



NAVARATHRI 2008

SANKALPAM

Some things never change.
Every year, I sit here on a night with no moon
and start a journey from despair and anxiety
towards grace.

The journey lasts ten days.
And words beyond what I care to count.

At the end of that journey
I do not find grace
but remember where it is –
somewhere in my own heart.

It's a long journey to this point of departure.
My self.
My heart.
My being.

And it's the same journey every year,
with some thematic variations.

But I do not really learn.

Just this minute, my brain is dictating these words
that my fingers are typing
even as my neck hurts with anxiety
about the grace
my heart is rummaging for

amid the lists and losses
and uncertainties of this moment.

And so in this moment,
I resolve, like I do every year,
to seek grace, your grace, my grace.
But this year, I will look for it
where I have known it most surely.

And this year, I will not ask you,
are you coming with me?
Because this year, I will know that where you are,
I am. Where I am,
you are.
And that is grace.

Mahalaya Amavasya
September 28, 2008

PRATHAMAM

Like the special effects of a mythological spectacular,
I know your grace first as my mother and
then in the sure cradle of my father's arms,
but these then dissolve into a benevolent universe
where scores of people play mother and father to me
at different moments.

In a world that is not always kind and nurturing,
nor even simply safe,
I know their care and protection
in places where my parents are not.

But let's start with my parents who first express your grace to me.
My mother, in her graceful and gracious way, teaches me
about the world and its cares,
what is right and what is wrong,
the right way to do something and the other ways it could be done.
My mother, particular and perfectionist, patient pedagogue,
meticulous nurse, sober aesthete and creative spirit,
and storyteller of unexpectedly wicked wit.
My father, sparing with words and generous in all other matters,
expressive in his moments, expansive always,
practical and imaginative, quick to anger but quicker to trust.
My father, with a heart that was lion and butter all at once,
hands always open to give and ready to hold,
willing to work, able to animate
and daring to make dreams come true.
My mother and father express your grace to me

but show me that grace lies in giving.

And then my readymade army of mothers and fathers,
my aunts and uncles,
each a distinctive manifestation of your grace in my life.
Like refracted images of my parents,
remembering what I liked to eat,
remembering small things about me,
inciting me to new adventures of the mind,
encouraging me to have a worldview all my own,
taking the time to hear what it is,
welcoming me to the home that is their heart,
teaching me to sing, taking pleasure in my song,
looking at me and seeing their child.
Your grace, this family of a thousand special talents,
all merging into the glow of its unmatched warmth
and all weaving quickly a safety net of support for me,
at all times. Your grace, this sheltering tree of a family.

And then by yet another sleight-of-hand,
the aunts and uncles of my childhood,
the parents of my friends.
Recipes and life-lessons, culture and politics,
conversations for a lifetime.
Your grace, their affection and indulgence
experienced as warm welcomes,
attention to small needs, acts of inclusion
when I was alone and it was cold and scary.

And now I am grown up, but wherever I am,
I look for your grace and I find it
in a mother who looks at me and sees a daughter,
her daughter, someone else's. A daughter.
And I find it in a father who thinks,
my daughter would say this,
or her father would do that.
I find your grace in that moment where I am
with someone who wants to look after me.

In the love and care I receive,
in the security I feel,
I know your grace as surely as I have
in the lap of my mother or
holding the strong hand of my father.

You are my mother,
mother of the world,
and your grace is mamata,
the love of a parent for a child.
When I close my eyes and say,
Amma, I feel your presence,
as touch, as calm, as breath,
I know your grace.

September 30, 2009

DWITIYAI

In the friendship of companions, your grace
is lighthearted laughter, rock-solid support
and long weepy funk sessions.

The gift of this grace is
finding friends,
making friends,
enjoying friends,
keeping friends,
being friends.

Friends are like air, found everywhere.

And my first friends are family.

Cousin sisters and cousin brothers,
playing with me, delighting in me,
storing up stories to embarrass me with,
indulging me, watching over me,
becoming my mentors, becoming my friends,
forming the lyrics of the first songs I wrote,
allowing me to follow, allowing me to lead,
making it safe for me to be me,
to try being me, just a little for size,
and then with ever-greater confidence.
My sisters and brothers, anchors of my self,
touchstones and yardsticks for my life.

My best friends, I called them,
and they are three, born right before me.
With them, I have learnt
that friendship is about words and music,
that friendship needs no words or music,
and that friendship is the opportunity to write a new song.
Like the mounts on a carousel,
we journey together,
sometimes coming close, sometimes moving away,
and me, the youngest by weeks,
always sure the other three are along for the entire ride,
as reassurance and reinforcement for all my choices.

