

**Undeserved Does Not Mean  
Undeserving  
The Rev. Linda Slabon  
Minister, Unitarian Universalist Fellowship  
of DeKalb  
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**First Reading** *Guilt* Wishful Thinking Frederick Buechner  
The danger of our guilt, both personal and collective, is less that we won't take it to heart than that we'll take it to heart overmuch and let it fester there in ways that we ourselves often fail to recognize. We condemn in others the wrong we don't want to face in ourselves...the sense of our own inner brokenness estranges us from the very ones who could help patch us together again. We steer clear of setting things right with the people we have wronged since their mere presence is a thorn in our flesh. Our desire to be clobbered for our guilt and thus rid of it tempts us to do things we will be clobbered for. The dismal variations are endless.

It is about as hard to absolve yourself of your own guilt as it is to sit in your own lap...In order to break the circuit we need somebody before whom we can put aside the disguise, trusting that when he or she sees us for what we fully are, she or he won't run away screaming (or screaming with laughter). Our trust in him or her leads us to trust their trust in us...for a moment then the vicious circle stops circling and we can step down onto the firm ground of acceptance.

**Second Reading:** *The Journey* New & Selected Poems, V. 1 Mary Oliver

One day you finally knew  
what you had to do, and began

Though the voices around you  
kept shouting their bad advice –  
Though the whole house began to tremble  
and you felt the old tug at your ankles.  
“Mend my life!” each voice cried.  
But you didn’t stop.

You knew what you had to do,  
though the wind pried with its stiff fingers  
at the very foundations,  
though their melancholy was terrible.  
It was already late enough,  
and a wild night,  
And the road full of fallen branches and stones.

But little by little,  
as you left their voices behind,  
The stars began to burn through the sheets of clouds,  
And there was a new voice  
which you slowly recognized as your own,  
That kept you company  
as you strode deeper and deeper into the world,  
Determined to do  
the only thing you could do –  
Determined to save  
the only life you could save.

**Sermon Background Blurb:** I was taught that “grace” meant “undeserved love” but my thoughts and family legacy twisted the meaning until I believed that I was “undeserving”. How is it that we self-sabotage or undermine grace-filled loving? And how is it that grace-filled loving redeems and transforms us?

### ***Undeserved Does Not Mean Undeserving***

At the age of 24, a fresh student of theology, I was browsing the seminary bookstore in Hyde Park, and there I discovered author and theologian Carl Frederick Buechner. Buechner was born on July 11, 1926 in New York and was ordained as a Presbyterian minister. He authored some 36 books, was nominated for a Pulitzer in literature, and among my favorites is his book *Wishful Thinking, A Theological ABC*. "Grace" writes Buechner, "is something you can only be given. There's no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream...or bring about your own birth...There is nothing **you** have to do. There is nothing you **have** to do. There is nothing you have to **do**" (*Wishful Thinking*, p. 33-34).

It's nice. Affirming. But being "given grace" didn't mean much to me until I understood how deeply I could be hurt, and how much I could hurt others. It was Buechner's reflective piece on guilt that made me pause now...for at the age of 58 I now have a longer view. Now I can see how the ribbons of guilt, forgiveness, and grace intertwine, how the brokenness and pain in my family was a legacy, carried on by me, and how grace filled moments guided me in the ways that Mary Oliver describes in her poem "The Journey". Phrases such as "you knew what you had to do though their melancholy was terrible" and "there was a new voice which you slowly recognized as your own" and "you strode deeper and deeper into the world determined to save the only life you could save" are phrases I have lived.

Alcoholism was handed down in my family from my grandfather to my father. In the early years my dad was funny and affectionate, a successful businessman, but the

alcohol did its work increasing the alienation between he and my mother. As she became more shrill, demanding, and frantic for connection and intimacy, he withdrew, drinking at a local bar. Mom would have me call to speak with the owner. I was maybe 10 or 11. "Hi Mr. Locascio. Please tell my Dad to come home. Mom says we're all waiting for him before we can eat dinner." My parent's dance of submerged rage, over-functioning and under-functioning, and the rules for behavior in public – which included cover-up-the-drinking and don't-tell-family-secrets -- played out in the endless dismal variations of guilt that Buechner refers to.

As the eldest child, I was the good girl, in the literature on alcoholism – the hero child. I was the one who did no alcohol or drugs through high school and most of college. I was the first-born, the most wanted baby and I knew I was loved by my family. Having grown up in a Christian church, I was taught and fully accepted the concept of being a recipient of God's undeserved grace. But none of that stopped me, none of that kept me from repeating the pattern – I married a man who was an alcoholic. It was downright scary to see the legacy of my parent's dance of the undeserving, become the dance of my own life. Even as I scrambled to help my husband, as I prayed to be the faithful, patient, and strong wife, at the same time I was sinking into fear. My self-esteem sank lower and lower as I saw myself as undeserving of respect or a healthy relationship. So there I was ashamed of the cycle I was in and silently self-sabotaging.

