

Finding Grace in a Broken World

Readings: "Truth in Advertising" – Andrea Cohen

"Mulch" – Linda Hasselstrom

"Try to Praise the Mutilated World" – Adam Zagajewski

Sarajevo is a beautiful city. It's tucked high in a mountain valley in southeastern Europe surrounded by forests. A river runs through the center of town. In the historic old city, stunning mosques, churches and synagogues are all a few steps from each other. With steeples, and sky scrapers, and minarets reaching toward the heavens, it looks like something from a fairy tale. I lived close to Sarajevo for two years and met many people from that city. Their stories of Sarajevo in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s make that city sound like a fairy tale, a fairy tale of religious pluralism. There was always something to celebrate. Sarajevo has large Muslim, Catholic, and Christian Orthodox populations. Between Muslim holidays, eastern and western Christian holidays and Yugoslav state holidays, the residents of Sarajevo were constantly gathering for a party. A cousin would host a break fast during Ramadan. A Catholic aunt would host a Christmas dinner, followed a few weeks later by a neighbor's Orthodox Christmas feast.

As many of you know, life in Sarajevo did not stay like this. The fairy tale ended. The beautiful mountains that surround the city turned threatening in the 1990s, as war raged across the former Yugoslavia. The mountains became the home of Serb forces that held the city under siege for nearly four years. The city was targeted, in part, because of the Sarajevans' tolerance and history of connection across difference. This peaceful cohabitation was a threat to the ethnic nationalist ideologies that fueled the conflicts in the region. During the siege, bombs and bullets **flew freely** into the city, killing many adults and many children. Ten thousand people were killed. People were killed and injured simply for living in their city. Killed as they waited in line for water or went to the market for bread. Killed as they sat in their homes, waiting for something to change.

But then, mercifully, the siege ended.

And the survivors were left to pick up the pieces of their destroyed lives, their destroyed city. There was so much mourning to do. So many people had been lost. So much of their city was lost. A way of life had been lost. Buildings had become piles of rubble. Sidewalks and roads were full of holes from deadly explosions. The people of Sarajevo had to decide what to do with the shattered infrastructure of their former lives.

There is a powerful passage in the novel *Beloved* by African American Nobel laureate Toni Morrison. In it, Sethe is remembering the religious revivals held by her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, in the clearing. Those who attend the gathering are mostly escaped slaves and their children. Morrison writes, "It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the

Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart.

She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure.

She told them the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it.”¹

Baby Suggs tells her community that the only grace they could have is the grace they could imagine, that if they could not see it, they could not have it. When the siege ended, the people of Sarajevo had some serious imagining to do. What could they do with their losses and their grief? What could they do with their city? What was the grace that they could see and make and have?

Grace may not be a word or theological concept that works for all of us. As I understand it, grace is often unearned blessing. Grace is the reality that the sun rises every morning and the first snow of the year is breathtakingly beautiful, regardless of our actions. In the Christian tradition, grace is unearned favor from God. For me, grace is human resilience and work toward redemption, about finding meaning and beauty in the most difficult of circumstances. Grace is choosing to bless the world. It is the grace described in *Beloved*—a vision of triumph in the midst of struggle.

Back to Sarajevo. What did the Sarajevans the fighting stopped? Did they build everything again? Make a shiny new city? Surely they could have. Vast sums of money were streaming into the city from abroad, as countries sought to atone for their earlier inability to stop the war. Some buildings were rebuilt and people found grace in thwarting those who had wanted to wipe their city off the map. Did the people of Sarajevo move away? Some of them did, finding the memories that the city held too painful to face every day. They found their grace in new beginnings.

But many stayed in Sarajevo and those who stayed imagined grace amidst the rubble. They imagined a grace of survival and remembrance. A grace that transformed pain into beauty. In times like these, times when we are brought low, words often fail us. Words are too small to contain our great suffering. Because words could not contend with the Sarajevans new reality, the people of that city turned to art.

The city was full of craters from mortar explosions. A group of citizens filled in these huge holes in the streets and sidewalks with a red resin. It forms a stunning, almost floral pattern. They call them ‘Sarajevo Roses.’ These roses, these markers of death and destruction, are all over Sarajevo. In residential neighborhoods and commercial districts. Underneath tables at sidewalk cafes. In the promenade along the river. If you didn’t know the story behind them, you would call them beautiful, a lovely piece of public art. As it is, these filled-in craters are still are beautiful, but hauntingly so. It is a beauty born out of brokenness. The roses call on passersby to remember that people died there, right there. The deaths of twenty years ago are made real. The roses are the grace that people of Sarajevo imagined, the grace that they brought to their community.

¹ Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987. Page 88

Can you imagine seeing the rose that marks where a beloved friend or child or parent died? I can't, not at all. But I can imagine that it would be more painful to pass by such a place and see that the road has been repaved and the wall replastered and repainted, as if nothing ever happened there. As if my loss is not real. The roses must provide some measure of comfort to those who have lost loved ones. And the staggering numbers of roses remind mourners that they are not alone in their grief. The city is filled with grief. Everyone in Sarajevo is confronted with these roses, forced to remember that war and suffering and death happened in this city. Those wounds are not healed and the city refuses to pretend otherwise. That willingness to live with and through pain is the grace that Sarajevo has imagined, the grace that Sarajevo has given to the world. The grace in Sarajevo is not the grace of Christian theology. It is not unearned blessings from God, God reaching out to humanity generously even though we don't deserve it. It is not amazing grace that saved a wretch like me. The grace of Sarajevo is different. It is not divine generosity. It is the transformation of unearned, undeserved pain into beauty and blessing. It is imperfect and human and beautiful.

