

Unitarian Society of Hartford
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Events of Grace©¹

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Reading

In their book *Christianity: an Introduction* Denise and John Carmody suggest how effective people can become when they stop trying to control their actions and learn to dance with God.

There is a tantalizing dictum from Christian tradition that puts the covenantal relationship between creator and creatures in the form of a practical maxim. "Act as though everything depended on God and pray as though everything depended on yourself." This maxim is so contrary to most Americans' expectations that frequently they invert it. Surely action, they reason, is our human affair, and prayer is where God comes in. But deeper Christian instinct confounds many other aspects of contemporary Western culture. To the Christian, the priority in all that we observe or do belongs to God the creator, the conserver, the concurer. She is the first cause and the final cause comprehensively.

When people really believe this, Christians assert, their action or work or doing straightens out. Like runners who have learned about stretching, they move easily, with fewer tightnesses and cramps. Like people who have appropriated a trust walk, making it something adult, they let themselves go, expecting that God will catch them when they fall. The results are often impressive. In contrast to the "Type A" behavior of the stereotypic American executive, tight-jawed and hell-bent for a coronary, those who feel God's presence keep their work in perspective, taking cues from the subtle initiatives that a given situation offers. Because they are not pushing, they can receive such initiatives, take in the delicate signs that nature or other people give of how things are flowing. Because their egos are not blocking their horizon, they can move their bodies and minds dexterously. So they resemble a realized Zen master, who has no self and can follow Buddha-nature's flow. So they conjure up T. S. Eliot, who set the still point of union with God in the context of a reality that was a dance. "Dance with me," the Christian God says. "Follow my lead, my music of the spheres."²

Sermon

In much of my work as a philosopher of religion, I have been trying to understand how I can experience the sacred or divine in my daily life. In traditional religious language, how can I experience God? By “God” I do not mean a personal, superhuman, supreme being. I like what our minister BJ has suggested. She says that the “G_O_D” might mean “Good Orderly Design.” In light of what I’m going to say in this sermon, I wonder if “G_O_D” might mean “Good Original Direction.” Something that is good. Something that is original or new. Something that gives us direction in our lives.

One way we might experience Good Original Direction is to focus on a particular kind of event in our experience. These are events that help us grow in significant ways. Sometimes they even transform us so that we gain new self-understandings, undertake new ways of living, and engage in new relationships.

Events that help us grow, that significantly change us, we might call “events of grace.” I first developed the idea of an event of grace when I was in graduate school in 1966 at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary in New York City. At that time I became acquainted with a woman who was about my age and who had many problems. She came from a broken home. She seemed to be drifting through life. And she was almost homeless. At the same time she was a devout Roman Catholic, and in spite of all her problems, she would sometimes say, “Grace happened to me today!”

This phrase startled me. What a peculiar expression—“Grace happened to me.” For several weeks I listened to what she was describing. I concluded that she was describing an event. Whenever something good happened to her, beyond her control, she said, “Grace happened to me.”

I took this idea and wrote a paper for one of my professors. In it I suggested that we might think of God not as a being, not as a person, but as an event—the “grace type event.” And I suggested that an event of grace occurs when things beyond our control come together in such a way that they bring about good.

My professor liked what I had done. On the back of the paper he wrote “Excellent.” He also wrote, “Now the only thing you have to do is explain what you mean by the word ‘good’.” That was humbling. I had failed to define a major key word in my paper. Not a good thing for someone in graduate school.

Of course, he wanted me to define the word “good” because sometimes things can come together in ways beyond our control so that the results are bad for us. An automobile accident can injure us or take a life. The actions of many people can come together unexpectedly to damage an ecosystem and endanger species. Internationally things can come together in such a way as to bring

about a war. So what do “events of grace” do when they bring about good? How do we know what is good?

To define the word “good” I used an idea from the philosopher of religion Henry Nelson Wieman. Wieman is now recognized by some as one of the great theologians of the 20th century, and he was a Unitarian Universalist. We would do well to study Wieman.³

In the most general sense the word “good” means “relations of mutual support.” Relations of mutual support, what does that mean?

For example, relations of mutual support is one way to talk about truth. A particular idea is true if it can be related to other ideas and to experiences in mutually supportive ways, so that the idea helps us understand how our experiences come about and the experiences confirm the idea.

Relations of mutual support is also a way to talk about beauty. According to Wieman, a work of art is a unified and limited whole in which the parts are related to one another and to the whole in mutually vivifying ways.⁴ The parts of a painting come together in ways that enhance one another and also the experience of the viewer.

Relations of mutual support is also a way to talk about a welcoming church congregation. When people come together in such a way that they are able to show concern and give assistance to one another, no matter who they are, a welcoming and caring community is created—and this is good.

So an event of grace occurs when things come together in ways beyond our control and give rise to new relations of mutual support such as new truth, new beauty, and new communities in which all are welcomed and cared for. Events of grace are events of “Good Originating Direction.”

