

The Gifts That Have Used Me

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Reverend Dave Franks

We are fast approaching Christmas. Hanukkah has already begun. Winter Solstice takes place tomorrow, **December 21 at 3:02 a.m. EST**. Growing up, like many of you who celebrated Christmas, whether you were Christian or not maybe, could open just one present under the tree on Christmas Eve. Usually, it was the smaller gifts I opened on Christmas Eve, expecting that the bigger one, the one I really asked for and was hoping had my name on it would wait until the morning. Memory is that my parents would let me open any present other than the one that I was hoping for until the morning. Well, this morning I want to share with you three gifts that I've received over the course of my life, like those opened on a Christmas Eve, that have used me, and made room for the one gift with my name on it.

I'm not going to belabor my description of each of the gifts, those that lead us to the bigger gift, but I believe they help us to unwrap the one that is most precious and is truly what can use us in shaping our values and principles, our relationships, and how we reach out with our voices, our hands, and with our actions that bring healing to a world hurting from racism, class disparities, and national tribalism. Tall order, huh? Better be a pretty big gift to do all that.

The first gift. My Mistakes. In my first appointment the Catholic priest and I were the only clergy of any mainline denomination in town. It was a small town. So, expectations were that I would be involved in the life of that town. And so, I was. I became a volunteer fireman. Yes, I had the fireman boots, yellow pants, red suspenders, the helmet, and gloves next to my bed ready to jump in to when the call box on the nightstand might blare its signal that there was a fire.

On one such morning the call box gave out its signal and I jumped into all my gear...adrenaline pumping...ready to go...and off I went to the firehouse, jumped into the big, pride of the town's brand-new red fire truck with Don Hillman, the other fireman available that day, a member of my church. With Don at the wheel, lights flashing and siren screaming, we turned out of the firehouse onto the main street of town. I don't care how old or sophisticated you may be but that is the funnest part of being a fireman.

As we always did in responding to a fire, I picked up the microphone to call Dispatch to let them know that we were on our way to the fire. I pressed the button to tell them we were out of the firehouse and proceeding to the fire. 10 – 4, unit 462 in route, over. No response from Dispatch. Again, 10-4, unit 462 in route, over. After about the fourth time I was beginning to get frustrated. Dispatch wasn't responding. Pushing the button on the microphone, yet again, I said to Don, "This damn thing isn't working. A brand, new truck and the radio doesn't even work! Augh!"

It was about right at that point that I realized that each time I was pushing the button on the microphone, the sirens stopped. And then when I released the button the siren would resume. And then like the sun rising through a morning fog, it dawned on me that I had the microphone switch on to the public address system. Here we were racing down main street to a fire and I was broadcasting to the entire town that the damn thing wasn't working. My Mistake.

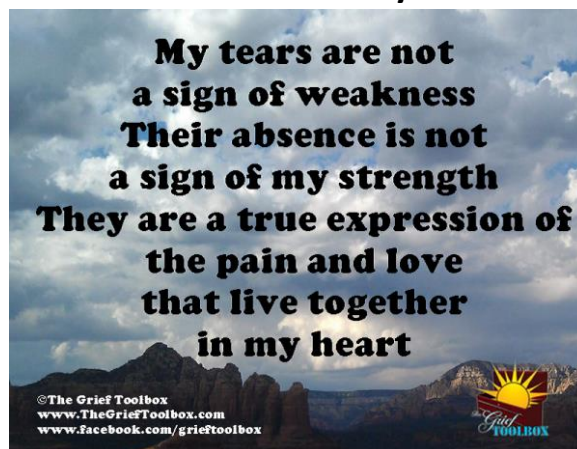
The mistakes that are gifts to us are those that we make without intent and yet they have an outcome that bring us closer to ourselves. It is in our mistakes that we learn more about ourselves and ways for the choices we make to shape our actions in the future. In this way, our mistakes challenge us to do better at being kinder to ourselves. They ask us to accept we are, after all, only human, even if we are the minister of the town. The next time I checked to see at what setting the microphone was set at.

The second gift. My Questions. Who, what, when, where, why, how? Most, if not all of us, learned those W questions from early childhood, didn't we? I have found that the why questions are great questions when it comes to the physical or natural scientific methods, political discourse, or when you might want to assign blame, or not assume responsibility. But when it comes to matter of spirituality or faith, they are not very helpful, if at all. The Why questions tend to be divisive, causing argument rather than being of true inquiry when it comes to matters of ontology and epistemology, which are heady disciplines. Most of us are not looking for the whys to the meaning of our lives. The questions that are gifts to gaining a more appreciative understanding and expansive view of our connection to life's meaning are the other W questions, and especially the How question. Who am I in this situation, the face I see in the mirror in the morning? We kind of

touched on that in my sermon a couple of weeks ago. What am I doing with my life right now? Where am I needed? Where am I headed? When am I going to take that leap, that risk that moves me in the direction I've learned I need to go? And finally, How do I go about reaching that true self in me that I keep getting in the way of? Those are the questions that are true gifts to us for they beg us to unwrap what is genuine, the gem, waiting to sparkle and illumine us to what Karl Barth called, "The Holy Other."

