

Grace—Part Free
August 7th, 2022
Rev. Dr. Leon Dunkley
North Universalist Chapel Society

The secret of life is enjoying the passage of time
Any fool can do it
There ain't nothing to it
Nobody knows how we got to the top of the hill
But since we're on our way down,
We might as well enjoy the ride

—James Taylor, The Secret of Life

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. Today is Sunday, August the 7th and the title of this morning's reflection is Grace—Part Free. It is the rebellious sequel to Grace—Part One, of course, our reflection of July the 17th. This reflection is rebellious because it is out of sequence and out of step. It is out sequence because the obvious sequel to Grace—Part One is Grace—Part Two...which doesn't exist. We are right leaping over that one to the next. So, we are leaping out of sequence to Grace—Part Three which is misleading and is misspelled and mispronounced to suit the needs of this moment that is before us. So, we have not Grace—Part Three and Grace—Part Free which is a spiritual concept that I hope that you find interesting.

So, welcome to this day, dreamers and the seekers of spirit. Welcome, wanderers and worshipers alike. Welcome to the open ones and to the broken, perfectly imperfect beneath the heavens. Beloved, given in care and compassion for one another, soul-level deep...in good times and in tempest, in conflict and consensus...held, whole and honored by a love that knows no bounds... To all souls, I say, "Good morning. It is so good to be together."

I have a question for you. Do you believe in fate? Or do you believe in free will? Which one do we prefer—the one that brings us to our senses or the one that brings us to our knees? Do you believe that life is fixed by the myriad, heavenly stars above or do you believe that we have a hand in changing things? Can we make a positive difference in the world? I know we can but how does your mind answer this question? What is the choice of your soul?

It really isn't hard to change the world. Any fool can do it and unfortunately, too many have—Greene, Jones and so many others—because it's easy to become spectacular by way of obscenity or violence? It's easy to become meaninglessly outrageous for a little while, to gain notoriety by berating the survivors of the high school shooting in Parkland, Florida. Marjorie Taylor Greene has made this choice in life. And it's easy to gain notoriety by 'cancelling' the survivors of the elementary school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut. Alex Jones of Infowars has taken this approach. He is the conspiracy theorist who directed his media company champion the idea that the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting that took twenty-six lives in 2012 was a [quote/unquote] "false flag" event. He called it a hoax. He said that it didn't happen, that the grieving parents were actors...shattering the hearts of the

families whose lives were clearly already shattered, convincing 25% of our country of something that was untrue and setting the stage for the even more monstrous lies that have followed, like the big lie about the stolen presidential election in 2020.

The truth is so important but Alex Jones pretends it isn't there for money...and at too high a cost to be protected by the First Amendment and not limited, balanced and checked by aspects of the Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, Ninth and Thirteenth.

For years, we have been putting up with this nonsense, this absurdity, this insanity that is his identity politics and culture war business plan. Recently, there has been a change. I suppose that one could say that Alex Jones finally met his fate this week. If you follow the news, you know that a Texas judge ruled against him in a lawsuit brought by Neil Heslin and Scarlett Lewis, the parents of 6-year-old, Jesse, who was killed in Newtown, killed in one of the deadliest school shootings in U.S. history. In a single judgment, Alex Jones was ordered to pay Jesse's parent more than \$45 million—and there are other pending lawsuits—and we are calling this a win. We are saying that he finally met his fate but is that true? What's the meaning of fate if this is the case?

We monetize spiritual meaning in our world. We like the exact a number. We think that it shows something that is definitive. It has become an easy way, a convenient way of evaluating right and wrong, to compare atrocities. But fate has nothing to do with the judicial awarding of costs. Don't get me wrong. I am calling this as a win because \$45 million is a lot of money, even though Heslin and Lewis sought for \$150 million in their lawsuit. Their child, Jesse, was one of 26 people who were lost to us that day. It's elementary—isn't it?—to do the math, the awful math, the vulgar equations of loss...as we tend to discuss it in the news. For Alex Jones did not deny the death and invalidate the life of a single child. His Infowars program did not claim that only 25 lives were lost in the Sandy Hook shooting. If Jones' fate could truly be measured in money, he would not owe a single award of slightly more than \$45 million. He would owe 26 awards of \$150 million. He would owe the families of the Sandy Hook shooting \$3.9 billion.

Were this the case, had this actually been the judgment of the Texas court, that money would not come close to the value of having even one more day's worth of the joy of being alive...for the children 26 families. Alex Jones doesn't know this yet. He seems to lack that capacity to know. The lawsuits are beginning to bring him to his senses but what fate will bring him to his knees?