Now I think that events of grace occur all the time. Yet in many cases we are unaware of how things come together to bring about new good for us—until after they have occurred. I wonder if events of grace may become more prevalent in our lives if we do two things: 1) if we in “listen” to what is happening around us, and 2) if we are open to “being led” by the way things seem to be flowing.

You may think that “listening” is a strange metaphor. How can we listen to events as they happen? But for me, the idea of listening expresses what I often feel called to do. It is not listening to words or other kinds of sounds, but a kind of silent listening so that one is “tuned in” to the way things are going in our interactions with others and to the way “nature is flowing” as Carmody and Carmody say in our reading.

In addition to listening in this sense, I think that events of grace are facilitated when we are open to “being led” by the events that are happening. This means a willingness to let go of what we have and to be open to new possibilities. As the Carmodys say, it means following Buddha-nature’s flow, or in Christian terms dancing with God, following God’s lead.

Listening and a willingness to being led help facilitate events of grace—events that increase relations of mutual support and that sometimes transform how we understand ourselves, our relationships with others, and how we behave in the wider world.

Let me illustrate all of this with two examples. These are events that challenged me to become involved in activities in which I am not normally involved, challenged me to grow in my relationships with others and in my own sense of who I am. As I relate them, I hope you will be reminded of times in your own life in which you experienced an event of grace.

In April of 2006 my wife Marj Davis and I visited our granddaughter Jana, who was in her first year at the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, Virginia. The university campus was lovely, and it was a beautiful spring weekend with cherry trees and other flowers blooming.

We enjoyed two of Jana’s classes. We had meals and meaningful conversations with her and four of her friends—the kinds of conversations that make an older generation hopeful about the future. We attended a beautiful concert put on by high school and university choirs. And, on Sunday morning we drove to Arlington, Virginia, to attend worship at an Episcopal church. We went because Jana’s college, woman’s choir was providing some of the music for worship.

The church was an “English style” building—a comfortable house of worship. We sat in the third pew, right behind our granddaughter and her choir-mates in a sanctuary that was almost full.

Three priests — two of them women, conducted the service. Some of the liturgy was beautifully sung. But I was turned off by the theology of the hymns and the ideas in much of the liturgy—really turned off.

However, the sermon by one of the woman priests, emphasizing love and service, was quite moving. And when our granddaughter and her choir-mates sang their first anthem, the crisp pure sound of their harmonious voices was “heavenly.” From that point on I experienced a change, a feeling of warmth and love permeating the “atmosphere.”

The feeling reminded me of one that I had years earlier at an ecumenical science and religion conference, where I was the sole Unitarian Universalist. All

the others were from various Christian churches. As the outsider I was welcomed enthusiastically by openhearted people. At the end of two days of fruitful discussions, I attended the closing worship service, the Eucharist (or communion service) conducted by the Episcopal clergy. Because I felt that I was in a community of love, I joined my companions in taking communion with them in the presence of love--the presence of Christ.

In Arlington that same feeling of love was present as the priests and congregation began the celebration of the Eucharist. One of the priests gave a heartfelt invitation to all present to celebrate. As I sat next to my wife, I thought that we do not usually attend church because she is a minister of the United Church of Christ and I am a member of this Unitarian Universalist congregation. And I realized that this was a rare opportunity to share in significant religious ritual. I whispered to her, "Let's go up."

And we did. To kneel at the communion rail to receive what Christians call the "body and blood of Christ"—a symbol that expresses how human beings can be united together in sacred love.

Jana and a friend from the choir also came to the rail. And so the three of us, none of whom are Episcopalians, celebrated communion together. In that celebration we grew closer together in love.

What I've just described is an example of how events of grace can bring about new good in settings of worship and personal relations. But events of grace can do more. Sometimes they lead to a transformation of our identities, as we are involved in the wider society. Religion is not only about the nurturing of our inner life; it sometimes spurs us into social action for justice and peace. Here is my second example.

As an academic and a philosopher of religion, I have spent most of my life trying to understand and appreciate the differences among people regarding their most fundamental, heartfelt convictions. Therefore, I have often found it difficult to take a firm stand on highly charged religious, social, and political issues.

However, in February of 2003 that changed. As I "listened to events" and "followed the lead" of the way things were going, I found myself caught up in a surprising and remarkable event of grace—one that transformed my identity from "understanding academic" to that of "activist war protestor." This occurred as the United States Government was debating whether to go to war in Iraq.

Looking back on it, this event of grace began over thirty-five years ago when I was in graduate school at Columbia University and Union Seminary. I had become good friends with Bob and Alice Evans, who lived across the hall in our married students' dorm.

After Bob and I received our degrees we went our own ways to teach in different schools. But when I moved to CT a few years ago, I discovered that Bob and Alice lived in the neighboring town of Simsbury and that they were good friends with Marj. So I renewed my graduate school friendship.

Bob and Alice Evans are the founders and co-directors of an organization called Plowshares. Plowshares gets its name from the Hebrew Bible's vision of world peace: the prophet Isaiah says, "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks."⁵ That is, the weapons of war shall become peaceful instruments of growing and harvesting food.

