

NOTHING SHORT OF GRACE

A sermon by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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The best part of Super Bowl LI, in my opinion, wasn't Donald Trump's favorite golfing buddy becoming the winningest quarterback in Super Bowl history, though the last 20 minutes of football were as masterful a quarterback performance as any I've ever seen. Nor was the best part the Lady Gaga-palooza halftime show, although I applaud the thematic bridge between her opening rendition of Woody Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land," with its not-so-subtle claim that this land was made for you *and* me, and her own anthem "Born This Way," with its embrace of people who've been "outcast, bullied, or teased," as Gaga sings.

My favorite part of the Super Bowl was the 84 Lumber commercial about a mother and her young daughter making their way to America, presumably from some distant part of Mexico. Carrying only a few precious belongings, mother and daughter hitch rides, hop trains, and walk dusty paths. Along the way, the daughter collects detritus to weave an American flag. At every turn, they rely on the generosity of strangers.

When they finally make it to the border, they encounter a wall. Undaunted, the young girl pulls out her American flag and hands it to her mother. Then they look up and see a pair of doors in the wall before them. They push on the doors, swing them open, and enter the United States. The film ends with a quotation: "The will to succeed is always welcome here."

As most of you doubtless know, Fox wouldn't allow the five-minute commercial to be shown in its entirety, because they said it was too political and too controversial. Fox aired the first 90 seconds and referred viewers to a website to watch the remainder, but the website promptly crashed because of the traffic. Even so, more than 10 million viewers have now watched the film.

I didn't know until later that 84 Lumber's owner and president, Maggie Hardy Magerko, is a Trump supporter who sees the film as celebrating, as she puts it, Trump's "big beautiful door" to admit legal immigrants. My own view is that Ms. Magerko should have a word with her ad agency, because I'm not sure that's the film they made.

Interspersed among shots of the mother and daughter traveling, we see shots of a construction site. The scenes are filmed so that you can't quite see what the workers are building. As one worker drives off in his pickup truck at the end of the film, however, with a somewhat knowing smile on his face, I take him to be pleased not that he had built a wall, but that he had put a door in it.

In any event, the film interjected into America's favorite game a contest that is very much not a game. Sometimes it's a struggle between life and death. Whether drawn by choice or driven by circumstance, lots of people today are on the move. Almost always, they depend upon the kindness of others to make it through.

As it happens, I spent Thursday — the day of the snowstorm — in a meeting convened to address precisely this issue. A major foundation here in New York brought together 15 thought leaders from around the world: academics, diplomats, faith leaders, as well as leaders of NGOs and government agencies. Our task was to describe how religion might more effectively play a role, both morally and practically, in reducing the suffering of refugees, migrants, and others who are on the move.

The challenge has already overwhelmed all efforts to help. Worldwide, more than 1 billion people are on the move — economic migrants, refugees fleeing conflict or persecution, and victims of natural disaster or environmental devastation. All of them need help, and given the numbers, there's not enough help to go around. The question on Thursday was whether — to put the matter simply and religiously — the story of the Good Samaritan is scalable from one person who needs help to 1 billion people who need help.

As the story of the Good Samaritan is told in the Christian New Testament, Jesus responds to a question from a lawyer, who tries to trick Jesus with a question about how to gain eternal life. Jesus responds with his own question: "What does the law say?"

The lawyer replies, "Love God, and love your neighbor."

Jesus responds, "You are correct. Do this, and you will live."

"But who is my neighbor?" the lawyer asks in return.

Jesus responds with a story that could easily have happened to the woman in the film and her daughter. While travelling along a country road, a man was accosted by robbers, beaten badly, and left by the roadside to die. Two esteemed citizens came along and saw the man lying there, but each in turn walked by on the other side of the road. Then a third man came along and immediately came to injured man's aid, binding his wounds and taking him to a nearby inn. "Take care of him," the traveler instructed the innkeeper as he handed over some money, "And whatever more you spend, I will repay when I return."

The man who helped came to be known as the Good Samaritan, which in those days was an oxymoron: Samaritans were the dregs of society, the lowest of the low. In common opinion, there were no good Samaritans. Nonetheless, this Samaritan was judged good because he acted like a neighbor to a man who wasn't, in fact, his neighbor. The wounded man was simply someone in need of help, whose suffering the Samaritan had witnessed.

The story doesn't say why the Samaritan responded to the injured man's suffering with an offer to help. Why didn't he walk by on the other side of the road? For that matter, why did the truck driver in the film offer the mother and daughter a ride? Why

did someone offer them a bottle of water? Why did someone offer them a hand to pull them up into a moving train car? Why did someone build a door in the wall?

