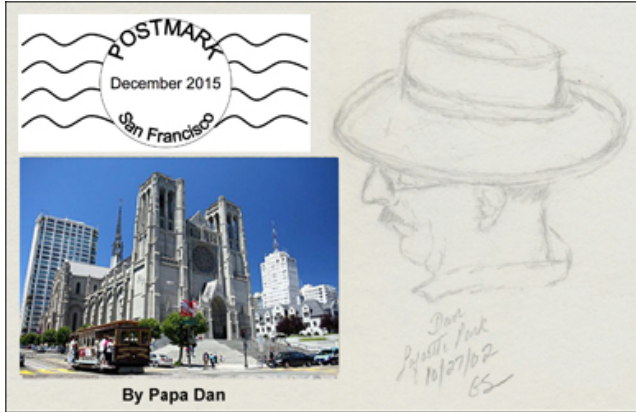


Grace

By Dan Sapone



**I do not understand the mystery of grace
— only that it meets us where we are but
does not leave us where it found us.”**

— Ann Lamott

Seeking Harmony in a Tradition of Grace

On Saturday, December 12, Gretta and I continued our nineteen-year tradition by attending “A Cathedral Christmas.” It is an annual Christmas concert of the Men’s and Boy’s Chorus, orchestra, and pipe organ, at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco.

For us, the tradition is in the music — for the music is truly magnificent. Usually, the concert focuses on two principal themes: 1) the joy associated with the birth of The Child — represented by well-known Christmas carols in the first and third segments of the performance — and 2) the peacefulness settling over the ‘Holy Land’ and the world, associated with the hope for peace that The Child would bring – represented by classic choral and orchestral music performed with sweetness and passion in the concert’s middle segment. The signature piece of the Grace Cathedral Music Ministry has always been a tune called “*Sleeps Judea Fair*,” by Hugh MacKinnon. Gretta and I always look forward to this tune, in the middle segment of the concert, as the highlight of the season. The lyrics and the slow, soft harmony of the voices recreate the joy and peace expected of the season.

Sleeps Judea Fair

By Hugh A. MacKinnon

Sleeps Judea fair,
Bides the Christ Child there.
Shepherds, haste ye! flocks forsaking,
Swift your way to Him be taking.
Babe of Israel's prayer.
Babe of Israel's prayer.

Christ from God is come,
Choosing earthly home.
Royal pomp and splendor, never,
But with love, which naught can sever.
He will heal the dumb.
Christ from God is come
Lowly bend the knee,

Thou from sin set free.
Let the Christ Child, meekly smiling,
Infant wise, all woe beguiling.
Grant His grace to thee.
Grant His grace to thee.

*[and then from a single small voice from the
choir loft in the back of the cathedral]*

Silent night, holy night

[and then the entire chorus again]

Grant His grace to thee.

Settling into our usual seats on the aisle of Row S, at the acoustic center of the cathedral — one of America's premier acoustical rooms — the expressions on the faces of the stained-glass figures of the saints all around the cathedral, contributed to the warmth, peace, and harmony that we, and they expected. I opened the printed program to read the list of musical pieces. I had to study it several times before I realized that "Sleeps Judea Fair" was NOT listed.

It was NOT listed!

"What's that about?!" I said out loud. So, as the choir emerged from their usual place to begin the event, I said to Gretta, "I am surprised just how distressed I feel that it's missing."

"Me, too" she said.

The first segment of the concert contained the familiar choral pieces we had come to expect — like John Rutter's *The Holly and the Ivy* — and others we all recognize. When the Men's and Boys' chorus left the altar for an intermission, a lively string quartet created a clever medley of carols interspersed within Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto #3*.

Then, after applause for the quartet, the singers and the organist returned for the middle portion of the program, the segment that traditionally conveys the message of peace and serenity culminating in their signature piece, "Sleeps Judea Fair." But, since that piece was not listed in the program, we weren't sure what to expect.

What followed was a shock. The choral pieces in this segment, three of them, featured, from beginning to end, harsh spasmodic cascades of unresolved dissonance, typical of the more unsettling orchestral compositions of the 20th century. The last of these, clearly difficult to perform, included a few moments that sounded like small eruptions of harmony attempting to make their voices heard above the all-encompassing harshness, only to be musically shouted down and drowned out by the grating dissonance, ending without resolution. Even the faces of the saints depicted in the stained-glass windows seemed to show the strain, their colors pale. Then, in the final segment, the sing-along tunes like "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing" completed the program, as always. As we attempted to sing along after the jarring experience of the middle segment, I realized what they had done. I said to Gretta, "I get it."

It was a harsh message: there is no peace and harmony in this season — not in this city, not in America, not across the world, and certainly not in Judea and the countries that surround it in the Middle East. The choir could not sing their signature piece, "Sleeps Judea Fair," because the message would have been a false one.

I get it. I don't like it, but I get it. It seems that we are being instructed to look harder for peace and harmony — or, finding none, create some ourselves.

