

Gracie Allen, Grace Kelly & Our Mothers: Full of Grace
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Today is Mother's Day. I'm asking what our mothers mean, or meant, in our lives. Today I am asking if some of that mothering – or even the lack of mothering – had any modicum of grace infused within, or bit of grace resulting.

Grace can have a spiritual or Divine, God-centered, meaning. Our lives are grace-filled because God smiles on us.

In the Hindu and Sikh religions grace is seen as God's loving favor.

In the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer grace is seen as an "outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace." I guess that means you can just look at someone and know they are full of grace.

In a Catholic view grace is characterized as a supernatural power, lost by human beings in the Garden of Eden when we fell from grace. Grace is a power which elevates and sanctifies human nature so that it is capable of enjoying communion with God. And grace is relatively available. Grace is received through good works, and through the sacraments, the holy rituals of the church – baptism, communion, confirmation, marriage, ordination, the last rites of sanctification for the dying.

In the Protestant view grace is God's unmerited forgiveness and redemption of a sinful humanity. Grace is received through faith alone. We do not, and we cannot, earn forgiveness. We do not, and we cannot, merit redemption. Nothing we humans can do will evoke God's grace. The kind of grace that "taught my heart to fear."

Unitarians and Universalists are historically Protestant, and historically we moved away from this Protestant view of grace. For Unitarians, good works and a good character were all that was needed for salvation. And that salvation was primarily here on earth, not in an afterlife. For Universalists, too, good works on earth were our responsibility. But, more importantly, for Universalists, God was simply too loving an Entity to condemn any of his children to hellfire. Grace is within us. Grace is all around us. We make the grace. And the grace makes us.

Now, when I was a philosophy grad student, we had a discussion about grace. And, I must say, every one of my fellow students would have heard each of these religious definitions and dismissed that word *grace* out of hand. Me, I was a bit more curious, so I looked in my dictionary, and found several other meanings.

On a more everyday level, *grace* is a short prayer, a thanksgiving before meals. We say grace. We bless the bread. This sort of grace is especially seen in Judaism, in which prayers are said after the meal – praising God for providing food, for the good land, requesting mercy on the Jewish people and thanking God for his goodness.

(John Bowker, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, 385-386)

And, on a more mundane level, grace has a number of secular meanings. Heck, a theological definition doesn't even appear until the eighth entry.

Before that grace is "seemingly effortless beauty or charm of movement, form, or proportion. Elegance. A quality pleasing for its charm or refinement. A sense of fitness or propriety. A disposition to be generous or helpful; good will. Mercy; clemency. A favor rendered by one who need not do so; indulgence. A temporary immunity or exemption; a reprieve from the consequences.

In Greek mythology the Graces are three sister goddesses, Aglaia, Euphrosyne, and Talia. These sisters, these Graces, dispense charm and beauty.

And so, grace from God is seen as divine love and protection bestowed freely on people" or "the state of being protected or sanctified by the favor of God" or "an excellence or a power granted by God."

(*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 785)

Ordinary, quotidian, day-to-day grace consists of the unexpected, undeserved gifts of our everyday lives. The gift of crocuses. The gift of a new day dawning. The gift of having a mother; or the gift of her absence.

I began to think of some of the "Graces" I'd known.

I know one Grace back in Duluth. She's 14 years old. A wonderful singer. All the little girls in Religious Education follow her everywhere. Her mothers – one is a registered nurse, one is the music director at the Unitarian church – are very proud of her.

And other Graces:

Gracie Allen (1906-1964) was a comedienne of the first order.

Gracie saw the world with a certain skewed charm. In one skit Gracie tells her neighbor Blanche that she is hosting a wedding that very evening for Mrs. Nelson's daughter Carol. Surprised at the suddenness of the arrangements, and having never heard of Mrs. Nelson or Carol, neighbor Blanche asks, "Is Mrs. Nelson related?" "Oh yes," replies Gracie. "You see, Mrs. Nelson is Carol's mother. So that makes Carol her daughter."

Inviting Blanche to the ceremony, Gracie tells her "Whatever you wear tonight, Blanche, bring an extra large handkerchief. During the ceremony you and I have to do all the crying for the bride's mother." "Isn't she going to be here?" Blanche asks. "Oh yes," Gracie replies, "but she's so glad to get rid of her daughter, she won't be able to cry."

Gracie Allen worked with her husband George Burns. Every plot of their 1950s comedy show is centered on Gracie's misinterpretation of the world around her and the resulting confusion. George once said of Gracie, "She is completely earnest about what she is doing and saying, and I think it is the fact that she is so kind to the rest of the world for its lack of understanding of what is perfectly clear to her that makes people love her.

She is right and everybody else is wrong, but she doesn't blame them – she just gently tries to explain to them, patiently, and puts up with everybody." ("Home Wedding,"

9-28-1958) & (Cheryl Blythe & Susan Sackett, *Say Goodnight, Gracie! The Story of Burns & Allen*, New York: E.P. Dutton, 1986, 39)

Gracie Allen, in her work, seemed to have a sort of grace about her, assured that her view of the world is correct, and patiently revealing its workings to those around her. Gracie showed a sense of propriety, a limitless measure of good will, a grand and free-wheeling generosity of spirit.

