

Grace in Focus

I live, as do we all, in an ocean of grace – unfathomable, infinite, and undeserved. It surrounds and sustains me, providing the means of life, all its ingredients, and all its delights. Despite its ubiquity, I am unequal to the task of ever fully appreciating it, and so live my minutes and days blissfully unaware of the cost – whether that might be countless now-dead stars that created the very elements that compose my body, the stunning beauty of our earthly home, the wisdom inherited through our culture, the courage of our founding fathers and mothers; the blood of patriots who preserved our liberty, the love of parents, spouses, friends, and communities. Most costly, there is the reconciliation with Himself that God provides me through Christ. "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it." -Ps 139:6

Roman Catholics have a term for this: they call it *habitual grace*, literally, the grace we inhabit. In their lexicon of grace its purpose is to evoke and enable sanctification, and I will leave unaddressed whether that is working in my life. But occasionally we experience a particular occurrence of grace that stands out from the background ocean, *actual grace*, that we recognize, accept, and respond to. Answered prayers, a beautiful sunset, a grandchild's greeting, Holy Communion, a loved one's touch – all of these are occasions of *focused grace*, moments when we realize that we are receiving a precious gift. If we are also able to recognize that the gift-giver is none other than the creator and sustainer of the universe, and that these moments are the illuminated vignettes of the vast and ever-present grace we have been offered, they can be transformative.

This past week I was provided several occasions of Grace in Focus. On Tuesday I made a visit to the emergency room of our nearby hospital for chest pains and learned to my dismay that I was having some sort of mild heart attack. I was subsequently admitted to the cardiac unit, and to my delight, found that one of my cardiac team was none other than the daughter of old and dear friends. I had known Kristine from the days when her parents occasionally boarded a beloved border collie "granddog" with us, and while I had been aware of her progress through university and medical school, it was an unexpected treat to find I was going to be her patient. Two days later after some serious "maintenance", I was discharged. The following day I had a real "no-bull" heart attack and all that was left to me was - grace. Several aspects of the experience stand out in my memory: my wife's call to 911, my good friend Bill in our door before the call had completed; another good friend – a first responder *and* cardiologist who rode with me in the ambulance and accelerated the admittance procedure; the first-responder crew, many of them fellow church members, who had me in the ambulance in less than 10 minutes. But the memory that is brightest was the moment when I transited the emergency area on my way to the cardiac cath lab. There, waiting for me, was Kristine, welcoming, reassuring, and competent, illuminated as surely as if she had been standing in a spotlight. I remain surprised at how glad I was to see her. The moment was gone in an instant as I was whisked away for repair and recovery in her domain, but the message to me was clear: even in the valley of the shadow of death, I was loved, and cared-for, and safe.