Bob and Alice spend about two-thirds of their time each year traveling the world, conducting training sessions in conflict transformation for religious and political leaders. In 2002 their organization, Plowshares, was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by two members of the South African Parliament for training religious and community leaders in mediation, negotiation, and peace building. The nomination was endorsed by leaders in China and Indonesia, and by some members of the U.S. Congress.

In late December 2002, as Director of Plowshares, Bob was invited to go with a delegation, sponsored by the National Council of Churches, to Iraq on a humanitarian inspection to see what living conditions were like, especially for women and children.

In mid-January 2003, Marj and I went to hear Bob preach at the First Presbyterian Church in Hartford. From him I learned the plight of the civilian population. To my surprise, this plight was the result of United Nations sanctions that were instituted after the 1991 Gulf War. The sanctions made it impossible for Iraqi civilians to have enough food and good drinking water.

As a result, in the ten years from 1992 to 2002, 500,000 children under five had died. And some estimated that 60% of those who survive were malnourished. When Bob Evans was asked to guess the age of a group of children, he said they looked to be nine or ten. He was told that they were fifteen and sixteen. Malnutrition had stunted their growth.

When I heard this, something happened inside of me. I felt that I really cared about what happened to these children.

But this was not the only thing that moved me to concrete action. Other things had been happening. I had heard the minister of our church here, Theresa Cooley, announce that people should bring shoeboxes of soap, toothpaste, toothbrushes, shampoo, combs and hairbrushes to send to the people of Iraq. These would be used in a demonstration at the Main Post office of Hartford. The postal service had a regulation that no package weighing more than twelve ounces could be sent to Iraq. The shoeboxes were designed to

weigh more than twelve ounces. The goal of the demonstration was to try to mail the boxes and be refused—under the eye of the media who would be present.

Meanwhile other churches were doing the same thing. Some of Marj's clergy friends were also involved.

So on Wednesday, January 15, 2003, the birthday of Martin Luther King, Marj and I joined 60 others in 20-degree weather outside the main post office of Hartford for a half-hour ceremony and for the attempt to mail the boxes at the post office.

The ceremony included remarks by a Catholic Priest who is the chaplain of the Connecticut State Legislature, the President of Hartford Seminary, a Rabbi, a Muslim Imam, and some Protestant Ministers. They spoke in honor of Martin Luther King and his work for justice and peace. We sang Negro spirituals.

During the ceremony, a group of eight went into the Post Office and returned with their packages. (Later they were collected and sent by the American Friends Service Committee to Iraq in a special convey via Jordan.) The ceremony closed with a litany led by our UU minister and with our singing "We Shall Overcome"—someday!

I was very apprehensive about getting involved in this demonstration. It just was not who I was—the careful, thoughtful, academic considering all sides of a question. Yet as events proceeded from the Sunday service at which Bob spoke during the next few days, I began to let go, to let myself be led by whatever might happen. So I found myself at the Post Office demonstration.

At first my role there was as one of crowd. However, things were happening that, for me, were much more significant. Before the ceremony I was asked to assist in overseeing the parking. In front of the Post Office was a busy four lane highway. Those coming to the demonstration had to be told to park on side streets or in the parking lot of the Red Roof Inn a block away.

Our people were gathered about 150 feet from the main road, where there was a pickup truck with our boxes to be mailed and a speaker's stand. I and another man were out on the road. The other man knew many of the people. He really managed the parking. But at one point he said, "I think it would help if we had a sign to identify the demonstration. I looked back at the group and there were large signs with blue background and white lettering—"No War on Iraq."

By this time I had let go of my old academic conception of myself and I was quite open to do whatever I was being led to do. I thought to myself: "He's busy with the parking, I guess I'll have to get the sign."

I got the sign and came back. He was still busy telling people where to park as they drove up. And so, moving into what now seemed a natural next step, I said to myself, “I guess I should hold up the sign!”

So there I stood, by myself, on this busy Hartford street. Cars went past. People looked at me and my sign, saying “No War On Iraq.” That is how I became a war protestor.

I share this event not because I am trying to persuade you to be against the war. (Well, maybe I’m trying to persuade a little bit.) The reason why I share this story is because I think it tells us something about events of grace. Events of grace occur when good things happen to us beyond our control. They are facilitated when we “listen” to what is going on around us and are open to “being led” by the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

When we listen and are open, things can come together in unexpected ways to bring about new good such as in increase in loving relationships within a family. And events of grace may also draw us into becoming more actively involved in doing good for others—for the homeless, for the abused, for mistreated animals, for the environment, for those suffering the ravages of war.

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² Denise L. Carmody and John T. Carmody, *Christianity: an Introduction* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1983), p. 20.

³ Two books that nicely complement one another are Henry Nelson Wieman, *The Source of Human Good* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1946) and *Man’s Ultimate Commitment* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1958). The first book is more philosophical; if you find the opening chapter difficult, skip to the second. The second book applies Wieman’s thinking to human society.

⁴ Wieman, *Source of Human Good* p. 133.

⁵ Isaiah 2:4.