

## *Little Graces (1.25.26 Reflection)*

A year or two ago the quote on our bulletin cited a Robert Holden reading: “Practice wonder today- be present, begin again, know nothing, and allow everything to surprise you, excite you, entertain you, teach you. Be fully open to life, today and let yourself live wonderfully”.

Steve Miller’s reflection that day was called “Surprise as a Spiritual Discipline” and I wanted to revisit this idea, as it spoke to me about my spirituality and how I discern God.

Some of you may have noticed that I often scribble notes on my bulletins during Sunday service- call them “epiphanies” or “got it” moments - and on that particular Sunday I wrote “serendipity and grace” and “nature” and “momentary”.

When I come to church or walk in the woods- I try to be open to seeing, hearing, smelling.... and hopefully feeling “the little moments, observations, epiphanies”. These are what I consider and call little graces- with a little “g”.

Here are a few of my favorite First Church examples of little graces: Joan’s bemused smile, Gene’s upturned brow at an errant note, the serendipity of the 11:00 bell (OK, bad example, as not one of us is particularly surprised when the bell rings mid-sermon... every single Sunday), morning sun suddenly breaking from the clouds and streaming through these tall southerly window, and once, while seated quietly before service started, hearing the scurrying of a small-to-median sized rodent or other mammal along the sanctuary basement ductwork. These are wonders, humors, and details of life that should be observed, recognized and remembered. Little graces or little magic traces... may

happen at any moment. And if you pay attention, you really do have the best seat in the house whether it's in church, looking out your window, on the street, in the library, in the restaurant, or in the woods.

Moving to my second favorite spiritual classroom: In quasi-retirement I've been able to spend more time walking and observing the natural world. I have been traveling the area's class 6 (abandoned town) roads, traversing meadows and golf links, hiking hilltops and bushwacking through and woodlands. Being in nature at times, in different weathers, in different moods, most often alone but sometimes with Toni or Wallace (dog), I've realized the changeability of atmosphere, light, landscapes, waterways, trees and forests, and grasses and fields. Even stone walls change.

Every morning, the sun that clears the easterly horizon, hundreds of miles east of Boston harbor, creates a new color on the top of the Mt. Monadnock- pink, red, gold, green. A tree row along a field at 4pm on a Monday may be totally different an hour later, or at 4pm on a Tuesday. Part of the magic about graces is that they are never exactly the same twice.

Robert Frost's poem, *Nature's First Green Is Gold*, the quote used at the beginning of the bulletin, and my mother's all-time favorite poem, likewise speaks to the temporal, the fleeting in nature.

I've been taking photos- my canvas for seeing (or excuse for stopping to look)- Not as a formal creative activity but simply to record and look at the form, pattern, texture, color, shade, hue, shape, contrast, negative and positive juxtaposition of all aspects of nature and God's work. Sometimes I go back and look at the pictures, but often I do not. It is really the act of noticing, not the recording, that is the important thing.

How many of you have fished a stream? You know then that putting on a pair of waders and shuffled out into the current is a magical experience- surrounded by moving water, light from the atmosphere reflected from the liquid water and solid rocks in the streambed, an overlapping of sounds, trickling or violent, vibrations of rushing water over pebbles beneath, tiny particles of water suspended in the air forming an atmospheric river. Never you mind the fishing. Again, it is the exercise.

The Trappist monk and writer Thomas Merton wrote of spending time in the woods on a rainy night, *“Think of it, All of that Speech pouring down, selling nothing, judging nobody... what a thing it is to sit absolutely alone, in the forest, at night, cherished by this wonderful, unintelligible, perfectly innocent speech, the most comforting speech in the world, the talk that rain makes by itself all over the ridges.... Nobody started it, nobody is going to stop it. It will take as long as it wants, this rain. As long as it talks, I am going to listen.”*

Little graces come from paying attention as completely and as often as possible- paying attention to the natural and human world, our surroundings, and each other:

(Paying attention...) To a flame, To a ripple, To a bite, To a sip, To a hello, To a hug, To a scent, To a bell, To a smile, To a tear

I think that Mary Oliver’s poem Gratitude, read by Linda earlier, perfectly suggests what questions can expose graces, like she was teaching in a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade classroom:

What did you notice?