Gracie Allen herself was mother to two adopted children, Sandra Jean and Ronald John. By all reports she was a gracious and attentive parent.

I wonder: What would it be like to have a comedienne for a mother? What would it be like to be that mother?

Grace Kelly (1929-1982), actress and princess of Monaco, was born to a family of athletes and a father who became a wealthy entrepreneur. From her earliest years she is said to have displayed a 'tranquility of the soul.'

Grace Kelly's mother was characterized as a strong authority figure and nicknamed 'The Prussian General' by her children. "Ma' Kelly [it is said] maintained an almost military atmosphere in the household. Her displays of affection were rare." She was described as "economical, organized, orderly, and severe." (Yann-Brice Dherbier, ed., *Grace Kelly: A Life in Pictures*, London: Pavilion, 2007, 9)

Ma Kelly's daughter Grace was a hard-worker, calm, determined to be an actress and be taken seriously at her craft. And Grace Kelly was, by all reports, a devoted mother to her three children. Grace was with her youngest daughter, Stephanie, when she lost control of the car she was driving, dying of her injuries. She was 52 years old.

Her son Albert said of his mother that "what was most entrancing about her was her compassion and generosity of spirit." (5)

The grace of Grace Kelly shone from within. In her work as an actress. In her work as a princess. In her work as a mother.

I wonder: What might it be like to have a beauty, an Oscar-award winning actress, a princess for a mother?

In "Grace Under Fire," an American situation comedy of the mid-1990s, the main character, also named Grace Kelly, is a single mom, divorced from an alcoholic husband, raising her three kids. She also is a recovering alcoholic. Later in the series, the son she gave up for adoption very early in her life appears. This Grace meets her life with a succession of one-liners, and a crusty fortitude that is a pleasure to behold.

And I wonder: What would it be like to have an alcoholic, or a recovering alcoholic, as your mother? What would it be like to be that mother? To give up your baby for adoption? To be that adopted child?

I think of other women, women not named Grace, I think of friends, mothers, who have struggled and worried and loved and hugged, and raised wonderful kids. Those who struggled through post-partum depression.

I think of friends who have lost babies to miscarriage; who have chosen abortion or adoption. I think of those for whom pregnancy was an ever-elusive goal. The friends who consciously and conscientiously decided not to have children.

And I think of friends, mothers, who have struggled and worried and loved and hugged, and lost their children to Sudden Infant Death, to cancer, to suicide, to accidental overdose, to the living death of self-destructive lives.

Sometimes grace abounds. Sometimes grace is elusive.

It's Mother's Day. Let's consider another woman, not named Grace.

Mother's Day was first organized 138 years ago by American abolitionist, suffragette, poet and Unitarian Julia Ward Howe (1819-1910). Julia's mother died when she was five years old. I could find no record of who raised her.

In 1870, at the age of 51, Julia Ward Howe organized a Mothers Day for Peace to promote peace and speak out against war. And she issued a Declaration, hoping to gather together women to work for peace.

Julia Ward Howe wrote:

Arise then...women of this day!
Arise, all women who have hearts!
Whether your baptism be of water or of tears!
Say firmly:
Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn
all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience.
We, the women of one country,
will be too tender of those of another country
to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs."

Let [women] solemnly take counsel with each other as to the means
Whereby the great human family can live in peace...

Mothers for peace.

Reading about Julia Ward Howe's life I discovered there is strong evidence that her husband, Samuel Gridley Howe, also a Unitarian, physically and mentally abused her.

Her diary indicates that the marriage was violent, Samuel controlling and resentful. The Howes considered divorce several times. Julia stayed, in part because she admired Samuel's humanitarian work for the abolition of slavery, and in part because he threatened to keep her from her children if she divorced him — that being the legal standard and common practice of the time.

Instead of divorce, Julia Ward Howe studied philosophy on her own, learned several languages and — at that time a bit of a scandal for a woman — devoted herself to her own self-education as well as the education and care of her children.

Despite her husband's opposition, Julia began to get more involved in writing and in public life. She ultimately took two of their children to Rome, leaving Samuel behind in Boston.

I wonder: What would it be like to have an abused mother? To be that abused mother? To be a child watching?

What would it be like to have a mother who worked to better the world? To be that mother.

Today we think of our own mothers, living and dead, loving or not, present to us or not.

We remember Julia Ward Howe. We remember the Graces. We remember our friends, those who are mothers and those who are not.

We think of the millions of women holding their children, trying to keep them safe and sound. We think of the hundreds of thousands of women whose children have been taken from them through the violence of poverty, the violence of war, the violence in our streets, the violence in our homes.

We hold in our hearts the mothers in Palestine, in Afghanistan, in Iraq and Iran, in Tibet. The mothers in refugee camps.

Those mothers, rejoicing and struggling, in our own neighborhoods.

We remember those mothers who were funny. Who were beautiful.

