

# To Grace the World

**Pamela Gray:** In these days of intensification when so many feel this world is rapidly moving out of control in horrendous ways, there is a constant. We gather like this to remember. The grace of God is with us. This is the constant that has always been and always will be present: God's grace.

This past week, the nation paused and gave well deserved respect and honor to John Lewis. He was a remarkable statesman, congressman, human rights leader and humble human being. In the face of imprisonment and violence hurled at him because of what he stood for, he was a nonviolent, peaceful warrior for love, truth and justice for everyone. His message was to speak the truth and to spread love—as much as we can, wherever we can, and for as long as we can. His final words to his nation and to us, appeared in the New York Times the day of his memorial service. Basically, he asked the question, “What will you do? How will you meet the challenges of today with the spirit of love?”

As his casket lay in state in the U.S. Capitol rotunda, Dr. Wintley Phipps so powerfully sang the hymn, “Amazing Grace.” Through the words, the spirit of them, and the response that they evoked, I felt a current of grace, healing, and love cover the earth.

The lyrics to “Amazing Grace” were written by John Newton in 1773. He was a former slave owner. In a dramatic accident at sea where he could have lost his life, he had an epiphany that brought him to his knees in repentance for his participation in the awful practice of slavery. He not only repented; he received God's grace. Thus he was able to write words that carry the spirit of grace and forgiveness.

I have been thinking about grace. Personally I find there are three steps to it. One is searching one's soul to the depths to face personal transgressions, and repenting deeply and thoroughly. The second step is to *receive* the grace that's always here. God's grace shines as the sun shines on the just and the unjust—no exception. But the question is, do we receive it deeply? And then there's a third step that I think may be the most difficult: to forgive oneself. This step must be taken personally.

It can feel hard because there are in our human makeup layers of shame and guilt. The attitude could be taken that one isn't worthy of receiving grace. But unless we go through each step of repentance, receiving grace and forgiving ourselves, we cannot extend grace into the world. I think what stops us from fully committing to being in position to give grace is that it's a huge

responsibility. “Oh, I can’t do that. I mean, I’m not worthy; it’s other people who can do that.” The sun shines on all—we all have that responsibility to search our souls and let it all be clear so we’re in position to offer grace. Rūmī had something to say about this: “Be watchful, the grace of God appears suddenly. It comes without warning to an open heart.”

It appears to come suddenly if we haven’t seen it before and haven’t received it. We haven’t had that moment of epiphany where it comes home that I am responsible. It’s our open heart to the Lord’s love and grace that allows it all to come clear, so that we are in position to extend His grace and love. In this time of pandemic and turmoil, whatever challenges we face, we have the grace of God with us and in us.

I’d like to read Mary Oliver’s poem, “The Summer Day.”

*Who made the world?*

*Who made the swan, and the black bear?*

*Who made the grasshopper?*

*This grasshopper, I mean-*

*the one who has flung herself out of the grass,*

*the one who is eating sugar out of my hand*

*who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-*

*who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.*

*Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.*

*Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.*

*I don't know exactly what a prayer is.*

*I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down*

*into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,*

*how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,*

*which is what I have been doing all day.*

*Tell me, what else should I have done?*

*Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?*

*Tell me, what is it you plan to do*

*with your one wild and precious life?*

What do *you* plan to do with your precious life?

**John Gray:** I love how good poets use sparse words to point to potential apertures in consciousness, openings where light may shine through to reveal levels of meaning beyond the literal. Mary Oliver is revered not only for her word-craft but for her ability to touch the transcendent through the simple and worldly.

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” With that question, was she addressing a grasshopper? Herself? Or is there a larger question here? God asks humanity, what is it you plan to do with *my* one wild and precious life? Human beings so often think their lives are their own to do with as they please. They’re not. Life is God’s gift to the world through humanity. This is why all life matters. It is sacred.

The news media are full of pandemics, politics and politicians, maybe especially in the United States today. Fires of all sorts are blazing. In Southern California where we live there’s an out-of-control forest fire burning now in the mountains to the north of us, some thirty-five miles away. It’s very visible from our house. By day we see mostly smoke but at night the flames produce a fiery glow within the smoke extending miles into the night sky. Though apparently destructive it’s quite a radiant sight.

