

The Mystery of Divine Mercy by Ronn Smith, March 2022

When Victor asked me to speak, he posed an intriguing question: we understand that the mercy shown between persons is accessible to everyone, but can nonbelievers also experience divine mercy? Universalism sprang from the idea that God loves and saves *all* his children, but today many UU's no longer equate divinity to God or mercy to salvation. What prompted Victor's question was knowing that I am an agnostic who recently survived a near-fatal, internal bleeding incident. Was my recovery evidence of divine mercy?

Perhaps, but not in the way you might think. The flood of mercy I felt was not due to my life being spared; it came earlier when the prognosis looked dire. I was overcome with a sense of peace with whatever might happen. Unexpectedly, my life felt somehow validated and complete. Where did that come from? Joseph Campbell described the experience this way: "The black moment is the moment when the real message of transformation is going to come." For me it was like a sudden tail wind that comes up toward the end of a grueling bike ride. I don't know whom to thank, but that doesn't make me any less thankful.

I don't regard mercy as an exoneration; we all live under the inescapable sentence of death. Neither is it a forgiveness nor a forgetting, for we are the irreversible sum of all our thoughts and actions. To understand the kind of mercy I felt, imagine that you have labored your entire lifetime to write your story and suddenly arrive at the realization that your book is finished. You sense that it was worth writing, and that every paragraph belongs – the defeats and embarrassments as well as the triumphs. To a skeptic like me, this gratuitous mercy is a confirmation that even though I am of no consequence to the universe, my life is internally justified and authentic.

By "divine" I mean *that which is most sacred*. Buddhism describes it as "wonder beyond explanation." Divine mercy is shrouded in mystery. I'd like to peel away a few of its layers to see if we might discover at its core some elemental truth that would appeal to believer and nonbeliever alike. If that core truth remains a mystery, can we still gain some insight that will enrich our spiritual life?

Most of us are familiar with the Christian image of God as a merciful deity. In this context divine mercy leads God to erase sin and bestow eternal salvation. However, with Christianity there are strings attached. We must believe in God to obtain His mercy. He is apparently offended more by disloyalty than by sin. But if divine mercy is conditional, does it even qualify as mercy? It seems to contradict the requirement that mercy be undeserved.

In the New Testament St. Paul implies that we need not earn mercy through faith. He states, "God has consigned *all* men to disobedience, that He may show His mercy to *all*." So, in Paul's view, divine mercy is universal. But his depiction of it strikes me as a strange rationalization of sin. He seems to say God made us imperfect to underscore His own perfection. Human depravity accentuates God's munificence. Even more strange, is one Christian explanation for God's self-concealment. If He showed Himself to mankind, people would still sin, but their moral culpability would be much greater since they could no longer claim doubt as an excuse. Therefore, by hiding Himself, God is showing greater mercy to humankind.

Pope Francis tried to rescue Christianity from this dizzying logic with a simple tenet that reveals his own inclination toward mercy. He said for someone who doesn't believe in God, the measure of good or evil actions "lies in obeying one's own conscience." The Vatican was not so gracious, contradicting him before the ink had dried. They made clear that baptism in the Catholic Church is a nonnegotiable condition for salvation. Still, I think Francis improved on Christian orthodoxy. Granted, by his interpretation divine mercy must still be earned, but the price is integrity not fealty.

It is apparent to me that divine mercy is a mystery even for believers. If they pretend to understand the *Who*, they struggle to explain the *Why*. This gospel song makes the case better than I could:

I am the angry man who came to stone the lover
I am the woman there ashamed before the crowd
And I am the leper that gave thanks
And I am the night that never came
My God, my God, why hast thou accepted me
It's a Mystery of mercy and of song

Song, indeed. The Hindus believe the ears are open to the song of the universe when we relinquish ego attachments, desire, guilt, and even hope. At the interface between the temporal and the eternal, our spirits can tap into this cosmic mystery. It offers *fullness*, not forgiveness. It has *metaphysical* not moral undertones, bringing a sense of unity, an awareness of the simple holiness of it all, and a reabsorption into what Emerson called the oversoul. It is fortuitous; neither our actions nor our intellect could foretell such relief. It is not just a deathbed phenomenon but may surprise us in any moment of profound self-surrender or merger with some larger whole.

Having dismissed religious faith as a prerequisite for divine mercy, maybe we can peel another layer from this mystery. What if a person not only doesn't believe in God, but has no conscience? Albert Camus parodies this situation in his novel, *The Stranger*. The protagonist Meursault is convicted of a senseless murder. The clinching evidence, presented to establish his callous character, is that he didn't cry at his mother's funeral. The trial is an instance of humankind's futile attempt to impose rationality on an irrational universe. Meursault realizes that, just as he is indifferent to much of the universe, so is the universe indifferent to him. He senses the inevitability of death, beyond which he will have no further importance. Ironically, only after Meursault reaches this seemingly dismal realization is he able to attain happiness. He sees that the hope of a successful appeal only creates in him a false sense that death is avoidable. This false hope has been a burden. His liberation from it allows him to see life as it is and to make the most of his remaining days.

Meursault confronts three possibilities for mercy. First is human mercy in the form of forgiveness or leniency from the state; but this is muted by his death sentence. Second is the religious form of divine mercy, which the prison chaplain offers him in exchange for his submission to God; but he furiously rejects this. Ultimately, he is overwhelmed by a third, more mysterious form of divine mercy, unsolicited and therefore serendipitous (not unlike the kind I felt). It is an inexplicable liberation and a transformation, which paradoxically, he experiences under the pall of his incarceration and impending execution.