Looking for Moments of Grace in a Grim Year

As we walked out of the cathedral on that beautiful December evening, humanity being what it is, our world remains a place of suffering and danger. We don't have to look far to find many sources of harshness and struggle:

- Suffering and terror emanate from in the Middle East (yes, even ancient Judea) and have spread across the world in the form of war and poverty.
- The US continues to be plagued by gunfire — gunfire enabled by American leaders, local and national, determined to keep as many guns in the hands of as many people as possible.
- Our “tough-guy” politics is demonstrating its penchant for keeping us fearful and divided and promises to get louder and cruder in the heat of a presidential race.
- While unemployment has declined, under-employment and low wages are increasing across a shrinking middle class in America.
- Individuals with dark skin or who speak in other languages or with foreign accents are made to feel increasingly unwelcome or, worse, in danger in their own neighborhoods.
- In our cities, an increasing number of homeless individuals, and families, who have dropped out of the middle class, are no longer looking for work, just struggling to find help — some sitting on street corners on Nob Hill hoping for a few bills dropped in their basket by people emerging from expensive holiday concerts.

Looking around at all of this, we can find plenty of reasons to be discouraged. But Americans have often defied logic and looked around for moments of grace during hard times.



Looking at the sky on Christmas Eve, while some were hoping for a glimpse of Santa Claus, a rare Christmas full moon provided me with moments of willful optimism. I asked myself, "Can I look up at the brightness, tune out the rancor, and find reasons to believe in humanity's better attributes: humility, conciliation, kindness, dignity, reason?

Can we?

But, you know, if we look, there are hopeful signs everywhere, right down here on the surface:

- This month, world leaders came together in Paris to reach an agreement that may yet stop our steady march toward an uninhabitable planet. The agreement offers our “last best hope” for meaningful global action to avert catastrophic climate change; and 195 countries promised to grab it. Can we succeed with so many industrial-strength forces working against us?

Can we?

- Pope Francis, naming himself after an Italian saint with a message of humility and peace, chose to visit the Americas and shine a mass-media spotlight on that message. He challenged the wealthy and powerful (including Congress) in the name of the poor and the weak.

He prayed at ground zero and hugged a little girl who jumped a fence to approach his motorcade in Washington. Francis set a very public example of welcome for children, immigrants, the forgotten — asking us to follow.

Can we?



- Tens of thousands of refugees who fled their homes to escape the catastrophe in Syria found open doors and hearts in Germany and elsewhere. The response from some other nations continues to be fearful and inadequate, but the Germans sent a message to all of us that rebukes nationalist bigotry, defends human rights, and reminds countries like the US how to confront a humanitarian emergency. In our own neighborhood, Canada has begun to follow the German example and may be teaching us how to respond as fellow humans. Is the challenge too big? Can we care for others on such a large scale?

Can we?

- This year, the US Supreme Court affirmed the marriage rights of same-sex couples who had been denied equal treatment under the law. Can our society accept them?

Can we?

- A bipartisan movement for criminal justice reform advanced in small steps, despite our ugly politics, asking “Can we find alternatives to mass incarceration and reduce the forces that sent so many Americans to prison?”

Can we?

- In neighborhoods long scarred by discrimination and police brutality, the Black Lives Matter movement spread a message of peaceable resistance. It is the method of that resistance that offers hope. Those small moments of progress are encouraging a similar struggle for a living wage for the lowest-paid workers in our prosperous land in a campaign for a \$15 minimum wage. Small successes are emerging. Can we broaden those efforts across our workforce?

Can we?

- Dozens of states and cities, resisting vocal opposition, passed laws expanding rights and inclusion for undocumented immigrants, through driver’s licenses, legal services, and health care. Now that January has arrived, California will be the first state to forbid discrimination based on immigration status, language, or citizenship. Can we expand these moments of progress?

Can we?

In addition to these more visible, public efforts, many individuals led by example, opposing hatred and fear with courage in their own neighborhoods.

- Parisians opened their homes to strangers on the night of terrifying slaughter there.
- After a gunman's rampage at an African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C., victims' families publicly forgave the killer. The mayor said "A hateful person came to this community with some crazy idea he'd be able to divide us, but all he did was unite us and make us love each other even more." President Obama sang a song (not among his core skills) at that South Carolina church — Amazing Grace, he sang. The congregation stood up and joined him and, a few days later, the Confederate battle flag came down at the South Carolina State Capitol. It had been a symbol of a distinct piece of our American character that we cannot deny.

Can we bring down more than just the symbols?

Can we?

Evil can be easily found; and anger and hatred are loud. The shouting and the dissonance can drown out the quiet voices and the moments of harmony and can block our view of goodness, even in Grace Cathedral. Yes, they can. And yet, there are signs of grace all around us that can move us from where we were. We must look carefully for those signs, or we may miss them. Better yet, can we reveal more of those signs of grace for others to see?

Can We?

After seven years, I haven't forgotten the words: "Yes, we can."

But, as I look at the state of the nation and the world here at the start of 2016, it is clear that the "We" in that optimistic phrase has not been enough. Could it be that the era of reliance on "We" is coming to an end? Perhaps it must begin with "Yes, I can."

Can I?

What can I do, as an individual, to make a difference? Since "grace" does not seem to be emerging from the "We" of national and international institutions, I suppose it is going to have to begin with me.

But How? I suppose there are lots of options. What do I need to do?

Maybe I can start by contributing to organizations that do the work I can't do on my own — some of our favorites: Planned Parenthood, Reach Out and Read, Boys and Girls Clubs, Sierra Club, Yosemite Conservancy, Valley Humane Society, American Civil Liberties Union, KQED, The Kidney Foundation, Hillary for America. All are hopeful efforts.

It's not enough; but it's a start.