

What does the word grace mean to you? It might conjure thoughts of something graceful, like a ballet dancer. Or it might be the prayer ritual of giving thanks before a meal. Perhaps it could be that your first thought about grace is a specifically religious one.

In some faith systems, grace refers only to the receipt of eternal salvation granted solely by God upon a person's declaration of a specific belief. Say you believe and free grace is yours. But this definition strays from the word's origins and ignores the power we each of us has to bestow it ourselves.

There is more, however, to the word grace. But in all cases, including those mentioned above, grace is joyful, happy, free and pleasurable. The Latin origin is *gratus*, meaning pleasing, thankful and it is conceptually related to kindness. When something is given to us for free it is sometimes referred to as being *gratis*, or free of charge. *Gratis* in Latin means 'as a kindness.'

None of those word origins speak directly of a ballet dancer or a prayer. Or even of its relationship to God. Yet religion has given us an opportunity to look at the concept of grace in a particularly spiritual light. One that serves us quite nicely.

In all definitions, grace is something which is bestowed. To clarify, grace is something good that's given to us, or by us to someone else. Grace does not exist separately from its giver. It is a state of being between the bestower and the bestowed.

Some people religiously confuse grace with mercy. The difference between them is worth noting for it better highlights their contrasting purposes. Mercy is the compassionate withholding of suffering or punishment, deserved or otherwise. Grace is the conferring of glad benefit. Both can be accomplished by a human judge, legally speaking, or a heavenly one, theologically speaking. A court judge can go lightly on the convicted when deciding their punishment. He or she can also perform an adoption and legally make a new family. One is mercy, the other is grace.

As for mercy, while I don't personally subscribe to the idea of a judgemental God, It has traditionally been described as such. God's mercy is often made reference to in scripture. But what evidence do we really have that God is merciful? We have no idea the inner workings of the Universe enough to conclude that we are experiencing more or less punishment than we'd otherwise have coming to us. Or if we are ever "punished" at all. Perhaps there is a God, and perhaps It's merciful. But we have zero ability to ascertain that for ourselves. It is a belief based entirely on one Old Testament interpretation that we are all inherently sinful and flawed and are therefore ever-worthy of punishment. Through that lens, every good we receive is a mercy from God, not a grace.

This is unfortunate, for it further ingrains in us the idea that we don't even truly deserve the good we receive. Are we fully able to appreciate what we are mercifully given? Perhaps. But there's a difference between receiving a hug and dodging a bullet. I'd wager the more accurate response to mercy is relief, not joy, happiness, freedom or pleasure. Relief is a blessing, but not the same.

Grace, however, is something freely and lovingly given without condition. It is an act of pure love. It is, at its core, the active demonstration of forgiveness, hospitality, nonresistance, compassion, empowerment, and gratitude as a life practice. Grace is the exhibition of the relational dharma of the Christian teachings (and other similar traditions) from throughout human history.

When we display kindness, we are displaying grace. When we actively live by the teachings of the world's most prolific spiritual masters we are embodying the attributes of grace. When we embody grace, I believe grace embodies us. A relationship is formed between us and grace itself. I believe that this is when grace becomes a thing of its own. A life force. A power that builds upon itself. I believe that kindness is grace personified. Personify it as often as you can.

We are called, in times such as these, to act according to the better angels of our nature. We are being demanded from within to reach across the divide and demonstrate grace, not mercy. Perhaps punishment is deserved by some. Met it out with grace rather than mercy. Though it may look the same, they are not. Mercy does not work to eradicate sorrow and fear, but grace does. Grace is restorative, whereas even a merciful punishment can still be retributive. Seek to restore peace to your enemy. That is what we have been taught. That is grace.