Allow me to quote Meursault from the first-person narrative. "It was as if that great rush of anger had washed me clean, emptied me of hope, and, gazing up at the dark sky spangled with its signs and stars, for the first time, the first, I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe. To feel it so like myself... made me realize that... I was happy." From his prison window Meursault sees people scurrying about in their daily drudgery and he rejoices at having been purged of such preoccupations. He anticipates with delight, the day of his public execution and the jeers from the cursing crowd. Mercifully, he feels connected at last to the cosmos and to his fellow man. These connections aren't friendly by any means, but they make him whole.

I should mention that Camus was an existentialist but not a nihilist. He carved his own meaning out of a meaningless world. In his novel *The Plague*, people suffer and die by the thousands amid squalid living conditions and mass hysteria. The ever-optimistic priest consoles the despairing doctor, suggesting, "Perhaps we should love what we do not understand." To this, the doctor (speaking for Camus) replies, "No father, I have a very different idea of love. And until my dying day I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture."

Why did Camus insist on human responsibility and commit his life to fighting social evil when he believed it to be futile in the end? What if his belief was right, that the only certainty in life is the inevitability of death, which makes our lives equally pointless? What if no one reads or cares about your book? Why bother writing it?

I would respond by asking, why does a bird sing? Because it is the bird's nature to sing, whether anyone listens or not. It is the nature of humans to make meaning even if we cannot make sense of our existence. Joseph Campbell laments that too often "We're so engaged in doing things to achieve purposes of outer value that we forget the inner value, the rapture... associated with being alive." There is no shame in contenting oneself with a provisional purpose befitting a finite being. Camus makes this point in his essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. You may recall that Sisyphus was condemned by the Greek gods to roll a huge stone up a steep mountain over and over for eternity. Of his fate, Camus said, "The struggle itself... is enough to fill a man's heart." Samuel Beckett was equally aware of the absurdity of the human condition yet remained undaunted. His mantra was, "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better." Both these authors beheld mercy in the face of futility.

Another layer I wish to tear away is the question of quality. If we accept that divine mercy is a universal mystery, can we presume that believers and nonbelievers sense it equally? One of the most thoughtful and eloquent Christians of the twentieth century was the British author C. S. Lewis. He relates his conversion experience as a dramatic manifestation of mercy. In *Surprised by Joy*, he writes, "That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me... I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing; the Divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms..." Lewis said forcible conversions like his "plumb the depth of the Divine mercy. The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and His compulsion is our liberation." While Lewis reads God into this awakening, he could as easily have attributed it to some universal mystery. After all, his trepidation, ensuing astonishment, then surrender, then liberation and transformation follow precisely the progression that saved the godless Meursault.

Lewis had an unusual imagination (he wrote fantasy novels like the *Chronicles of Narnia*). But for most Christians, in my observation, divine mercy is more doctrine than epiphany. Giving it a name and a face may even diminish it. In *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, the agnostic Ursula Goodenough argues, “To assign attributes to mystery is to disenchant it, to take away its luminance.” Albert Einstein called mystery “the most beautiful thing we can experience.” I find it telling that with all his singular insight, the modern world’s greatest genius was moved most by those phenomena which he could least comprehend. The poet Goethe said, “The highest to which a man can attain is wonder; and if the prime phenomenon [meaning ultimate reality] makes him wonder, let him be content.” With this mindset, mystery is God enough, for it has no upper bound.

Trying to make sense of divine mercy can confuse more than it clarifies. If mercy comes from a beneficent Creator, why does it appear so unfairly allotted? If it reflects divine intention, then doesn’t the human offense that calls for mercy also reflect divine intention? Is God pardoning Himself? Roman philosopher Boethius was baffled by his Christian faith, confessing, “The God who is the helmsman makes my incomprehension that much greater.”

The deepest layer of this mystery may be the connection between divine mercy and love. To paraphrase Saint Maria Kowalska, love is the flower – mercy the fruit. The philosopher Montaigne, “Instead of trusting to God’s mercy, placed his trust in the deepest attachments we have, our love of life itself,” writes Michael Ignatieff. The UU Rev. Tom Owen-Towle speaks of four interlocking loves: love of self, one’s neighbor, the natural world, and divine mystery. I believe love of mystery is a conduit for divine mercy.

I will close with a visceral account of the grace that love for mystery can elicit. This comes from Philip Simmons, the UU writer who fell victim to Lou Gehrig’s disease at age 35. He described the mystery of divine mercy when he wrote, “only by letting go our grip on all that we ordinarily find most precious—our achievements, our plans, our loved ones, our very selves—can we find, ultimately, the most profound freedom.” This rings true in my experience. His impassioned story leaves little doubt that love can open even an agnostic’s heart to the most intense encounters with divine mercy. He wrote, “Moved by love of the world, we venture all to enter the sacred circle, to cross the threshold of the invisible, to draw closer to God.” I can’t be sure, but his words seem to peel the secret down to its core and reveal a kind of mercy woven into our biological heritage. He concluded, “Beloved of the world, we are every moment in its embrace. Choosing the world, we discover in the end that the world has already chosen us.”