My sister, born on a day of my choosing,
someone for me to watch over,
became someone to watch over me.
Quicksilver but focused, intensely loyal and innately social,
sometimes child, sometimes student,
sometimes boss, sometimes teacher,
sometimes life-mechanic, sometimes co-worker,
she gives me the confidence to paint in bright colours.
Painting with her, is another friend of mine,
who has taught us all to celebrate every moment
as it comes. Joy is in the small things,
the daub of colour on a grey day,
a piece of chocolate, the shared abandon of a family board game.

Shared excitement, shared pleasures, shared struggles.
These sisters and brothers of mine
who can go from philosophy to bad jokes,

get serious about humour and keep perspective on challenges,
who disappear in peacetime but materialize in times of crisis,
who can sing like nightingales and larks
in the absence of an audience,
who allow me to walk with them as they walk with me,
who are blessed with words, colours, music and
above all, the gift of love,
express your grace to me
with their unfailing, unflagging friendship,
teaching me the most useful of all life-skills – friendship.

September 30, 2008

TRITIYAI

Some days I sit by myself
a speck caught in a typhoon
a small raft tossing around a turbulent ocean
a penny sinking weightlessly into a black hole
a heart full of worry that cannot find words
nor a person who will listen to them.
Some days I miss my friends.

Someone
who knows the everyday business of your life,
who knows from the way you are standing
that this has not been a good day,
who knows from your shifty glance
that you are trying not to laugh and even better
what it is that makes you giggle,
who tells you when something good happens to her,
who thinks of you when the day has just been ghastly,
who knows you care and who cares about you
enough for conversation without preliminaries,
for whom there is no substitute in the whole world.

In my life, there is such an abundance of grace,
that I have known true friendship,
not once, or twice, but in every moment of my life.
Today when I remind myself of that,
I am overawed by this abundance which means
that I cannot recall every single person who is my friend.

The girl who walked back and forth with me,
as we escorted each other home in an endless loop.
The girl with whom I had a pact to write the same word
at the same time in the same way.
The girls with whom I played house in the corridor between our
flats.
The girls with whom I first went for walks and long talks.

And then friendships and life began to be about serious stuff.
Crises, angst, rivalry, political strategy and solidarity.
We kept secrets, we kept vigil, we kept together.
And like water seeping through walls,
there were books, words, laughter, music,
irony and dreams to keep us going.
They still do. That is your grace.

I treasure friendships because I have also known loneliness.
I have known alienation.
I have known what it is to not fit in.
I still do.
On good days, I accept these as your grace as well.
They stoke the fire in my belly.
They keep me focused.
They make me creative and they sharpen my expression.

On other days, I miss the friends of my adult years.
We have shared work,
we have shared stolen moments of leisure from work.
We have been colleagues,
we have been conspirators in turning work into play
and play into opportunities for creativity.
We have exulted in each other's successes,
owned each other's celebrations as our own.
We have entered into each other's crises,
becoming pillars, walls, foundations for each other.
We have chided, like teachers,
and indulged, like parents.
I know that wherever they are
they know I am writing this. And missing them.

On most days, I miss these people,
scattered like your grace in every corner of the world.
connecting, re-connecting through every device
and platform possible to make up for geographical distance.

I miss them, but I am so grateful for your grace
that brings them to my life.
For what is it but grace, that brings humans
born in different corners of the world,
different settings, different communities,
together, to interact and form these unbreakable bonds
with each other?

Your grace in my life –
the gifts of friendship
without borders
and understanding
without words
and love
without reason.

October 1, 2008

CHATURTI

Today my brain has been like a foggy tunnel.

There are many things I don't understand
about the way grace works.
(I do understand that figuring them out
is the purpose of life.)

You gifted me grasp and intelligence.
But it has never been important to me
to prove that relative to anyone else.

You gave me voice
--to sing, to speak, to write—
but filled me with enough reticence
and then an appreciation for silence,
that let me cede my turn
over and over.

You gave me a comfortable life as a child
and then you challenged me.
painfully, at times, traumatically, as an adult.
But you never filled me with enough desire
to earn or acquire numbers I cannot write.

You filled my life with people.
And you filled me with devotion to them.
When they were snide or cruel,
and they were, you peeled away my aura-armour

and let me feel hurt.
You could have let me be as I was.
But I had to feel anger, hurt, resentment.

