down and holding us all back from our spiritual evolution." Fear, Peck continues, is another major form that laziness takes. If we think about it, we know this to be true.

The amazing grace, the amazing gift, each of us were given. A gift that resides in the heart of every man, woman and child. The voice, the drive, the urge to grow, evolve, to become our spiritual best ...this is amazing.

Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.