This conversation is vulgar and absurd and for this, I offer an apology—not an apology in the narrow sense. This is not personal. The word, apology, is commonly and primarily defined on the personal level. An apology is “a regretful acknowledgment of an offense or failure.” It is often taken as an admission of guilt and is almost invariably coupled with shame and indignation.

An apology is also larger, “a formal, public statement of regret, such as one issued by a newspaper, government, or other organization.” The apology that I offer here is not described by either of these definitions. Such an apology would not be worthy of this free pulpit, this house of worship or the honored tradition of faith that they strive to magnify. It would not be worthy of any of us.

The apology that I offer her stands far apart from all of this. The third definition of the word, apology, is the one I mean. This apology is “a reasoned argument or writing in justification of something, typically a theory or religious doctrine.”

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, a man named Richard Clarke made an apology. Do you remember that? It was about twenty years ago now. So, I can hardly blame you if you don't. Between 1998 and 2003, Richard Clarke was the National Coordinator for Security, Infrastructure Protection, and Counter-Terrorism for the United States. At the time, he was popularly known as the Counterterrorism Czar. There were lots of American czars back then. There drugs czars and energy czars and education czars and so on. We don't seem to use that term so much these days...for obvious reason. It's a problematic reference in the context of the war in Ukraine.

In any case, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 2001, in the hearings before the 9/11 Commission that issued this report, Richard Clarke said, I welcome these hearings because of the opportunity that they provide to the American people to better understand why the tragedy of 9/11 happened and what we must do to prevent a reoccurrence. I also welcome the hearings because it is finally a forum where I can apologize to the loved ones of the victims of 9/11. To them who are here in the room, to those who are watching on television, your government failed you. Those entrusted with protecting you failed you. And I failed you.

His was a powerful, personal apology but it was also more than that. IT stood apart from itself, it seemed, because it was not linked to shame and indignation. It was not an admission of individual guilt. It was also a reasoned argument in favor of institutional transparency, increased coordination and higher levels of integrity within the government. It was a reasoned argument against demagoguery.

Demagoguery is a political system that seeks “support by appealing to popular desires and prejudices rather than by using rational argument.”

When the sweets seller beats the dentist for office, we call this a demagoguery. If this becomes the predominant practice in a democracy, then the country's education system had failed its citizens. This explains in a basic sense why Socrates distrusted democracy.

Plato explained all of this in a book he wrote called Apologia (or The Apology) back in the day...like 2400 years ago, back in 399 BCE.

Socrates stood up for what he thought was right. He staked his life upon what he thought...and he was martyred. He was executed because he would not betray his beliefs. That was his fate...and it was his choice, some might say...which brings us back around to our original questions this morning. Do you believe in fate? Or do you believe in free will? Which one of these do you prefer? Do you believe that life is fixed by the myriad stars up in the heavens or do you believe that you have a hand in changing things? Can we truly make a difference in the world? What does your mind say? What does your soul choose? Do we have the power? Do we have the grit to be truly courageous in our responses this morning? Can we

choose without narrow apology (which is to say without shame or indignation? Can we make a reasoned defense of what we believe?)

When I first confronted the choice between free will and fate, I knew what I was supposed to believe and what I knew comforted me. Intuitively, I knew that I was supposed to believe in free will. I'm a Unitarian Universalist, right? Choice is our middle name. Besides, free will is what they believed in *The Matrix* and I loved that movie. I loved the exchange between two of the central characters—Morpheus and Neo. I loved the part when Morpheus raised the question. He said, "Do you believe in fate, Neo?"

And Neo said, "No" and Morpheus smiled and Morpheus asked him why he didn't believe in fate and Neo said, "Because I don't like the idea that I'm not in control of my own life."

Well, there it is. That's me...or that was me until I met up with grace. That was me until grace brought me to my knees. Grace showed up as a Sufi and it was not magical. It was everyday life in seminary. This Sufi's name was Cheikh Yasir Chadley. He was an advisor and an adjunct professor at Starr King. He was much more than that. He was a sage...and he knew just how to be my teacher. He recognized me and my headstrong ways. Yasir asked me the same question that Morpheus asked Neo in *The Matrix*. He phrased it differently but it was essentially the same question. Yasir Chadley asked, "Do you believe in fate or in free will?"

And I responded predictably. I said that I believed in free will and he proceeded to tell me a story. He told me that a young man had been wandering for hours in the desert when he came upon the tent of an old, wise man. The young man asked if he could enter. He needed water to quench his thirst and he needed a few moments in the shade to cool his feet.

