

“Amazing Grace”

In these tough economic times - that show no sign of ending soon - I consider myself very fortunate; I have a job, an adequate car, a roof over my head – two, actually – a luxury. I don’t have all the gadgets – but I don’t want for much, I think.

I haven’t always felt so fortunate. At a time when Kate and I had two kids in college, I was fired twice in the course of a year and a half. I’ve had cancer. My father died when I was twenty two. I was drafted during the Vietnam War.

But, overall, I have been very fortunate – lucky. I don’t need to look far to see lots of examples of misfortune and hardship that far surpass anything in my own experience – serious illness, long-term unemployment, foreclosure, the deaths of spouses and children.

We wonder what determines our various fates. As rational people – mostly – we are inclined to attribute our fortunes to the luck of the draw – to being in the right place at the right time – or the wrong place at the wrong time – knowing that we didn’t choose our parents, or our birthplaces, or our genes, or the times of our lives.

We’re lucky – or not – we say. We hear Branch Rickey, quoting Milton, telling us that “luck is the residue of design.” Others – more prosaically – say, “Luck is the residue of hard work and preparation.” There is no luck, in effect. But, for most of us, luck still retains some magical qualities.

If we landed on our feet, as we say, it’s because we woke up on the right side of bed – or we’ve been living right – or the stars were aligned – or because we avoided the cracks in the sidewalk. For baseball players, hitting streaks are attributed to the special bat; for the great LSU basketball great Pistol Pete Maravich it was his lucky socks, which legend says went unwashed for his entire college career.

Religion, as it has developed over the millennia, has served, in part, to explain our fate and fortune. Among the earliest tribal societies magic played a big role in religious ritual – and still does – as in voodoo, for example. Good things will happen if we display the right symbols, dance at the right times and in the right directions, chant the right incantations. And, similarly, we can make bad things happen to our enemies.

For Hindus and Buddhists an explanation is in the concept of *karma* – a law of moral causation – that our actions – good and bad - over many past lifetimes - are responsible for fate and fortune now and in the future. We – and all the previous we’s – are responsible for how and where we are.

Christians developed very different explanations for fate – among them the Calvinist notion of pre-destination – which holds that an omnipotent supernatural being – God – has determined our fates – and our lives are simply a playing-out of his plan. God selects individuals for salvation and good fortune – the *elect* – bestowing upon them an unmerited gift of favor – called “grace”.

We are saved because God wants us to be saved - our lives are full of good fortune – not because we are ethical or have done good deeds – in this life or any previous life – but because God ordains it. “There,

but for the Grace of God, go I,” we say, when we see the homeless sleeping on sidewalk heating grates in the middle of January.

One must *believe* – have that kind of faith – accept the gospel – in order for this election to take effect, Calvinism says – but belief *itself* is a gift from God. He *compels* the elect to believe and to lead Godly lives. Such is the power of God’s Grace.

Such is the power that John Newton extolled when he wrote the hymn Amazing Grace in 1779. Newton, a British sailor and slave trader, prayed for God’s mercy one night during a particularly fierce storm at sea, and, when the ship miraculously found safe haven, he attributed it to Divine Intervention. God had saved him and his fellows. He knew clearly that nothing he had done in his life merited salvation; he was saved solely because God decided that it must be so. Amazing! Sweet! What a precious gift! he says. This unmerited gift has saved me – and it will lead me home.

This gift from God changed Newton’s life. He became a poet and theologian. He wrote hymns, like Amazing Grace, singing God’s praise – singing the Grace of God – “that passeth all understanding.”

“Grace” is the word that came to Kate and me, when we reflected on an adventure on the Broad River near our cottage in Beaufort, South Carolina early this summer. Kate and I are sailors, and the beautiful, wide Broad River – the estuary we gaze out upon from our front porch there each morning and evening – seemed to beg for a sailboat. But not the traditional, old wooden boat we have sailed for twenty years in Maine. With its fixed keel, it draws too much water for the shallow waters and shifting sandbars of the Broad.