Perhaps you've been more fortunate in your life...I hope so. But each of us has a story, and I ask you to consider: In what ways have you self-sabotaged or undermined genuine grace-filled moments of love or acceptance. You

find yourself grasping at, or simply falling into, the familiar habits, and the psychological pushes and pulls of deeply entrenched family patterns or legacies that alienate you, distance you, and wound others? How is it that grace-filled loving can possibly intervene to redeem and transform us?

I digress from my own story for a bit to take a look at a gospel story. Remember that gospel story from the book of John chapters 7:53 – 8:11? You'll know it as soon I say, "It's the one about the woman taken in adultery". A self-righteous group of leaders -- Scribes and Pharisees -- brought the woman to shame her and trap him. "Teacher," they say with sarcasm, "we are commanded to stone her, to kill her. What do you say?" The text says Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger in the dust. I imagine this as a moment of deep quiet and gathering grace, so that when Jesus said, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone" it was not a vitriol of shaming and blaming, but was an invitation for each person to look into his own heart and this moment of grace interrupted the vicious cycle of guilt. As the powerful leaders each acknowledged their own pride and capacity to wound others, grace intervened and the cycle could stop. The crowd dispersed and the shamed woman, who was not punished, was asked by Jesus, "Has no one condemned you?" She answered, "No one." And Jesus said, "Neither do I."

I believe that because Jesus saw her for who she truly was and yet extended love and compassion rather than condemnation, she could begin to trust herself.

Back to my story...How is it that grace-filled love intervened to redeem and transform me? Today I will credit 3 grace-filled moments (I use "moment" here loosely to refer not to a short interval, but to grace

revealing itself in a stretch of my life – which, like all lives, in its entirety is but a fragment of time):

**Grace-filled moment #1** – My therapist Mary was my Jesus – my person who saw me for whom I truly was and spoke with compassion so that I could learn to trust myself. It was Mary who told me it was not my job to save my husband and not my fault that I couldn't save my parents. It was my job to save myself (as Mary Oliver recommends) and part of that salvation was that I became a therapist myself.

**Grace-filled moment #2** –As an undergrad college student I read, well.. I ingested the writing of existentialist philosopher Paul Tillich (born: Starosiedle, Poland 1886-1965 died: Chicago, IL), who is regarded as one of the most influential theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He wrote a sermon "*You are Accepted*" published in his 1948 book of sermons entitled *The Shaking of the Foundations*. The sermon is based on Paul's letter to the Romans 5:20: *But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.*

Tillich suggests that sin is best understood as estrangement or separation from others, from ourselves, and from the Ground of our being. Grace is described as reunion, a reunion with the Ground of our being and this leads to a reunion with ourselves and with others. We are not in control of it. We cannot force it to happen, take credit for it, or even be sure that it will happen at all. Tillich wrote,

*"Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual*

*because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged ... It strikes us when year after year, the longed for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness. If that happens to us, we experience grace. After such an experience, we may not be better than before, and we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed."*

**Grace-filled moment #3** – is my lived experience of grace that wove together the ribbons of guilt, forgiveness and grace. For 10 years I was estranged from my Dad. It was due to a lot of things: my mom had died after brain aneurisms and throat cancer – and the grief tore at us. I became a lesbian and then a Unitarian Universalist – it was just **too much** for my conservative family. And the family alcoholism and judgmental attitudes were too much for me. After 10 years there was some healing of our fragile relationship, but Dad – now in his late 70s - continued to refuse help. Drinking and ill, he fell, and the doctors would not let him return home.

I invite you now to join me in one of my most precious memories of grace: My father sat in a wheelchair in his room at a nursing home in DeKalb. He had congestive heart failure and horribly swollen legs with sores but the staff and I were hopeful that he could do well. A few days earlier I had loaded his things and driven him from a Chicago facility myself because he refused ambulance transport. Too expensive, he barked. The ride in the sunshine had been bliss for him and I still remember that. I stopped by a few days later to check on him. I combed his hair, unpacked more items, bundled up some laundry to take home, and said, "Dad, I've got to go. I have some

work to do." He asked me to fix the TV, then get a magazine, then just one more thing, one more, and another one more thing, and with creeping exasperation I said, "Dad, I've *really* got to go." "Fine, GO," he snapped. Me pleading, "I've got to do this work" I said, as I gathered up my purse, jacket, his laundry, my keys and made my way to his door. Just as I was about gone he yelled, "I love you." Frustrated and my nerves gritty by then too, I groused back, "I love you too."

It was NOT a sweet exchange. It was raw and filled with cranky humanness, but it was filled with grace. A few days later he died. The cycle of guilt and shame are broken because I have been seen and I now own the truth that I am deserving. Grace was shared in that cranky, irritable, frazzled moment of shouted love - that I cherish. And I may not be better than before, but everything is transformed.