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Workin Scholarship Essay 2016

*The following is a passage from Joel's essay, "Grace Unbounded." Focus on how Joel's conviction that "the most precious grace God gives us is the grace to be ourselves" connects with your own vocation and theology.*

*"And now, it is time to let grace abound! It's time for gay people to build worshipping communities. It's time for us to bring God's good news, and not the church's bad news, to the LGBTQ community. It's time to care for the kicked-out, the runaway, the imprisoned, the friendless, the dying. It's time to celebrate what has already been done. It is time to remember that we are the church. We celebrate God's gracious gifts. We proclaim the love, the life, and the grace of God at work within us and our community. We demonstrate the gracious power and glory that is ours when we come out and take the step, saying, "We are here. We are Gay and Lesbian and Bisexual and Transgend[er]... We are friends of Lesbians and Gays and Bisexuals and the Transgend[er]. We are God's. We are the kingdom." The most precious grace God gives us is the grace to be ourselves. And now, it is time to let grace abound."*

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Aileen grabbed the long, jet-black braid from off her shoulder and firmly clamped it between her teeth. Sliding first into a small second-position plié, she began to turn. As her head whipped with each revolution, her arms opening and closing in counterpoint to her feet, the diaphanous wrap skirt swirled at her knees. She completed a series of revolutions, and then turned and released the braid-tail from her mouth. "Now your turn. David, again!" The accompanist began the introduction and we attempted *chaines* turns with the technique of spotting: the continuous re-focusing on one location as you revolve, so as not to become dizzy. One by one the dancers in beginning ballet would rally failing limbs and uncertain feet in imitation of our enthusiastic dance professor. "S.O.S.," she cried. "S.O.S!" It wasn't until years later that I realized she was actually affirming our success. Her heavy New York accent, paired with newly acquired Spanish skills rendered "Eso es—That's it" into an ironic commentary on our fledgling dance abilities.

One day in class, we began to talk about coordination that leads to the gracefulness of dancers. Aileen asserted, "Grace is when all the parts of your body know what all the other parts of your body are doing at any given moment." Grace happens when the head knows where the hands are when your eyes can't see. Grace happens when your pinky finger and your little toe are kinesthetically aware of each other. But most importantly, grace isn't a finite destination—it is a

journey of awareness. I have often thought of my time with Aileen, a time when I wasn't a church person, but I was a seeker—looking for a connection to the divine; looking for the action in the universe that would take flailing hearts and uncertain relationships and make community. Grace was an aspiration of the body, a striving for beauty; it was also an aspiration of the spirit, a yearning for the divine.

Reading Joel Workin's essay, *Grace Unbounded*, I couldn't help but think of Aileen and her definition of grace: certainly not because what we aspire to as Christians is the kind of perfection that the grace of dance demands—hours in the studio and on the stage. Rather, the grace that we aspire to is the outpouring from God, undeserved and relentless, bucketful's of love that rain down—so many drops of baptismal water. But God's grace does demand something from us, and I'm not being a heretical Lutheran and talking about works-righteousness. God's grace demands that we be completely human, a kind of perfection in our imperfection. In fact, grace encourages what it demands.

The grace you get when you are a dancer holds you up when things don't go as planned, when gravity gets the best of you, when your memory decides it is time to count sheep rather than remember if it was two turns to the right or to the left. In an unexpected way, grace allows you to become the artist that you were from the beginning, a potential that was hovering just under the surface of your inexperience. God's grace does the same thing. I am free to live into the baptismal covenant that seals me in everlasting life as it propels me to the cross to die yet another day, yet another death. And in the dark falling, in the everlasting emptiness, the grace is there saying, "Get up and follow me." Regardless of what I might think about who I am, this "most precious grace" says that I can be who I am, and be right by God.<sup>1</sup>