We are all Sarajevo. We are all the walking wounded – carrying with us scars from past losses and pains. I sincerely hope that no one here has faced the losses that come with living in a city under siege for four years. But we have experienced the suffering of illness, the death of loved ones, dreams unrealized, and everyday unkindnesses. To be human is to live through pain.

And we all face the same dilemma that faced the citizens of Sarajevo at the end of the war. What do we do with our wounds? What is the grace that we imagine? Do we lay fresh clean cement on our wounds or cover them up with a new coat of paint? Pretend that nothing happened? Do we let the pains be and not do anything? Maybe we just avoid that part of town, that part of our past. Or do we transform pain into power, into haunting beauty? A graceful and grace-filled gift to the world that cannot be ignored? Something that reminds us—and those around us—that we have survived suffering and are unwilling to pretend otherwise?

We are called to create Sarajevo roses in our lives and in the world around us. To remember our pain, and to transform it into something life-giving, something grace-giving. We know that the suffering of the Sarajevans does not disappear because of red resin on the sidewalk. But it is acknowledged. It is there for everyone to see. It is an unearned blessing for all who encounter it, those who survived the siege and those who are just passing through town. And this willingness to live with and through suffering is brave and beautiful. It blesses the world. The strange haunting beauty of the Sarajevo roses reminds us of all that has been lost, of the suffering all around us. That we are not alone in our pain.

Grace is not only a Christian concept. In the Sri Vaishnava sect of Hinduism, there are two primary schools of thought about grace. One asserts that God is like a mother monkey and the other states that God is a mother cat. Adherents to the so-called cat school believe that God acts like a mother cat carrying her kittens. Do you remember what that looks like? The cat bites the kitten on the scruff of his neck, picks him up and carries him from one place to another. The kitten does

nothing, except maybe squirm; he is transported to where he needs to be without making any effort. His grace is unearned.

Others believe that grace works more like a monkey and her baby. Maybe you remember seeing a baby monkey being carried from your last trip to the zoo. The baby monkey climbs up onto its mother's back and holds on for dear life as the mother jumps from tree to tree or scampers across the ground. Some believe that grace works like that, that we have to show some initiative, partner with the divine, hold on for dear life. Only then will the holy grant us grace, only then will the holy jump from tree to tree with us holding tight to its hairy back.²

That is not all that grace is. Sometimes, like in post-war Sarajevo, grace happens through human initiative. We make the world graceful and grace-filled. We bless the world. To return to the metaphor from Hinduism, there are cats and monkeys of all ages and it all gets mixed up. We assume all the roles. Sometimes we are kittens, being carried and protected. Sometimes, we are the baby monkeys holding on tightly to something bigger than ourselves. And sometimes we are the mothers and fathers in the situation, carrying friends and neighbors and strangers toward a place of wholeness and blessing. Sometimes we are all that we have. In these situations, we make grace happen.

Sometimes, in the words of the Caribbean-American poet June Jordan, "we are the ones we have been waiting for." Sometimes we don't have the privilege of being helpless. Sometimes, we must become the take-charge momma cat, grabbing others by the scruff of their necks and carrying them into safety, into transformation, into grace.

Take-charge momma cats transform their communities. Simon Rodia was one such person. He was an Italian immigrant who lived in the Watts area of Los Angeles. For many of us, Watts is shorthand for urban unrest. But Watts is a neighborhood. A neighborhood full of people living rather ordinary lives, sharing many of the worries that animate our days. True, it is a neighborhood where many have had their aspirations and achievements curtailed by racism and poverty. Watts is not a symbol, though. It is a real, lived-in place. And Simon Rodia knew that.

Simon Rodia was a construction worker who lived in Watts, beginning in the 1920s. He devoted his evenings and weekends to building a striking landmark for his neighborhood, the Watts Towers. This project took him nearly 30 years. The tallest tower stretches 99 ½ feet into the heavens. From a distance, the towers look like a collection of church spires. As one approaches the towers, an expectation rises that there will be holy site at their base. And then, one discovers that there is no place of worship there. The towers remind us all that the ground, just as it is, is holy ground.

Every inch of the Watts Towers is covered in mosaic. Mosaic is an apt symbol for transformation and grace. To make his mosaics, Simon canvassed his neighbors and scoured the sidewalks,

² Doninger, Wendy. *The Hindus: An Alternative History*. New York: Penguin, 2010. Page 515.

collecting discarded things in a disregarded neighborhood. There are pieces of old dessert plates, coffee cups, sea shells, and beer bottles embedded in his sculpture. Objects that would otherwise be garbage were elevated, both literally and metaphorically, into art. In her powerful book, *Finding Beauty in a Broken World*, Euro-American conservationist Terry Tempest Williams writes that 'There is a way of being in the world that calls us beyond hope. Mosaic is not simply an art form, but a form of integration, a way of not only seeing the world but responding to it.'³ Mosaic transforms the discarded into art. And the Watts Towers make their neighborhood holy ground.

In this moment, I invite us all look closely at the places of pain in our own lives, the craters left by grief, broken relationships, suffering of all kinds. What is the grace that we can imagine? How can these wounds be transformed into the blessing and beauty the world is hungry for? That the world desperately needs.

Where is our pain? And what are we waiting for?

The world needs us to act.

The world needs the grace that only we can create.

The world needs us to build monuments to the holy ground beneath our feet.

The world needs us to be monkeys and to be cats and to be mothers and others who care for one another.

The world is in desperate need of roses.

May it be so. May we make it so and amen.

³ Williams, Terry Tempest, *Finding Beauty in a Broken World*, New York: Vintage, 2009, p. 384