The old, wise man let the young man in and was glad to tend to his needs. He got him water and he gave him shade. And he also asked of him a question. The old, wise man asked, "Do you believe in fate or in free will?" And the young man answered as I did, as many of you would and as Neo did in the *Matrix* movie.

The young man said, "I believe in free will" with the confidence of his years.

And the old, wise man said, "Lift one of your feet in the air" and the young man complied immediately, shifting his weight to his right foot and lifting his left behind him. And the old, wise man said, "Very good. That's free will. Now, lift your other foot in the air" and once again, the young man complied immediately, placing his left foot back down, re-shifting his weight and this time, lifting his left foot in the air.

"No, no," said the old, wise man. "Perhaps, I wasn't clear in my instructions. I need you to lift your second foot without placing your first foot back on the ground."

And the young man said, "I can't do that without falling to my knees."

And the old, wise man smiled and said, "The lifting of your first foot... That was your free will. The lifting of your second foot... Well, that would have been your fate."

Each way is a journey of grace. The free will seems to bring us to our senses and almost always, the journey of fate brings us to our knees. Sting writes,

I walked out this morning

It was like a veil had been removed from before my eyes

For the first time I saw the work of heaven
In the line where the hills had been married to the sky
And all around me, every blade of singing grass
Was calling out your name and that our love would always last
And inside every turning leaf is the pattern of an older tree
The shape of our future, the shape of all our history
And out of the confusion where the river meets the sea
Came things I'd never seen, things I'd never seen
I was brought to my senses
I was blind, but now that I can see

And this is grace and it borrows from a song that is familiar to us, a song that rises out of the American landscape in ways that are deeply beautiful. Revolutionary. Revelationary, right? For the veil has been removed from our eyes. A revelation, a revealing...a disillusionment.

Now, I wish that I could write the best book about the blues, a book that could be bold and brash and bawdy without having to apologize...a book that could be as fierce as the blues guitar has to be...to cut through lies and the double-speak...to pierce through the illusions...to overcome the blindness...to see our way through to amazing grace in the way that it works for us...in the way the unfold comfortably in our tradition.

Play Amazing Grace/Spirit of Life

I just lost a friend, the Reverend Dr. Rob Eller-Isaacs. He died about two weeks ago. I cried a good good-bye to him at Star a few days ago. He was a great teacher to me. He helped to shape my ministry after seminary. He charged me as a minister at my ordination in St. Paul. He offered me his highest wishes. This is the picture that is featured on your Orders of Service this week. It was a powerful moment for me, although it could have been quite awkward.

The church in St. Paul was traditional. There was a way that some things were. There were rules...and the rule when you get charged in that church is that you get charged on your knees. You kneel, as the ordinand, before your teacher. It is very hierarchical and weird and lovely...only I didn't know if I could do it.

Surrender is essential for ministry. Ministers are charged in the attitude of surrender. It's healthy practice for the soul...but racial realities complicated that moment for me—even in church...especially in church. I didn't know what I was going to do. Part of my ministry was working with people of color in the Twin Cities and they were all invited to the ordination...and they all looked up to me. I can't say that they all liked me (or knew me, particularly well), but they respected the church and my place in it. But how could I kneel in this way? What would they think? What message would that send on such a solemn occasion? And my family was going to be there... My father would have to see that happen...and what would he think? ...after all of the sacrifices that he and my mother had made? I honestly didn't know if I would be able go to my knees...in good faith, before God...with racial conditions as bad as they were. This was before the high-profile cases of Philandro

Castille and Duante Wright and before the world-awakening case, the murder of George Floyd...but you could feel something coming in the distance. I didn't know if I could go to my knees.

When the moment came, I was terrified. It didn't know what the right thing was to do. When I stepped forward to meet my teacher, I almost had tears in my eyes. Then, suddenly, he went to his knees and with his body, he asked me to join him...and, BOOM, I was down on the ground, down on my knees. I joined him there. It was a complex moment of grace. It was grace—part fate and it was grace—part free.

So, when he died two weeks ago. This was all I could think about. We used to sing a song together before every meal. We would sing,

Call down a blessing
Call down a blessing
Call down a blessing, call down
Beauty above us
Beauty below us
Beauty around us and between us
So, call down a blessing...

I was bound and tied and committed and accountable to racial justice...and so was my mentor, my teacher, my friend of spirit in life, my brother in faith and my brother in this amazing grace of living and loss—one part fate and one part free.

Be bound by nothing less sacred than the wind and the blessings we call down from the sky. Be driven by nothing less holy than fearless love. May we know grace in deepest measure and truest heart—one part fate and one part free.

May it be so. Blessed be an amen.