This is dangerous grace. Saving grace. LGBTQ Christians, many of whom still face the "church's bad news," today need "God's good news,"<sup>2</sup> an unwavering message that assures them there will be "at last, peace . . . at last, light . . . at last, courage," and most certainly "at last, 'Gay is Good!'"<sup>3</sup> There is a level of reconciliation in the ELCA, if not the church universal, which is unprecedented. Less than ten years ago, I could not be where I am as a gay and partnered

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<sup>1</sup> Joel Workin, "Grace Unbounded," in *Dear God I'm Gay: Thank You*, second edition (Publisher unknown, 2012), 32.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 31.

seminarian on track to Word and Sacrament ministry. Now, I am in seminary with eighteen other LGBTQ folk, in a synod where we installed four LGBTQ pastors in the past year, and in a greater network of queer folk across the country. We can certainly “celebrate what has already been done,” with an eye toward the future.<sup>4</sup> “We are God’s. We are the Kingdom.”<sup>5</sup> The grace of God allows us, moment by moment, to be ourselves.

When Augustine famously wrote “you have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you,”<sup>6</sup> he was foreshadowing the struggle for spiritual justice that is at the heart of LGBTQ inclusion in the church. How unquiet—how restless—the yearning heart, especially when the very food that will quench the hunger, the unwavering love of a God so in-love with creation who descends down to share our humble humanity, is at arms reach. The queer community has just such a yearning heart. My time as a queer Christian is short—I was baptized and confirmed as a Lutheran only six years ago. In that time I have expanded my gay-identity to now include a Christian aspect, an expansion facilitated by the precious grace of God. I have lead the charge at my home congregation, Third Lutheran Church in Louisville, Kentucky, to have a more visible presence in the LGBTQ community. We march in the annual Pride parade and staff a booth at the festival. I spearheaded a logo design that incorporated the rainbow colors into the Luther Rose, with a proclamation of God’s inclusive love: “Gay/Straight, Male/Female, Black/White, Older/Younger: Everybody needs a little TLC!” Now in seminary, I chair our LGBTQ affinity group, Thesis 96, and I am the LGBTQ rep on student government. Just recently Thesis 96 crafted a letter to our president, calling on the school to be more intentional in its LGBTQ affirmations. The conversation will continue next semester in an attempt to get better resources in classes for both LGBTQ seminarians and all future clergy who will minister to the LGBTQ community. I have allowed the grace of God to move through my active-practical spirituality in a way that affirms my out identity and encourages others to be true to their Christian selves, inclusive of their queer personas.

There is still work to do, to continue to let “grace abound.”<sup>7</sup> We have to be ourselves. We can’t let another day go by when we are forced back into the closet, into an elaborate tango of

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 33.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Augustine, *The Confessions*, Translated by Maria Boulding (Hyde Park: New City Press, 1997), I.1.1.

<sup>7</sup> Workin, 33.

compromises that thinks it mirrors the perichoretic dance of the Triune God. With all the achievements, there are still stumbling blocks. Marriage equality swept the nation less than one year ago; but the ELCA still defines marriage as one man and one woman. Many congregations are celebrating years with their LGBTQ pastors; other congregations, based on bound conscience, choose not to interview LGBTQ candidates. Not only must we allow grace to unlock our hearts and our closets, but we also have a responsibility to proclaim that grace—that gospel—as LGBTQ Christians. Grace helps us connect the wins and the losses, the “yes’s” and the “no’s.”<sup>8</sup> Grace connects “the kicked-out, the run away, the imprisoned, the friendless, the dying” with a love that knows what it is doing.<sup>9</sup>

I can only imagine what the queer Christian church of the future will be, but I’m hopeful it will be a place where the Trinity finds its truest expression, the sliding scales of sex and gender tuned and re-tuned toward the love of God in Christ Jesus, a dance where both/and is a place only of equality and consent. I look backward and forward for signs that point to yes, and see angels all around, “standing sure and proud and anchored in the gospel claiming their place.”<sup>10</sup>

Angels that look at our work and say, “Eso es!”

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>10</sup> Workin, 31.