

On Falling From Grace

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Back in January, when the winter was just beginning to settle in around us, and before we knew for certain how difficult a winter it was going to be, I delivered myself of a sermon in which I attempted to answer the question, "What is grace." I talked about the sense that sometimes comes over us that our lives are lived in a larger context, a deeper dimension, a sense that we are a part of a web of relationships which includes our families, our friends, our remote ancestors, our descendants, and all the natural processes of the earth and the universe which have come to focus in us and in our lives. I talked about the sense of wonder at what we are, and what we have become and what we might yet be and a sense of spontaneous gratitude that we are called into being and sustained in being by forces over which we have no control and which are under no obligation to us. I defined grace both as the constant reality of our existence and as the opportunity we have to live in rich awareness of the larger forces which live through us.

At the conclusion of that sermon, someone asked me if I would address the other side of the question: about living in times of darkness, when it is difficult or impossible to discover any larger dimension to our lives. That, I have learned, is a much more difficult assignment. It is difficult not because I do not experience those dark moments of the soul, but because those are times not easily shared. The truth is, our culture invites us to be open about the times of light and hope and joy, and to keep secret, to hug to ourselves the darkness at the center of our being. Perhaps, therefore, the place to begin thinking about how to live when the world is not a place of endless delight, when the future seems more a threat than a promise, when purpose eludes us and habit replaces hope as the engine of our existence, perhaps the place to begin is with confession.

The truth is that there has always been a dark place at the center of my being--a void and an emptiness which nothing has ever been able to fill. Perhaps it is related to the fact that my mother died when I was nine-months old and still a nursing infant. I have no recollections of my mother, but, from my earliest memories, I have always had a feeling at the center of my being--a feeling I can not describe fully, but which partakes of a sense of emptiness which is almost, but not quite an ache. This ache (which I sometimes define as a grief and an anger which remains with me because it went unvoiced since I had no words to shape it) most of the time remains buried deep beneath my busyness, and I can ignore it for months. But there are times when the emptiness and sorrow come pouring out of the well that is deep in me and overwhelm my world. And then it is that I find myself in a one dimensional existence in which there is neither depth nor meaning nor power nor resonance.

When this spirit is upon me, I truly feel that I have fallen from grace. The world of nature, about which I write so often, and in which I find rich metaphors for my own existence and powerful insights into the meaning of our sojourn on this beautiful planet, loses its ability to touch my soul, becomes colorless, becomes opaque, becomes ordinary and predictable and mute. I walk the familiar paths, see the familiar sights, hear the familiar sounds, but nothing touches my soul, nothing speaks to me, nothing calls to me, and I am an isolated being, disconnected and disconsolate, a stranger in a familiar land. The song of the birds, the surprise of the flowers, the dance of the butterflies mock me. Where once I was part of their song, their surprise, their dance, now I am cut off and unable to enter into the great world process.

And then it is that I feel--or almost feel--that ancient, primordial ache that is part yearning and part emptiness rise up in me and sweep away all my defenses and flood my soul. Then there is no voice that can call me to myself; then there is no book that can renew my confidence; then there is no path that leads me beyond myself. Habit and competence replace excitement and daring and novelty. Grace has fled my world, and I am truly fallen into despair.

Many things trigger this loss of grace. Sometimes, I am overwhelmed by the world we share. I read of the endless brutality: civil war in Bosnia or Rwanda; terrorists slaughtering the innocent in Palestine; teenagers in our cities shooting each other in random and pointless acts of violence; wives beaten by their husbands and children murdered by their parents; and always, the state responding with executions and other acts of vengeance, and I find all my brave words about meaning and purpose and beauty hollow and empty and mocking. Sometimes I am ambushed by my own sense of inadequacy: I cannot dismiss from my mind the haunting reminder of things I have not done, of needs I have not met, of people I have failed to serve; I am oppressed by foolish things I have said and done; I am haunted by a vision of things that might be changed had I the insight and the courage and the strength to inspire others to see what I see. Sometimes it is fatigue--too much running hither and yon, unable to distinguish between the urgent and the truly important. Sometimes it is simple loneliness--in a world crowded with people the one person I most need is not there, cannot be there. Sometimes it is powerlessness--I have not the strength to do what needs to be done.