You have blessed me with so much skill
and enough charisma,
even I must embarrassingly concede,
you improve my odds of success at anything.
The ambitions and dreams you have stoked
are of being useful, of giving and giving back.
Both then you make each task hard,
harder, still harder, unbearable.
Everything takes long
and I am always fighting alone.

Or rather, you place me in a universe
that is crowded with helpful people,
and you endow me with an appreciative nature,
but I always feel alone.
Alone, alienated, isolated, lone-ranger,
Don Quixote, maverick, eccentric, all by myself,
alone.

Why?

Why waste my time on
elaborating these contradictions,
sorting through the maze they forge?

You have an agenda.
You have created an able instrument.
Why not let things happen?
Why can that not be your grace?

Why must it be instead that
I have to breathe evenly,
pay attention to each of these ironies,
fathom the curriculum you have designed for my life
and study it deeply, by myself?
Why does your grace not take the form of revelation,
or at least, study guide?

I really don't understand this today.
As I write, I am overwhelmed
by a sense of my limitations
and my mind wonders how anything will get done.
But somewhere in this mess,
my heart tells me, is.... your grace.

October 2, 2008.

PANCHAMI

Grace is the light at the end of the tunnel.

The road winds dramatically and the ascent is steep,
but at the end of a ride that has challenged your stomach
to the limits of its tolerance,
grace is the glimpse of light
through which you see the forested hills you love,
the ocean you have missed.

Waiting for parents to come take you home
long after most of your friends have gone,
grace is the glimpse of your father
approaching the school gate.

Grace is the friend's sister who gets off the bus with you
because you cannot cross the road by yourself.
Grace is the school teacher who seats you at her dining-table
to teach you quadratic equations.

The kind and understanding vice-principal
who lets you sit with her and take time off from college
because she knows your struggle before you do,
is grace.

Grace is found in the mundane things that go your way.
Someone cleans the train bathroom just before you use it.
You step out of your gate and an auto steps before you.
The car pulls into the garage

as someone vacates the spot you like best.
But the experience of grace is more tangible
when you have waited long for a breakthrough
and then it happens as easily as breath.

Grace is reading parts of your own dissertation
a decade after the life-death struggle with it ended in your favour
to realise you did a good job after all.
When your tired spirit and your ill-used body
show the first signs of recovery,
grace is like sunshine you cannot miss.

Those who accept your rough edges
and the spillover of your inner struggles
and the workings of the uncontrollable centrifuge of vitriol within
you,
and still stay in your orbit
are nothing less than fragrant fragments of grace.

For October 4, 2008/ Written October 5, 2008

SHASHTI

Grace is also the tunnel itself
and the discovery of the unexpected pleasures
of the darkness
as well as the unanticipated gifts of the journey.

Many, most, almost all
of these gifts are friends.

Such as the friend you made on a train out of the city
and kept for decades after that.
Such as the friends that you make while taking an exam
at a dilapidated centre in the heart of town.
Such as the friends you made on job interviews
who don't forget you even when the outcome favours another.

The hardest moments of a journey are sprinkled with grace.
Students who greet you like family and
worry about your future like friends.
New friends who pray and comfort and take care of you
as you take care of your crisis.
Old friends who make calls and call favours.
Friends you don't know
whose written words reach you when you need to hear them.

Grace is like the cycle of tides.
Good energy that washes over you
and washes you to the magical shore
you barely imagined.

Friends who enter, disappear, re-enter to vanish again
in order to enable you in one moment.
You can look at them drifting away again
or you can look gratefully at where they helped you reach.

Grace is the experience of enough scarcity
to understand abundance as a state of mind.
Penny-pinching to the point of surrender
and finding that someone up there does arrange
to take care of your bills.
Not more, not less, but just what you need.
The confidence to start doing something
knowing it will get paid for.
Contentment with the realization of value—
above all, mine.

Being true to yourself when it is hard
is grace.
Finding those who will stand by you
on the uncomfortable moral high ground
is nothing less than grace.
Grace is not knowing enough to know
you are going to pay for what you say
so that you can say it anyway. And it is
not changing your mind once you know.
To be able to take the consequences
and to read their true lessons,
however haltingly, is grace.

Grace is the discipline to delay gratification
without resentment.

It is finding delight in small things
while the big ones are elusive.

Grace is noticing that spring is beautiful
even when your own summer is uncertain.

You become grace on the rare instances
that past and future completely slip your mind...

On a windy cliff by an ocean full of stories,
staying grounded against the gale-like forces
working to fly you across.

In that space where you slip into meditation
and out of your body for just long enough
to know you are. You are. Just now.

Grace is what is left when you weed out
feeling, thinking, having an opinion,
asserting yourself, cowering,
everything else.