We remember those mothers who were self-destructive. Who were wounded souls.

We remember our own mothers, living and dead, loving or not, present to us or not. We call to mind our own mothering. We remember our relationships with our mothers, our children, grace-filled, graceless, a confusing mixture of both.

Sometimes grace abounds. Sometimes grace is elusive.

(Naming of mothers – or those who acted as our mothers – into this sacred space)

The Sufi poet Rumi writes:

Something opens our wings. Something

makes boredom and hurt disappear.

Someone fills the cup in front of us.

We taste only sacredness.

“The winds of grace are always blowing, declares Ramakrishna, but you have to raise the sail.” We cannot control the unexpected gifts of grace, but we must be willing to receive them.

Buddhist Joanna Macy observes, “Grace happens when we act with others on behalf of our world.” Generosity, goodwill, mercy, a reprieve from our suffering and grief – moments of grace happen. We find “gracelets” – “moments of meaning in the mundane.” (Celeste Snowber Schroeder) We rejoin the world and work on its behalf.

(Fredric and MaryAnn Brussat, *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life*, New York: Touchstone, 1996, 182-183.)

Sometimes grace abounds. Sometimes grace is elusive.

May we find the light or electricity or juice or breeze that takes us from our isolated places to a place of love.

May amazing grace – generosity, mercy, good will, ordinary gifts beyond reckoning – may grace fill our days and our world.

May life flow fresh and free for us.

May something open our wings.

Make boredom and hurt disappear.

Someone fill the cup in front of us.

And may we taste only sacredness.

May it ever be so. May we make it so. Blessed Be. Amen.

Reading #1

“Grace” from Anne Lamott’s *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, New York: Anchor, 1999, 139)

Grace [is] the force that infuses our lives and keeps letting us off the hook. It is unearned love – the love that goes before, that greets us on the way. It’s the help you receive when you have no bright ideas left, when you are empty and desperate and have discovered that your best thinking and most charming charm have failed you. Grace is the light or electricity or juice or breeze that takes you from that isolated place and puts you with others who are as startled and embarrassed and eventually grateful as you are to be there.

Reading #2

“Journey of Grace” by Heidi Wahl

Many of you may know that my daughter Carla has Cystic Fibrosis, a genetic and fatal illness. Many young people with CF have lost their battle, and I want to honour those families who have lost their children too soon, and all families who care for an ‘imperfect’ child.

When my daughter was born, all my hopes, dreams and plans for a ‘normal’ life were shattered. I had to choose a different path as I cared for my daughter. It hasn’t been easy, but I have learned that attaining anything worthwhile is not supposed to be ‘easy’. I have read that parents of children with a chronic illness may experience a constant underlying feeling of sadness, because the dream you had for your child has died, and it is as much for this broken dream that you grieve, as you do for your broken child. Tears are shed. Grief, bitterness, disbelief, sadness, self-pity, and anger run amok as you try to make sense of it all, until you realize that you don’t need to understand it, you need to accept it. And when that happens, if you allow it, so does a miracle – for out of that acceptance you will find yourself in a state of grace. As my daughter grew, I gradually came to realize that she wasn’t going to die today – or next week, or even next year – it was her life that I was meant to focus on and not her imminent death. I have been able to enjoy and celebrate her life’s milestones, some of which a parent of a ‘normal’ child might take for granted – from a first birthday, to a high school graduation, to a big 30th birthday, which my daughter celebrated last year! I have strived to grow in acceptance and grace and have come to enjoy my new path my daughter and I are traveling.

And it is has been the many good people along the way – people that care and want to help, volunteers, the medical community, friends, family – that have helped me on my journey of experiencing acceptance and grace. They have given me the strength in the knowledge that I am not alone. I have learned to enjoy the beauty of today. Now, laughter, fun, companionship, and even joy have found their way into my repertoire of emotions.

My spirit sings.

“Mom Interrupted” from Anne Lamott’s *Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Penguin, 2007, 225-230)

My mother has been dead for several years. But old mothers never die, and they never fade away. They are too complicated for either.

For a long time after her death, I didn’t feel much of anything – except relief – because I’m a complicated mother, too, and I have my hands full as it is. I felt much more spaciousness in my life after my mother died, partly because my phone did not ring every

several seconds, and partly because I didn't have to be both a complicated mother and a complicated daughter at the same time.

My mother was a handful. You can ask her best friends and her sibling: she was imperious, with no self-esteem, which is a terrible combination. She was controlling, judgmental, withholding, needy, and desperate to be loved.She was a black-belt co-dependent.

Everyone always said how proud she was of me. But she mostly forgot to mention this to me, and instead held other people's kids up as true successes: people with college degrees, spouses, stylish clothes.

When my mother was alive, I felt like strangling her about half the time. The rest of the time, though, I was tender and dutiful toward her, on every level of her existence, there at her side like an aggrieved bellhop throughout our forty-eight years together.

Fortunately, I was still drinking much of that time....

Now here it is, three years later, and I am beginning to miss her. Before now, I missed having had a healthier, more elegant mother. But now I miss her, Nikki Lamott.