Many things trigger the loss of grace, the sense of having fallen from grace. For me, only one thing serves to rescue me from despair. I have learned, over time, that eventually the emptiness flooding my soul will return to its source, if I wait patiently and expectantly for the coming of renewal. When that aching emptiness has taken control of my soul it leaves me with only one resource--endurance: the willingness to give myself over to habit and routine and necessity. But that one resource, I discover is enough. And the time, will come when, walking the dog one morning because it is my duty and not because there is any joy in it, a squirrel will suddenly dart up a tree in front of me and do some impossible acrobatic leap and drag my reluctant spirit after it and I will suddenly understand that the world is truly absurd, but delightfully absurd. Walking down the street, wrapped in my sense of hopelessness at the horror and brutality afflicting the human community, I will suddenly see a child in a stroller, sitting up, reaching out, straining to embrace the world,

a smile of innocence and openness in her eyes, and I suddenly know that the pain is real and the suffering is real, but so is the love and the hope and the promise. At my desk, grinding out one more piece for the newsletter, one more sermon, I am suddenly surprised at what I have written and I am reminded that though I am often inadequate to the task before me, there are times when something speaks through me with a power not mine to master or control or command. At home, alone, feeling isolated and unable to reach out or even to speak my need, the music playing not because I want to listen but because I cannot bear the silence, suddenly a piece of music, perhaps Beethoven's great violin concerto in D major, will reach out to me, will ensorcelle me, will shatter my loneliness and invite me into the mind and soul of one long dead, and I will know that what I am feeling others have felt and that there "is a unity which binds us forever together in spite of time and death and the space between the stars." And sometimes the telephone rings when I need to hear that one voice. And sometimes a book falls open to a poem I have read a dozen times before and I read it now for the very first time and then it is that the aching emptiness ebbs back into its well at the center and the renewal begins.

I am suggesting that for me, grace, like the springtime, eventually returns, no matter how long and hard the winter. But I have learned something else: The seasons of the soul, like the seasons of the year, move at their own pace and cannot be hurried. And like the seasons of the year, each season of the soul has its own peculiar gift. For my spiritual development and well-being, I need the winter as much as I need the spring; I need the void fully as much as I need the pregnant moment. I have come to realize that much of who I am and much of the power that has been given me is rooted not in the spring sunshine and fulfillment, but in the empty winter darkness. I am who I am, in large part because of that aching void at the center. It is that which gives me what ability I have to see the world as I see it, to cherish the world in all its imperfect reality, to hope against hope, to struggle where struggle seems foolish and pointless, to dream where the dream seems mocked by reality. The world is luminous for me because it shines against that primordial darkness; the hope is real because it rises despite that ancient futility; the joy is transcendent because it rings in defiance of that central despair. For grace to be real in my soul, I must be willing to submit myself to the times when a nameless sorrow, a wordless grief arises unbidden from deep within me and reasserts its ancient claim.

When I was in seminary, preparing for the Unitarian Universalist ministry, I encountered an eighty-year-old theologian, Dr. Henry Nelson Wieman. Dr. Wieman was a man with a world-wide reputation. He had written a shelf of books, outlining his empirical theology. Now retired, he traveled to Chicago once a week to teach a group Unitarian Universalist seminary students. I can still hear his voice explaining that God is not outside the human world and beyond human experience. Rather, he said, the holy is that process which brings us into life, sustains us in live, and has the power to transform us and the world as we cannot transform ourselves when the appropriate and necessary conditions have been met. Dr. Wieman had spent most of his life trying to define those necessary conditions which make creative transformation possible within human beings and within the human community. He talked about living with a deep and persistent appreciation of the fullness of the other, of creating situations in which we can be fully understanding and

appreciative of the other, of inviting and welcoming creative interchange with other people and the world.

But in the end, he said, the creative processes by which we come into being, are sustained in being, and are transformed and renewed are never in our control. The process of spiritual growth, of human transformation are always larger than we know, and rooted in the same processes which brought the universe into being and evoked life on this planet, and caused it to evolve over time. And that process, he said, is never easy, or painless or without its disappointments. It responds to a directive in history of which we are only dimly aware at most. Given a choice, most of us would settle for the status quo, for things as they are, for the world with which we are familiar. Though the present is sometimes painful and disappointing, it is a world we know and with which we have somehow made our peace. Transformation, he said, means changing everything, including even our dreams and our hopes and our ambitions. It is always, at the beginning, painful and alienating and disruptive; for, it challenges and overthrows and destroys the status quo. To embrace the new possibility, we must learn, said Dr. Wieman, "to live richly with dark realities."

To live richly with dark realities is to know that everything is always in process, that no achievement is ever final, that no moment will last, that every joy carries a sorrow, that no success is ever total, that every accomplishment is a springboard to another challenge. To live richly with dark realities is to understand that all I am today is ephemeral and will be challenged by tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. To find grace is not to avoid the challenge, not to flee the change, not to deny the pain but to seek carefully to discover what the world, what the moment, what the experience has to teach, to learn the lesson contained in every aspect of life, to seize the gift which each season brings, to let it enter fully into your being and what transformation, painful or otherwise, it has to offer, trusting that in ways you cannot always see or understand what will emerge will be a more integrated, richer, deeper understanding and appreciation of the self, of others and of the world.

When the world is shadowed and the path ahead is unclear, and joy has been smothered by an impenetrable blanket of the ordinary and the common-place, then it is that I wait, in patience, for the meaning to come clear. And always it comes clear; for, in truth, there is no falling from grace. There are only seasons of the soul in which we grow from what we have been and are to what we shall be.