

Universalist Unitarian Church of Halifax

Themed Church Magazine - October 2015

Grace



Definition

grace n.

1. Elegance or beauty of form
2. Undeserved favor or goodwill
3. A short prayer before or after a meal

synonyms: agility, beauty, dignity, ease, poise, compassion, generosity, goodness, kindness, tenderness, prayer

This is the second in a series of monthly “magazines” on the topic of the theme for the month. Each magazine will contain inspiring words, questions to ponder, articles to read and further resources to explore.

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What Does Grace Mean in Your Life?

Grace is not a word that you hear very often in UU congregations. Grace is a theological concept we left behind, or grew out of, or were wounded by. We are uncomfortable with the old words: “to be saved by grace alone.” They sound to us like a prescription for passivity. And don’t even get us started on the idea that we “need grace.” We are so done with the argument about whether or not we are hopeless sinners who need our dark souls wiped clean.

But grace is too good a word, too useful a concept, to be abandoned by us. At the heart of the idea of grace, is the idea of thankfulness. We have received things that we did not deserve or earn. It is time to quit arguing over where we received these things from. We need to graciously accept the gifts.

Grace was chosen as our theme for October because of the celebration of Thanksgiving during this month. Despite all its theological baggage, at its core the acceptance of grace simply celebrates a gift. Or maybe it’s more accurate to say, it accepts the giftedness of life.

Reclaiming the word Unitarian Universalists way of humbly and acknowledging that of our ability or at the way of surprising us. It’s acknowledging the matter how tragic or simply can’t shut out all not squeeze out all the



“grace” is our way as of saying thanks! It’s our gratefully when we are at the end end of a rope, life has a our way of astounding fact that no bleak things get, the bad the good, the dark need light.

Whether your personal theology leans theist or atheist (or somewhere in between), all of us find common ground around celebrating the gifts we didn’t expect, create or deserve. Whereas once we fought about who is the giver of grace and whether or not there even was one, we have no problem being satisfied with simply coming together to celebrate the gift. And not just celebrating it, but giving it a little bit of help as well.

Grace has a lot to do with serendipity. Just as serendipity happens, when we practice the art of careful observation and allow our curiosity to lead us, so too grace happens when we are open to its gifts. While we can’t control it, we can collude with it. The rules of grace involve more than us just sitting back and waiting for grace to happen. We are asked to be open, to let go of our precious and preferred plans, and accept the gift in whatever form it comes. We are also asked to be “givers of grace.” Yes, grace frequently does its work in spite of us, but more often than not it finds a way of working through us, if we let it.

That is what this month is all about: asking ourselves what we need to do to enable grace to flow more freely. So what is your “grace work”? Looking around? Letting go? Trusting more? Accepting whatever comes? Sneaking a gift into someone’s life without them knowing it? Forgiving someone when they don’t deserve it? Joyful work indeed!

Community is another source of grace. In community we are meant to grace one another; to be sources of grace; healers by way of grace. - Matthew Fox

Our Spiritual Exercise

Option A: Give Grace A Hand

Grace doesn't just surprise us; it also often invites us to be part of the surprise. It's sneaky that way. It likes to enlist us as its partner-in-crime. This exercise asks us to explore that more deeply— it asks us to notice how we are both givers and receivers of grace.



Simply put, your challenge is **to find a way to bring grace to someone's life**. That may seem simple, but there is one big, challenging rule you must follow: • **They can't know you were involved!** Your task is not to do a "good deed." It is to help someone experience life differently. The goal is to remind someone that *life itself* is generous, not stingy; open, not closed; full of surprises, not full of threats. If they know you are involved, it will only convince them that you are a good guy or gal. Your goal is convince them that "life is good!"

It is a reflection on our society that when researching examples of grace, they most frequently involve money - paying for someone's lunch anonymously, or leaving change at a vending machine, for example. See if you can find ways to exercise grace without resorting to using money as the agent of grace.

Here is some inspiration to help you.