What did you hear?

When did you admire?

What astonished you?

What would you like to see again?

What was the most tender?

What was the most wonderful?

What did you think was happening?

I hope you all will re-read Gratitude at some quiet time this week.

Because we can't recognize these affirmations of God's presence when we are plugged into electronic devices, blitzed by the media and advertising, and controlled by the speed and chaos (or routine and monotony) of our lives we fall prey to "the blur".

In his book, *My Life as Told By Water*, David James Duncan (a fly fisherman by the way) points out that the human eye is a terrible physiological adaptation. He writes *"If we focus not on how the eyeball works but on how we experience our sense of sight in action, the camera becomes a hopelessly inept model. We all live, at all times, in the center of an extremely complex, perfectly visible sphere. There is at all times a visible ceiling or sky above us, a visible floor or ground below, and an almost infinite number of visible objects occupying a 360-degree surrounding. What we see of this up, down, and surround is, almost literally, nothing. Human vision is as remarkable for what it screens out, or simply fails to see, as for what it actually perceives. Our sight zooms in constantly on details, blinding us to the surround; it pans, constantly, over the surround's surface, giving us "the view" but no detail; is sidetracked, constantly, by desire, fatigue, daydreams, moods, fantasies, during which we see outward objects yet perceive them not at all. This is hardly the performance of a Kodak product. If our eyes were intended to be cameras, we all deserve our money back.*

Duncan's reflection about our eyes not focusing, seems the perfect metaphor for our not focusing and missing so much, especially the beautiful little things from God.

Let me leave you with these two quotes to contemplate:

From the late Christian faith write, Rachel Held Evans, *"Grace is just a doctrine when we withhold it from ourselves. Grace must be lived and breathed. Perhaps you are not where you want to be today — Breathe. Live into the grace offered to you from God. And don't worry. Things take the time they take."*

And from Cathy George, our visiting pastor three weeks ago: "Authentic signs of God accompany all of us"....

And I say, they are most visible when we are open to them."

Poem: Mary Oliver, *Gratitude*

*What did you notice?*

The dew-snail;  
the low-flying sparrow;  
the bat, on the wind, in the dark;  
big-chested geese, in the V of sleekest performance;  
the soft toad, patient in the hot sand;  
the sweet-hungry ants;  
the uproar of mice in the empty house;  
the tin music of the cricket's body;  
the blouse of the goldenrod.

*What did you hear?*

The thrush greeting the morning;  
the little bluebirds in their hot box;  
the salty talk of the wren,  
then the deep cup of the hour of silence.

*When did you admire?*

The oaks, letting down their dark and hairy fruit;  
the carrot, rising in its elongated waist;  
the onion, sheet after sheet, curved inward to the pale green wand;  
at the end of summer the brassy dust, the almost liquid beauty of the flowers;  
then the ferns, scrawned black by the frost.

*What astonished you?*

The swallows making their dip and turn over the water.

*What would you like to see again?*

My dog: her energy and exuberance, her willingness,  
her language beyond all nimbleness of tongue,  
her recklessness, her loyalty, her sweetness,  
her strong legs, her curled black lip, her snap.

*What was most tender?*

Queen Anne's lace, with its parsnip root;  
the everlasting in its bonnets of wool;  
the kinks and turns of the tupelo's body;  
the tall, blank banks of sand;  
the clam, clamped down.

*What was most wonderful?*

The sea, and its wide shoulders;  
the sea and its triangles;  
the sea lying back on its long athlete's spine.

*What did you think was happening?*

The green beast of the hummingbird;  
the eye of the pond;  
the wet face of the lily;  
the bright, puckered knee of the broken oak;  
the red tulip of the fox's mouth;  
the up-swing, the down-pour, the frayed sleeve of the first snow—  
so the gods shake us from our sleep.