So, reluctantly, we put her up for sale and, in mid-May, bought a little 15-foot flat-bottomed, shallow-draft catboat – ideal for the waters of the Low Country. On June 1st, one of the first days of Kate’s summer vacation, we took her for a long sail. The breeze was stiff, as we say, from the Southeast. We ran before the wind several miles upriver – north - and then tacked our way back south. We were near the mouth of Habersham Creek, where we dock the boat, and - changing course – “coming about” in nautical lingo – swinging the boat from one side of the wind to the other – when we tipped too far – the rail went under – the river flooded in – and we went down.

Flotation material kept her from sinking completely, but there wasn’t much of her above water – a few feet of the mast – with sail attached, of course – and about a foot of the stern. We grabbed debris as it rose to the surface – wooden paddles, seat cushions, an insulated lunch bag, and we assessed our situation.

We were in the middle of a two-mile wide river. Wind and waves were blowing us toward the unpopulated west shore and its vast marshes. There were no other boats within sight. It was about 4:00 in the afternoon. The air and water were warm; we weren’t cold; we weren’t hurt. But there was no righting the boat; it’s not large, but it’s extremely well-built and quite heavy – at least a thousand pounds.

We would try to push her to the eastern shore of the river – towards home. So for five hours we kicked and pushed – the boat dangling stern up, bow down, sail still rigged – while the wind pushed us west and the in-coming tide carried us steadily north – away from the open ocean, fortunately. The eternal optimist, I thought we were making progress. I'd pick out one spot on the shore after another, suggesting that in just a few more minutes we could reach it – only to have each such spot drift out of sight to the south.

Two boats passed us during this ordeal – one way too far to the west to possibly see us and the other just too focused on its mission. After a few hours, Kate dug a couple of energy bars out of the floating lunch bag – Clif Bars – to replace a little of the fuel we'd expended. I imagine they helped us more than I've acknowledged.

We knew that we didn't have all day to get to shore – or, more accurately, we knew we had only the daylight hours. We watched helplessly as the sun slowly, but inexorably, descended behind us, and we began to think about abandoning ship and swimming to shore. When the sun finally went down, the tide was carrying us past the last outpost of civilization at that end of the river - a little naval housing complex called Laurel Bay.

And it so happened that the family of a Marine officer, the commander of a fighter squadron at the Beaufort Marine Air Station, was sitting in their living room, watching the sun go down over the river, as they often did. He was on leave, about to deploy to Afghanistan; his parents were visiting. They saw some debris floating by – far out in the river. And they speculated about it. What could that be? "It didn't seem right, and it wasn't going away," they later told a newspaper reporter.

They decided to go out to the end of the community dock, right in front of the house, to get a better look. "Could that be a head," someone wondered aloud? Russ, the Marine officer, ran back to the house for his binoculars, and with them he thought he could make out a head in the water beside the floating "whatever". "Do you need help," he called.

We heard him and, waving our arms, hollered back, "Yes!" They couldn't hear our shouting against the easterly wind, but they saw us wave, and, instantly, we saw a man run full tilt up the dock, and almost as quickly we heard the sirens and saw emergency vehicles of all kinds – police cars, fire trucks, ambulances – converging on the dock.

Kate set off for shore (we were wearing life jackets) – to tell them who we were and that we needed a boat to tow us in. It would only take her a few minutes; we were only a few hundred yards from shore, we thought. I would stay with the ship. It took her twenty minutes; it was more like half a mile.

A fireman came out in a fishing boat to get me – only me, he insisted – their concern and responsibility was for rescuing people – not things – not boats – so, after five hours of trying to save the boat, we abandoned her to the dark and the tide.

We were weak, tired, hungry, and cold – even in the tropical heat of a Beaufort summer. But we were whole – uninjured – none the worse for wear – so, after giving the various officials our story – name,

rank, and serial number – and convincing them that we were OK, Col. Blauw – Russ – and his dad drove us the five miles back to our cottage. Yes, we'd drifted five miles upriver.

The next morning a neighbor took us upriver in his big powerboat to try to find ours, and as luck – fate - would have it - at about the spot we left her, we came across her being towed toward the shore at Laurel Bay by a couple of volunteers from an organization called Beaufort Water Rescue. A crabber had found her early in the morning, on the far side of the river; he had called the local Dept. of Natural Resources officer, who, in turn, had enlisted their help.