Grace is the inappropriately timed escaping giggle.

The exquisitely worded appeal that you hear
yourself speaking.

It is the honesty of your incoherent-feeling representation
that grace allows people to hear over your grammar
or the perfection of your rhetoric.

Grace is that moment when pain lifts
from a migraine-ravaged body.

When the practice of conscious breathing

stems nausea that threatens to evacuate your insides.

It is that day when your energy suddenly rises
and your mind is as sharp as a razor
as fast as a race-car.

Grace fills you with ideas that are
imaginative, interesting, beautiful
and that speak exquisitely and simply,
leaving you just the instrument for their delivery.

Grace gives you the words you need
and then fills the rest of the space with silence.

A moment of stillness in an afternoon of frenzy.

In the interstices and corners of hard times,
grace eases the flow of life
and illuminates the fact of movement
through the tunnel,
so you can see that life blossoms everywhere.

October 5, 2008

SAPTAMI

I have known grace in ways
that words cannot capture.

In the realm of my dreams,
grace has been a destination where I have found myself.
Flowers and fragrances.
Sun on sea, glinting, shimmering.
Pastel and silver dawn,
brilliantly glass mid-day,
and a breeze that does not end.

Grace is the magical journey
from mundane to miraculous
that dreams screen if you are lucky.
Transformed hands.
Merging, melding self.
A presence that straddles
the waking-sleeping state
in unimaginable ways,
experienced as touch, as temperature,
as love and as grace.

Bliss that stays with you
on tap for the moments when
you remain your body
and your feelings
and your fears
and your words.

Grace is remembering that bliss
so that you can recall it
and renew yourself.

Grace is breath.
And grace is definitely
the breath that takes you
from where you are to
where you truly are.
Grace is being.
And awareness of being.

In those many, many moments
when the universe stops to embrace you,
there is grace.
I know that grace well,
I tell you in gratitude.
Grace is like your mother's lap,
always a safe place.

Expressed as love,
inclusion, love,
belonging, love,
assistance, love,
friendship, love,
compassion, love,
grace is always unspoken.
Still, silent grace.

October 6, 2008

ASHTAMI

Grace is why
all the horrible things
that could happen to you
did not.

In every life,
there are many.
Narrow escapes from
dangers you did not know
exist.
Conscious decisions
that were better than
you knew.
Mediocre outcomes
that would have been a waste.
Disastrous results that
would have wasted you.
The dogged hand of fate
that moved you away
from peer pressure
from family arguments
from your own weakness
from the inability to think straight
in a critical moment.

Grace is the knowledge
that you must help others
escape the outcomes

that could have been your life.
The imperative to help grace along
is grace.
And grace is the ability to do that.

Grace is the magic
that happens when the bad stuff doesn't.
Even when the road to it
does not seem magical.

Grace is innocence
that keeps from you
what could have been.
It is your struggling and grudging
acceptance of what did not happen
which makes room for the thing
that is so wonderfully right
that you did not know it existed
consider it as a possibility
admit it in your dream.

Grace is finding a teacher
in every person you meet
as you journey away from bad outcomes
as you struggle with frustration
as you discover the miracle
that unfolds in your life.
And grace is recognizing
the teaching
and sometimes, the teacher too.

Grace is the spirit
that moves the body to do,
even on days when the body is reluctant.
And the phenomenally intelligent human body
is also grace.

Grace lies in the grace of every
thought, word, action—
especially positive thought,
well-chosen word,
compassionate action.

Grace is the steering wheel
that guides your body towards
this domain of the spirit.

Grace is the recognition of grace
everywhere.

October 7, 2008

NAVAMI

If you are one of the lucky few
who do what they love
with some competence
and passion
in a way that is useful to many
and sustains you,
you live in grace.

Where there is a joining of
intellect
heart
hands
spirit,
that conjunction is grace.

To have
ideas,
feelings,
words,
skill,
energy,
is grace.

If with my hands,
my heart and my intellect,
my words and my actions,
I can be useful,
creative,

resourceful,
content,
it is your grace.

To know the rush of one creative idea after another.
To know what it is to take dictation when one sits to write.
To speak verbally and visually,
and to communicate through silence.
To mine a bottomless wellspring of commitment,
fuel it with the energy of passion and ambition,
temper it with conscience and compassion,
and work long, hard and happy,
is to know abundance.
Abundance of grace.

To be aware that one is not doing
and to experience the joy of being just an instrument
but a very keen instrument by virtue of that,
is grace.