The fire I think of, however, is more metaphoric. This fire burns everywhere on earth and it’s becoming hotter, more intense, every day. For some this is perceived as the fire of hell burning from below. For others it’s the fire of love coming into the world from on high. To most, however, I think things are just starting to warm up. It may still seem possible to avoid and ignore what’s happening. But current circumstances help get everyone’s attention. We may ask ourselves, “What do *I* know? What’s *my* experience?”

It’s more apparent than ever these days that the thin fabric of human society is showing its weak areas. Through the tears here and there, come things deep and dark to erupt and splatter the surface of awareness with toxic waste. Anyone who tunes into fear finds plenty to be afraid of. Those who have a basic inner resonance with what is fine and true know that this is a deception and don’t fall into the trap. Grace, as Pamela said, is ever-present, waiting to fill the hearts and minds of all who orient in what is above the surface situations.

Pamela quoted the 13<sup>th</sup> century Persian poet Jalāl Rūmī: “Be watchful—the grace of God appears suddenly. It comes without warning to an open heart.” Many would say that grace is amazing. Watching that televised memorial service for U.S. Congressman John Lewis last week I

wondered why the hymn, “Amazing Grace,” is often sung just at funerals. Grace is God’s gift to the living. But this radiant gift is received and known only by the open heart.

I’m fond of the words *radiant* and *radiation*. The Latin origin of the English words mean simply, “a glittering;” “a shining.” Some words reach for ways to communicate the ineffable. Radiation is one such word. I’ve been helping my friend, Terry Oftedal, edit his memoir stories. Terry’s favored term for the divine radiant is *spiritual wind*—his way of describing the power that kept him moving in creative directions as a young man and which powers his more conscious presence, now that he’s older. It’s a transcendent metaphor. *Radiation* is as well. The word is used in conjunction with things like atomic bombs and cancer treatments, for examples, but its basic meaning is, “to spread out in all directions from a center.” Radiation gives evidence of the presence of that center, that source.

*Light* is another word for an ineffable presence. The dictionary says it’s, “something that makes things visible or affords illumination,” but it’s derived from a root that simply means “bright” and “white.” We need words to express ourselves in language. And it’s often good to lighten up about what we think they mean.

Grace “comes without warning to an open heart.” It may occur in a moment; in many it may occur only *for* a moment, but it’s known to be real. The heart that is open consistently is cleansed, uplifted, and purified by grace.

We remember, “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.” [Mat. 5:8] Maybe even people as wise as we are may have had some odd views on what being pure in heart means. It’s not the ego saying, “Boy, I’d sure like to be pure in heart and see God. Wouldn’t that be something! And if I were pure in heart, I would never feel anything but bliss. That would be heaven! But I do feel all kinds of bad stuff, so obviously my heart must not be pure.” This is totally false! We are in the world the way it is. We feel it, we see it, we touch it, we breathe it, the way it is. The key is to be in the world—and we *are* in the world until our bodies kick the bucket—but not *of* it. Being not of it does not, to me, mean not being aware of it all, but not being controlled by what’s bubbling up.

In these times, a great many people who share this understanding together form a collective amalgam that could be called a body of elders. Elders, in this sense, have nothing to do with chronological age. The essential role of elders is to be unmoved by the machinations of the man-made world and remain steadfast in the spiritual wind, radiantly loving the world despite appearances, scary or otherwise. In just this way grace is admitted to do its radiant work,

transforming responsive substance at all levels and making all things new. This is why we're here. It is why we as angelic beings chose to be present, to have been born at the time and in the way that we were. All we've experienced moving in the spiritual wind up to this point has been for this cause. We are very blessed to know grace and to be steadfast.

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### **Pre-Service Music**

#### *1. Sing Gently* (for String Quartet and Choir)

Composed by Eric Whitacre and performed by Eric Whitacre & Virtual Choir 6