

The same sun rises over all of us. It's really a question of whether or not we see it.

Good morning. I saw a grammar cartoon in the New Yorker recently. It featured two men stranded on a sandy, tropical island that was no more than ten yards in diameter. There was one palm tree. It's a classic image. Perhaps, you can picture it in your mind. I'm sure it's really terrible to be stranded on a desert island but just imagine how bright the stars would be if you were. Just imagine the heavens. Might they seem just near enough to touch?

I searched online for this cartoon because I couldn't remember the caption and I wanted to share it with you precisely but I couldn't find it.

I found others, though. I found the cartoon depicting one man stranded on a smaller desert island. Once again, there was one palm tree. Now, this man was bearded, dressed in a loin cloth—presumably, all that was left of his clothing. I had the feeling that he had been there for some time. He was fit. He was barefoot and he was standing upright, reading the classic 'message in a bottle' that had just arrived...and the bottle was visible, resting on the ground a foot and a half behind him. What a miracle!...that a message could actually find someone stranded like that! The man, though, was unimpressed. He seemed to be disappointed by the message. The cartoon caption read: "Hey, got your message. Just wanted to let you know that you spelled the word 'desperately' wrong." Eeesh...

Have you seen days like this...when it seems that the world can't get out of its own way enough to stay connected to what really matters. We deserve to be connected like that, don't you think? You and I...were entitled to as much. We get that, right? We're entitled to grace...

It was fun to search for that other cartoon online and I wish I had found it. It featured two, stranded men this time and both of them were underserving. Strangely, they were entirely surrounded by plate after after-dinner plate holding generous portions of mixed berry crumble cheese cakes and blueberry-apple pies, strawberry/rhubarb pound cakes, oatmeal cookies, peanut-butter bars.....dark-chocolate macadamia-nut wedges, ricotta cheese and apricot croissants, mocha bars with almond glaze and lemon chiffon cakes with zesty peach icing...and the two men were absolutely delirious, gorging themselves on the sweetness of life—luckily and undeservedly indulging in what they were not entitled to—and they were so very, very grateful. If memory serves, the caption read something like, "I'm just so glad that heavenly judges didn't really know how to spell."

Now, it would be clearer if we had the image to look at this morning. It would be easier to see that the artist is drawing on an old, familiar adage that says that in the arc of life, we can do what we please but in the end, we get what we deserve. In other words, there's a fairness to life, a measurable give and take. And, in the end, we get our "just deserts"...but the almost karmic message that was misspelled by the heavenly judges. Instead of receiving the perpetual penalty, instead of getting their 'just deserts'—one s—for the woes and for the troubles that these men caused

others in life, they received the perpetual reward! They got “just desserts”—two s’s. They got pies and cakes and mocha bars. Which of these is an example of grace?

When I saw the dessert cartoon, it got me going a little bit. I wondered about what we think that we “deserve” on our spiritual journeys. I wondered about what we believe that we are “entitled” to. To deserve is to do something, it is to have or to show the proper qualities of being worthy of receiving either reward or punishment. To be entitled is to be in possession the “legal right” or the “just claim” to receive something, as if by inheritance, acquisition or exchange. Both words are transactional. Neither is subtle or beautiful enough to apply to the concept of grace.

Grace comes without warning or method and grace comes without pride or condition. It can’t be lost and can’t be stolen. It can’t be sold and can’t be purchased. The Beatles were right in ‘64 when they sang with such passion, “Money can’t buy me love!” ...can’t buy us grace, can’t make us happy, can’t buy us freedom, can’t bring us joy. Money can’t bring the heavens down to earth. Grace can. Grace obeys no law of currency. It has no customers. Grace comes when it comes and that’s it. It comes all on its own. It comes from the hand of God as it comes from the rising sun. It comes from the budding flower and grace comes through you and me. Grace brings heaven down to earth.

Dr. Jeyhan Kartaltepe is an associate professor of physics and astronomy at the Rochester Institute of Technology. She is one of the scientists who is dutifully unpacking the vast quantities of data that NASA has been receiving from the James Webb telescope. What a fabulous mission! Those images are publically available now. They are phenomenal images. We are learning SO much more about the universe...and we are learning SO much more about ourselves.

In the context of all this new data, Dr. Kartaltepe said something that was so interesting. She said,

In thinking over the past year and the past couple of years, with so much going on in the world and so much negativity, having the positivity of a mission like this to look forward to and something that’s working and is successful and is a symbol of people all over the world working together to achieve something that is technically amazing... To me, that’s awe-inspiring and gives me hope for the future of humanity.