I can see that I am setting myself up for a full three-part sermon series. LOL

The third gift under the tree on Christmas Eve? **My tears**



[Tanya Lord](#)

My tears usually come as surprise to me. I seldom, if ever plan to shed tears. They come as a gift that unwraps feelings, pain, or joy, that I've allowed to be outside of my awareness, of what's going on with me, really. In psychological terms they serve us, as a way of hopefully achieving some relief or satisfaction. ... They have a physiological effect on our bodies, such as releasing neurochemical substances that can improve mood.

There are all kinds of theories that date back over human history, as far back as 1,500 B.C. Ad Vingerhoets, a professor at Tilburg University in the Netherlands and the world's foremost expert on crying, in his 2013 book, *Why Only Humans Weep*, reports that "...people thought tears originated in the heart; the Old Testament describes tears as the by-product of when the heart's material weakens and turns into water...Later, in Hippocrates' time, it was thought that the mind was the trigger for tears. A prevailing theory in the 1600s held that emotions—especially love—heated the heart, which generated water vapor to cool itself down. The heart vapor would then rise to the head, condense near the eyes and escape as tears.

But the theory I most appreciate, and maybe because it best supports the gift I'm talking about, is one that Jonathan Rottenberg, an emotion researcher and professor of psychology at the University of South Florida, proports that, "Evidence is mounting in support of some new, more plausible theories. One is that tears trigger social bonding and human connection. While most other animals are born fully formed, humans come into the world vulnerable and physically unequipped to deal with anything on their own. Even though we get physically and emotionally more capable as we mature, grownups never quite age out of the occasional bout of helplessness. Crying signals to yourself and other people that there's some important problem," And I would add, not always a problem, "that is at least temporarily beyond your ability to cope."

The Gift of Grace

Three gifts, mistakes that challenge me to be kinder to myself, questions that looks for the genuine me, and tears that bring into my awareness that something is going on. When unwrapping them I discover they unwrapped me, used me, to bring me to an even greater gift, the one with my name on it, waiting to make my day a day to remember, just like that boy on Christmas morning. The gift? Grace.

The other day I stood in line, on a sidewalk for 4.5 hours, waiting to get tested for Covid as I felt a little funky that morning and was scheduled to see my 96 y.o. mother that day. Test was negative. So what do you do, standing in such a line, for that length of time? Sometimes I get nudges that ask me to do something. The nudge that day was to look up the basic theology of Rudolph Bultmann, known for de-mythologizing and bringing into existentialist thought, that there is that mystery that must remain mystery to us and in so doing breaks into our lives, transforming them. He gets into a whole kind of thought that questions, challenges the idea of theology itself. Why do I bring him up? It's not him I want to talk about but that in reading about him I came across a sidenote that led me to a sermon, entitled, "Living in Grace," by Reverend Daniel Budd, UU Minister in Birmingham, Alabama.

He caught my attention, for I have to say I'm a little shy about wanting to preach about grace, because of words like sin, failure, and surrender that are associated with folks like St. Paul, strident evangelicals and fundamentalists, the confession booth, and so on, when words like grace are spoken, especially

from the pulpit. How to talk about grace with UUs, and really, anyone for that matter. So, I'm grateful to Rev. Budd because some of what he says and whom he quotes unwraps a bit the mystery of this season, the gift that uses us and to which, I believe, Bultmann was getting at, Grace.

“Grace,” he says, “manifests itself, incarnates itself, in varying ways: from the surprisingly pleasant, the exquisitely charming, the deeply compassionate, the unexpectedly kind, the simply beautiful, the profoundly enchanting, the captivating heart-stopping eye-opening moment of understanding, the aha moment of creativity – and to all the things and moments we might not readily associate with grace, yet there it is.”

“So,” he goes on, “many things rely upon our understanding and interpretation of them, upon our perception and reception of them. Someone could wag their finger in our face and, with irritation in their voice, tell us to be more careful, to ask more questions, to be certain we know exactly what is being said and meant. But grace cannot enter such strident attempts at perfection and control. Mysteries are not to be solved, says Rumi. Grace enters our lives through simple trusting and through a willingness to get it wrong. It may even enter most knowingly when we do get it wrong.”

It is, I believe, to simply trust and the willingness to get it wrong that we come to know ourselves as, that neo-orthodox, 20th century theologian, Paul Tillich say about grace, that a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: “You are accepted. You are accepted, by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know...”

For Tillich, and much I think like Bultmann, grace is not some kind of magic waived over our troubles and makes it all okay, and everything go our way. Some days, oh how I wish. Tillich would say that grace doesn't change the situation we find ourselves. It changes us who then makes changes. That statement right there has always stood as my understanding of grace. That moment of aha creativity, that captivating heart-stopping eye-opening moment of understanding that brings me back to myself, the trueness of our lives, our connection to one another as incarnate of that mystery, that interconnectedness we have, in Rev. Budd beautiful recollection of Thomas Moore's description of grace as, “a divine gift or as ‘the support and inspiration offer by life itself.’ No matter – it is what it is, still flowing, still in motion, swirling around and through our lives every minute of every day.”

What a gift. When it unwraps us, just like unwrapping that awaited gift under the tree, it doesn't just sit there under the tree unwrapped. It is put to

use, even if we get it wrong putting it together. We get put to use, practiced with, made tried and worn in seeking to keep connected to that mystery that connects with us and we to one to another by doing justice, healing the broken hearted, listening and sitting still with one who is grieving, or marching with those marginalized, anticipating the next step in being visibly anti-racist, and finally loving ourselves and others as we recall those moments when the light broke through and we accepted that we are indeed, accepted.