

Preparation for Grace (theme for January)

What is Grace? Frederick Buechner, Presbyterian minister, writes, “After centuries of handling and mishandling, most religious words have become so shop-worn nobody’s much interested any more. Not so with grace, for some reason. Mysteriously, even derivatives like gracious and graceful still have some of the bloom left. Grace is something you can never get, but only be given. There’s no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth. A good sleep is grace and so are good dreams. Most tears are grace. The smell of rain is grace. Somebody loving you is grace. Loving somebody is grace.”

In traditional Christian terms, grace is associated with sin and salvation. Rev. Dr. Edward Frost explains this idea of grace as “the unearned, undeserved gift of God by which people are lifted out of a life of sin.” In this view, people live in a state of original sin but can be saved through God’s grace, as manifested in Jesus. In the 1800s in the U.S., a formative period for both Universalism and Unitarianism, the ideas of sin, salvation, and grace underwent changes. For Universalists, the idea of God’s grace was powerful. They believed that God’s love was so great that grace would be extended to all people. While most Unitarians at this time still believed in salvation, they tended to emphasize salvation not by grace but by an individual’s moral goodness. As Channing put it, the “image of God” is in each one of us.

Can the idea of grace be a meaningful part of our current UU faith? While we don’t believe we are sinners in the sense of “original sin,” we sometimes feel that we live in disharmony with ourselves, with other people, or with nature. Moments of grace may realign us, center us, and bring us back into harmony. These moments of grace may come unbidden, in solitary moments or in times with others. Many experience such moments of grace in nature, in music, or in a moment of being in the zone while engaged in sports. Grace often involves surrender, falling, letting go.

An atheist or humanist may struggle with the question, “Grace is a gift from ... who or what?” This question has come up with moments of gratitude as well. Some use the term Being or the Universe rather than God to answer the “who” question. Others simply cherish the gift of grace without needing to examine in too much detail the mechanics involved.

This essay was partially based on material in the *Touchstones* January issue, “Grace,” especially essays by Rev. Kirk Loadman-Copeland and Rev. Dr. Edward Frost.

Here are some thoughts you may wish to consider as you think about the topic of grace.

I do not understand the mystery of grace – only that it meets us where we are and does not leave us where it found us. *Anne Lamott*

There are moments of glory that go beyond the human expectation, beyond the physical and emotional ability of an individual. Something unexplainable takes over and breathes life into the known life. One stands on the threshold of miracles that one cannot create voluntarily Call it a state of grace, or an act of faith ... or an act of God. It is there, and the impossible becomes possible.... The athlete goes beyond herself; she transcends the natural. *Patsy Neal*, basketball star

In true community we will not choose our companions, for our choices are so often limited by self-serving motives. Instead, our companions will be given to us by grace. Often they will be persons who will upset our settled view of self and world. *Parker J. Palmer*

Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness ... have become intolerable to us. It strikes us ... when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage.

Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: "You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!" If that happens to us, we experience grace. *Paul Tillich*

Everything that slows us down and forces patience, everything that sets us back into the slow circles of nature, is a help. Gardening is an instrument of grace. *May Sarton*

I believe that appreciation is a holy thing, that when we look for what's best in the person we happen to be with at the moment, we're doing what God does. So, in loving and appreciating our neighbor, we're participating in something truly sacred. *Fred Rogers*

We let go into this grace. It's something we fall into, like when we fall into the arms of another, or we put our head on the pillow to go to sleep. It's a willingness to relax, even in the midst of tension. It's a willingness to stop for just a moment, to breathe, to notice that there's something else going on other than the story our mind is telling us. In this moment of grace, we see that whatever might be there in our experience, from the most difficult emotional challenges to the most causeless joy, occurs within a vast space of peace, of stillness, of ultimate well-being. *Adyashanti*, author and teacher

Questions to Ponder

1. What is your understanding of grace? It is a meaningful idea for you?
2. Think of moments when you have been surprised by life. Do you consider any of these surprises to be moments of grace?
3. What qualities of your heart or your mind might make you more receptive to grace?
4. Some people find moments of grace in activities that bring a sense of "flow" – for example, gardening, running, community, nature, music, or art. What are some paths that sometimes lead you to moments of grace?
5. Many of us feel that being "good" and being in control helps us lead worthwhile lives. Grace, however, is undeserved and often seems to happen when we let go. How do you see this paradox?

Words of the Day

For the Gathering, think of a word or a phrase to complete this sentence:
I have experienced grace when ...