We are learning SO much more about the universe. We are learning SO much more about ourselves...and what we are learning is changing us...powerfully. I believe that we are learning about grace. A poet named Patti Cathcart asks,

What are you waiting for?
Believe in me
Isn’t it love in this life that you need
You can offer your soul on an altar of sacrifice
But give your heart to me
Let’s bring heaven down here
Let’s bring heaven on down
I don’t want to wait for the angels
Let’s bring heaven down here

And this is what they are doing—they, being the scientists, Dr. Kartaltepe and all of the others on the project. They are bringing heaven down to earth.

In a song that she released in 1976, the year of the American Bicentennial, Joni Mitchell shared these words. She wrote,

At a highway service station,
over the month of June
Was a photograph of the earth,
taken coming back from the moon
And you couldn't see a city
on this mirrored bowling ball
Or a forest or a highway
or me here, least of all
You couldn't see the cold-water restrooms
or this baggage overload
Westbound and rolling,
taking refuge in the roads

The framing is so wonderful...the magnitude of that moment in space that still captivates the human imagination and the smallness, the finiteness that is irreducibly meaningfully of a humble, gas-station bathroom in the heartland somewhere, where some owner or some manager has thought enough to put a calendar over the porcelain...just in case, I guess, we become so road weary in our travels cross the country that we forget what day it is...we can go to the bathroom and check.

1976. We were more amazed back then, more willing to be amazed. It sometimes seems like a darker time now...in spite of the fact that it's a whole lot more amazing. Anyway, it was the son of a wealthy, Tennessee cattle farmer who once explained that picture that Joni Mitchell was singing about. He showed us the image. He showed us that photograph of the Earth taken coming back from the moon and he said,

This is the first picture of the Earth from space that any of us ever saw. It was taken on Christmas Eve 1968 during the Apollo 8 mission. I'm Al Gore. I used to be the next president of the United States.

And there was laughter and applause from audience. Responding to this, Al Gore said, "I don't find that particularly funny." I wonder where we would be if things had been different at the turn of the century. What would have unfolded after 9/11? Would Barack Obama have been elected? Would he have even run? Would the insurrection of January 6th have taken place in 2021? I wonder about these things. In any case, Al Gore continued. He explained that back in 1968, the crew from the Apollo 8 mission [quote]...

...lost radio contact when they went around to the dark side of the moon and there was inevitably some suspense. Then when they came back in radio contact they looked up and snapped a picture that exploded in the consciousness of humankind. It led to dramatic changes. Within 18 months of this picture the modern environmental movement had begun.

I think that we are at a similar moment right now...with a similar catalyst. This time, though, we are not looking back at ourselves. We are looking out incredible distances, spectacularly far away. We are looking back in time through outer space! And something within us changes. Something between us changes. Despite all of the negativity in the world, something is awakening in us. Al Gore said,

You look at that river gently flowing by. You notice the leaves rustling with the wind. You hear the birds. You hear the tree frogs. In the distance, you hear a cow. You feel the grass. The mud gives a little bit on the riverbank. It's quiet. It's peaceful. And all of a sudden, it's a gearshift inside of you. And it's like taking a deep breath and going, "Oh, yeah. I forgot about this."

This is the gesture of grace. We don't deserve it. We are not entitled to it. We can't buy it or sell it. We can't lose it. It can't be stolen away. It comes without warning or method and it comes without pride or condition. The gesture of grace surprises, bringing heaven down to earth.

I was surprised when I went looking for the desert island cartoon...and I was distracted after a while and I fell down a YouTube wormhole. I ended up coming across a show called Dismantling Racism Is Patriotic—Jon Stewart Talks Race with Senator Cory Booker. I shared the link with Richard Schramm. I'd love to schedule a workshop on the subject. Maybe you and I could do that together? Sorry to ask you so coercively. Anyway, their exchange is about 90 minutes long. I found grace in the experience of watching them.

Senator Booker quoted a poem by Gwendolyn Brooks called "Paul Robeson." The poem was named after the artist and intellectual, the actor and ground-breaking athlete of the 20th century. Gwendolyn Brooks wrote these words:

That time
we all heard it,
cool and clear,
cutting across the hot grit of the day.
The major Voice.
The adult Voice
forgoing Rolling River,
forgoing tearful tale of bale and barge
and other symptoms of an old despond.