Work.
Having work.
Doing useful work.
Being able to work.
Working with everything I have.
Is grace.

And then, compassionate, loving one,
having filled my life with this grace,
you give me one day,
one day off—
in your honour.

As I wearily shut down for that one holiday,
and prepare to worship all the things,
inherent and outward,
animate and inanimate,
that enable me to enjoy your grace
as work, creativity, play, service,
to worship you,
I thank you also for this one holiday.
That too is your grace.

With your leave, and by your grace,
I will now rest a day
and return to your labours on the morrow.

October 7, 2008.

DASHAMI

You make your grace known
in more ways than we can write about.

In an emerald vision that stays in the heart.
In the unmistakable touch of a mother
when her child is sick.
In a warm glow that suffuses the heart.
In the walk-in-and-out parts that strangers
play in a moment of crisis.

In the generosity of others.
In my own impulse to generosity.
In kindness and consideration.
In nurture and bonding.

You make your grace known
in unexpected ways.

In the isolation of alienation
that spurs inner growth.
In anger over injustice
that moves one to action.
In moving beyond negativity
of any sort,
towards good thought, word, deed.
In the people and events that catalyse
such movement.

I feel your grace a million times a minute.
Sometimes mindfully, too rarely, I suspect.
Most of the time with relief
barely registering my good fortune.

The moments that I know
are the magical moments of my life.
But my life is a composite
of all the moments of your grace
which never wavers or diminishes.

October 9, 2008

SAMAPTI

This year, I have written about your grace
mostly writing about myself.

From a certain point of view, this is
wrong.
Self-centred.
Weird.
Unacceptable.
But if you remember, this is where
we finish every year.

There is neither separation nor separateness
between you and me.
The most important sign of your grace
is that knowledge.
The most important confirmation of your grace
lies in my growing internalization of it.

This year, since you already know what I am thinking,
I decided to point out some areas in which your grace
might be even more abundant,
or explicit, if you prefer.

We could have world peace, for starters.
We could have a climate of reconciliation
and mutual acceptance.
A deep-seated realization that we sink or swim together
and must work together on our shared problems.

We could have less talk and more action
by everybody.

We could have more cleanliness and order.
A reversal of global warming.
Conservation without conservatism.
Better weather might cool our tempers too!

And while you are working on all that,
I will put in a word for the many who are suffering at this moment.
From illness and from its aftermath.
From violence. By family, friends, strangers or states.
From the impact of crises, whether
they created them or not.
From bereavement and loss.
From the negativity of their own hearts
and the limits of their own mind.

Make the bad stuff go away
and make the good stuff obvious
even to those who do not seek.

In my outer life, too, I have a list.
Give me the means to do the work
you and I both want me to do.
Give me the physical strength
and well-being to do it
and enable me to help you with that.
Give me the people I need.
Open doors. Make the waves part.

Give me the words I need to speak my piece.
Open their hearts and minds to my words.

Give the people around me
good health, prosperity and peace of mind.
Give them good days, good ways
and good internet connections.
Give them the will and the means to communicate.
Touch their lives as you touch mine.
And touch the lives of those around them.
Radiating circle after circle of grace.

Let love truly become the default emotion.
Let compassion become a lingua franca.

And a special request or two
from my inner life.
Give me patience.
Give me acceptance and
teach me to surrender.
Give me the ability to be attentive
and to be calm
so I can finish what you assign to me.
Give me a lot of calm.

Let me remember to accept and allow
the flow of your grace through
my self, life and days
without doubt,
without interruption,

without foolish intervention
or pig-headed pursuit of lesser goals.

And in my turn,
I give some things too.

First, I have a load of crap to dump in your garden.
Anger.
Doubt.
Impatience.
Intolerance.
The urge to criticise and mock others.
But remember, don't take it all.
All these things are good up to a point,
and I am only giving you the excess.

I am also giving you self-doubt.
You can have all of my self-loathing moments.
You can take all my aches and pains
maybe just leaving me enough
for me to value my body.
You can take away awkwardness
and anxiety and shyness.
You can have avarice (not ambition).
You can take away fear, almost altogether —
just leave enough for me to be careful.

Is your backyard full
or have all these things turned to
light, fragrant rose-petals and
barely filled it?

In that case, you can just leave the truck
parked at the edge of my life
so I can dump the things that
I cannot remember right now.

In my life, is your grace.

In your heart, is my life.

This giving and this taking
are notional.

The easy way to explain
the transformation that we wreak together.
So that the difference and distance
that appears between us
vanishes.

That is the victory
we anticipate
and celebrate
today.

October 9, 2008