Just because someone needs help and I have the ability to help does not mean help will be forthcoming. There's another factor in play, which is why these questions are indeed spiritual questions. What's the factor? In a word, it's compassion. If compassion is what I feel in the face of my own needs, compassion is what I feel in the face of someone else's needs. Let me return to an even more ancient story that illustrates why compassion emerges.

The ancient Greek playwright Sophocles tells the story of a soldier named Philoctetes, who was on his way to fight with the Greeks in the Trojan War when he wandered by mistake onto a sacred shrine. A serpent guarding the shrine bit his foot. Soon Philoctetes' foot became infected, and he began to cry out in pain. In response, the commanders of the army abandoned him on the deserted island of Lemnos with nothing but his bow and arrows.

For ten years, the Greek army battled the Trojans in Troy, while Philoctetes hobbled around his little island in pain, always near starvation. Finally, an emissary of the gods told the Greeks that they could not win the war without Philoctetes, for he carried with him the famous bow and arrows of Hercules. So the Greek champion Odysseus returned with several companions to bring Philoctetes and his weapons back to Troy, either by force or by fraud.

Sick, lonely, hungry and exhausted, Philoctetes was overjoyed to see his visitors. He entreats them:

...Have compassion for me.
Look how men and women live, always precariously
balanced between good and bad fortune.
If you are out of trouble, watch for danger.
And when you live well, then think the hardest
About life, lest ruin take you unawares.

One of Odysseus' companions, a young soldier named Neoptolemus, realizes that what Philoctetes says is true. The troubles that have overwhelmed Philoctetes could have easily beset him instead. Sobered by this realization, Neoptolemus tells Philoctetes the truth about Odysseus' plan to trick him into returning to Troy. Eventually, Neoptolemus' compassion and honesty make Philoctetes willing to go with his weapons to Troy, where the Greeks prove victorious. Neoptolemus ended up saving his own life by joining his own struggle with that of Philoctetes.

When something terrible happens to someone else, we have two choices: ignore the suffering and walk by on the other side of the street or the world, or recognize that the vulnerability of others mirrors our own vulnerability, and the destiny of others therefore is linked to our own.

The yoga practitioner and poet Danna Faulds speaks of this shared vulnerability and shared destiny in her poem titled “Sangha,” which is a Sanskrit word meaning community or company. It appears in her collection of poems titled *Go In and In: Poems from the Heart of Yoga*, published in 2002. Among other things, this poem happens to be one of the best Valentine’s Day poems I know. It reveals that compassion is the truest passion of all. Danna Faulds writes:

Teach me what I cannot learn alone.
Let us share what we know, and what
we cannot fathom. Speak to me of
mysteries, and let us never lie
to one another.

May our fierce and tender longing
fuel the fire in our souls. When we
stand side by side, let us dare to focus
our desires on the truth. May we be
reminders, each for the other, that
the path of transformation passes
through the flames.

To take one step is courageous;
to stay on the path day after day,
choosing the unknown and facing
yet another fear, that is nothing
short of grace.

Teach me what I cannot learn alone, the poet writes. There are some things we desperately need to know that we can only learn if others are willing to share their lives with us. Just because someone else happens to be in trouble, and I happen to be doing well, doesn’t mean that I know more or understand life better than they do. It only means that, for the moment at least, I happen to be the luckier one. Because I’ve been lucky, if I can help, I should help — and join my destiny with theirs.

Why? Because, the poet says, I need reminding that the path of transformation passes through the flames. Only by engaging deeply in the suffering of others can we redeem our own tendency to be self-serving and self-possessed. After all, Narcissus stared at his own image — and only his own image — until he eventually withered away and died. If we refuse to engage with the suffering of others, and thereby refuse the chance to redeem our own suffering, we too will wither away and die, at least in spirit.

But there’s another way. In her final stanza, the poet writes:

To take one step is courageous;
to stay on the path day after day,
choosing the unknown and facing
yet another fear, that is nothing
short of grace.

In spiritual terms, the way to alleviate human suffering is to transform human hearts. This happens when the passion that seeks to satisfy our own needs becomes compassion that seeks to satisfy the needs of others. As Danna Faulds suggests, it requires honesty, vulnerability, and long-term commitment to the good of someone other than oneself. It can happen between lovers, among friends, among neighbors, and also among people across the globe.

When people discover their common humanity and shared destiny in this way, and in so doing discover themselves, it's nothing short of grace — a gift of life from the source of life. The mystery of human love becomes manifest; the meaning of human compassion becomes redemptive. Where compassionate hearts reach out to alleviate human suffering, a door swings open onto a place where the will to succeed is always welcome.