“Do you know who this boat belongs to,” they shouted as we approached. Even with their 150 horsepower outboard they were just inching along – our submerged boat proving quite the sea anchor. And we thought we could push her to shore!

They dragged her up into the shallows, leaving her on her side. When the tide had receded enough, I would be able to roll her upright and bail her out. I stayed to do that. Kate went back with Barry, our neighbor, to get the car; he would return with his boat when the tide was back up and we were floating again.

Soon after Kate left, a girl fishing on the dock offered me a five gallon bait bucket to use for bailing. The wife of the base commander came down from her house on the shore with lunch, and a hat, and sunscreen. (It was mid-day by then.) And Russ and his wife and children came down to check on me. One of the kids revealed that it was his mom's birthday. I revealed that it was also Kate's. And the young boy expounded on the sight of twelve sharks circling Kate the night before as she swam to shore! We expressed the proper degree of amazement.

About the time I finished bailing out the boat – a lot of water and fully 20 gallons of sandy mud – Kate returned with the car. Col. Blauw and his wife invited us up to their house to wait for Barry. For an hour we chatted about the great adventure; “Do you know how small you looked from here,” they kept saying. “You have no idea!” We had wine and cheese and crackers and thoroughly enjoyed the company of our new friends – until Barry returned to tow us home.

A few days later, after we had worked up the nerve to go out on the boat again, thinking about our rescue, I happened to say, “Those people were so gracious! Maybe that's what we should name the boat.” “How about *Grace*,” Kate replied. And that's her name.

And how fitting! The graciousness of our rescuers exemplified an Old Testament definition of Grace – a kind of “moral quality of kindness.” And it *was* a gift from God – if we think of God as the “core goodness of life on earth”, as Rebecca Parker would define it. Grace is not something bestowed from above; it simply “is”. It becomes a gift when we recognize it; the care/concern/love displayed by strangers is a manifestation of that core goodness. Our rescuers didn't know us when they extended their kindness; we were neither *of the tribe* or “*the other*” - we were too far away – they extended themselves without knowing. We were simply fellow humans in need.

What is the effect of a gift like this - both this gracious kindness and the confluence of fortunate circumstances.

It awakens us to the goodness and sweetness of life – reminds us of Thich Nhat Hahn’s words, “The great miracle of life is not to fly in the air or walk on the water, but, rather, simply, to walk on the earth.” A gift like this expands our circle of compassion, shrinks the concept of other, reinforces our values – like our belief in the inherent worth and dignity of all people. Kate and I would seem, on the surface, not to have a whole lot in common with a Marine pilot and his family; we have not known anyone who has gone off to fight in Afghanistan or Iraq. Our circle of care is wider now.

And such a gift of grace fills us with *gratitude* – fitting – *gratitude* and *grace* coming from the same root .

Reflecting on the words of the hymn, I think, *Grace* - How sweet the sound “Do you need help!!”

“I once was blind.” I am “blind”, indeed, when I am unaware, not awake to the goodness and beauty of life.

“But now I see.” Newly aware, awake, as in this adventure, “I *do*, indeed, see”.

“How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed” – or when my eyes were opened to it! I believe in the power of Grace, so defined!

Grace likes this teaches my heart to sing - relieves my fears – this awareness of the goodness of life.

Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come.....Grace has brought me safe thus far. Yes!

And, yes, when we’ve been there ten thousand years, we’ve no less days to sing the goodness of life; that’s what we celebrate and hold up here.

This grace is not bestowed from above. It appears, sometimes magically, as *if* from the sky, in odd times and places, but not from a grandfatherly God figure sitting on a cloud – not that odd!

Grace *is*; grace is a fundamental condition of our existence – of the universe. It is the life force – the spirit of life. It is the truth, goodness, and beauty we seek and honor – that we hold up every Sunday morning. We are the richer when it makes itself known to us, opening our eyes to its glory; and we are the richer when we acknowledge it in gratitude - in grace – and, when, in *ethical grace*, Rebecca Parker’s term – we spread it – adding to the stores of goodness and beauty in the world – widening the circle of compassion – accepting our responsibility to make the world a better place – gracefully.

May it be so.

David R. Hudson

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