Paul Robeson was highly acclaimed for his role as "Joe" in a 1927 musical by Kern and Hammerstein. "Joe" is a black stevedore. Like so many like him, he is a longshoreman. He works on the docks and he's grown weary from a hard-working life. He sang,

You and me
We sweat and strain
Body all aching
And wracked with pain
Tote that barge
Lift that bale

Get a little drunk
And you land in jail

It is no wonder, then, that “Joe” becomes despondent but something of grace shines through, unexpectedly. As the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks continues,

Warning, in music-words
devout and large,
that we are each other’s
harvest:
we are each other’s
business:
we are each other’s
magnitude and bond.

Through the storm and through the strife, we continue on together. So often, against the odds and against the grain.

Gwendolyn Brooks lived from 1917 until the turn of the century. Early poets mused about a similar sentiment. They wrote, they declared, really, that “we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor” and they did so on July the 4th in 1776—246 years, 1 week and six days ago... It was on a Thursday. I don’t know why but that seems fitting somehow.

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope this new day finds you well. Today is Sunday, July 17th and the title of this morning’s reflection Grace—Part One...because grace is not the kind of subject that fits squarely with the boundaries of a single, Sunday morning. So, I will return to this subject in the future. It fascinates me so.

Christianity defines *grace* as “a spontaneous [and] unmerited gift of divine favor in the salvation of sinners.” Grace is “the divine influence operating in individuals.” It is the influence that leads us to sanctity...but what should we do when we get there? So many of us are reluctant...for some reason...for this reason or for that one. We hesitate. We dawdle. We linger at the garden verge...tempted but non-committal. So often, something prevents us from entering in. Fear, perhaps, fear of embarrassment or foolishness. They say that fools rush in where angels fear to go...but then—it stands to reason, of course—that this can’t be true of heaven. Angels don’t fear in heaven and for them, there’s no need to ‘rush in’ because angels live there already. You cannot rush to where you already reside. So, if this can’t be true of heaven, how can it be true of grace? Grace is like the unexpected bridge that gets us over the waters of our suffering, the bridge that surprises us and gets us over troubled waters.

I found grace in the YouTube wormhole because Senator Cory Booker said something that was amazing. In the context of all the things that have been going wrong, he said [quote],

The story of America to me is the story of people trying to make this a more perfect union, where we are a multicultural democracy based around principles and ideals—not race, not ethnicity, but the best of our spirit.

He said,

I don't think that we get out of the trap that obviously [plagues us, I don't think we relieve] that tension until we get a far more courageous empathy for one another in this country, until we show a capacity...to truly understand that...we are in this together and that your suffering is directly attached to how much my family and well-being can thrive.

Senator Booker kept returning to what I will call the ministry of our country—brilliant, impossibly naïve and necessarily in motion. He said, There is a spiritual component that I have to return to, [a spiritual component of empathy] that is written into our founding documents. [Now, these founding documents] are full of [un-evolved thoughts]... Native Americans are called savages. In the founding documents, Blacks are fractions of human beings. God, they don't even mention women. It's men. I understand all of that but there was a genius...

And this is what I find so surprising, so graceful and so beautiful about him. He says, ...there was a genius in these documents that has inspired Black Americans since the founding of this country to dream a bigger dream. Every leader from Frederick Douglass to Martin Luther King called to the documents of our founding as a way of calling to the conscience of a larger country.

And, here, for me, is the most powerful part. Corey Booker explains that... The end of the Declaration of Independence is all about empathy. It says that we must mutually pledge our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor or else this whole thing is not going to work. [] As a great, Black female poet once said, we are each other's business. We are each other's harvest. We are each other's magnitude and bond. And so, I'm sorry. [This is a] time for politics but this is a time for poetry as well. We need more poets to awaken that larger vision.

The poem was called "Paul Robeson" by Gwendolyn Brooks. And then, Jon Stewart asks, "But why is it incumbent upon the disenfranchised to have that grace?" Senator Booker responds, "It's not, Jon. It's incumbent on you and on others." It is all-American to recognize that this grace is in our hands. Surprising grace, undeserved grace, beautiful grace...amazing grace.

It is so easy to forget that we are asked to do a great and powerful thing. We are asked to become a people truly undivided, beneath the lucky stars of the heavens, stars that we see now much more clearly. We are asked to know that we are held, whole and honored by a love that knows no bounds and the no single heart is gone from out the circles of our care and consciousness. When we forget this, we get stranded, as if alone on desert islands. But when we remember, when we re-member, so often grace surprises us.

May we be surprised and touched and loved and known and witnessed in our inward spiritual experiences and in the farthest reaches of outer space.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.