- Grace can be as simple as picking up some trash on the street and putting it into a garbage can. The next person walking by doesn't have to see it, and will never know that you made the world a little for everyone.
- Gregory Clark, the Canadian author and humourist recommended hiding stacks of pennies outside where children were likely to find them. You might want to move up to nickels or dimes.
- When walking, watch for expired parking meters. If you find one, put in a quarter, or Loonie, and leave a note on the windshield. (This is totally illegal, but don't let that stop you.)
- There is more than one way to be anonymous. If you are brave enough, try initiating a cheerful conversation with a total stranger or maybe just offer a few cheerful words.
- You can be an agent of grace for other species as well. A simple bird feeder makes you an agent of grace.

Think about how you would answer these questions:

1. Is the idea of remaining anonymous appealing or would you rather vicariously experience the recipients joy?
2. Do some people, or some animals for that matter deserve grace more than others. You might put out a bird feeder, but would you put out a mouse feeder or a spider feeder?
3. In what way could being an agent of grace, be a spiritual experience for you?
4. Would you have any problems receiving a gift from an anonymous person?

Option B, C or D: Alternate Exercises:

1. Think of Your Best Grace Story: Treat this as an opportunity to express gratitude for the grace that has blessed your life, but also choose a story that taught you something significant about grace. How did this experience make you think about grace differently? How has the experience helped you more easily notice grace and open to it?

2. Take Up “Grace Watching”: As a way of reminding yourself of life’s giftedness, spend a week documenting the number of times you see grace in action. The day after writing this, my grace radar apparently more receptive, I noticed an older gentleman rooting around in a large flower pot placed by the city on Gottingen Street. My first thought was that he was about to pick a couple of blooms for his own use, but as I watched I realized that he was carefully weeding and pruning the public planter, a simple act of grace. When he was finished he walked past my car and I gave him a big thumbs up and a smile, which he returned. It was a moment of beautiful grace.

3. Give Your Schedule over to Grace: Put your To-Do List down for a day. Ignore your schedule. Commit to giving up all plans or expectations. Simply spend the day letting grace guide your agenda. Treat it as an experiment, testing the hypothesis that grace and giftedness is all around and wants to lure you in.

Your Question



*No need to treat these questions like “homework.” You do not need to engage every single one. Instead, simply find **the one** that “hooks” you most and let it lead you where you need to go.*

- 1. Have you closed yourself off from grace because you are uncomfortable with the word?** No one will object to you criticizing the way the concept of grace has been misused. But are you sure you want to keep criticizing? Rather than reclaim it?
- 2. Are you ticked off at grace?** It can be arbitrary. Not showing up when you need it most. How are you doing at “forgiving grace”? How are you doing at accepting the fact that it comes and goes like the wind? Or shows up in forms different than you had hoped?
- 3. Is grace asking for your help?** Grace rarely does everything on its own. It enlists us as its partner. Have you noticed that neighbor or co-worker who feels cut off? Or who is convinced that life is no longer on her side? Have you missed the invitation to help?
- 4. Do you consider yourself “graceful”?** Grace is not always something we receive or give. Sometimes it’s a state of being. Like a dancer lost in the flow, sometimes we are so attuned to and accepting of life’s currents that everything suddenly feels like a gift. When was the last time you danced through life gracefully? What’s keeping you from doing it right now?
- 5. Is grace trying to get you to let go?** Sometimes we cut ourselves off from grace by doggedly pursuing our own plans and preferences? Keeping your eyes on the prize can be noble, unless it’s blinding you to the real gift sitting in the other corner of the room? Do you need to let go of what you want in order to notice the unexpected thing grace is trying to give?
- 6. Are you here because of grace?** Have you given grace its due? Or stole all the credit? We all like to tell the story of our lives as if we pulled ourselves up by our own bootstraps. It’s a delicious temptation to tell the story that way. Here is your chance to tell a more grateful – and grace-full – story.
- 7. Do you believe in grace?** Every religion has its way of declaring that grace is always there, that no tragedy, defeat or evil is so large that it eliminates grace entirely. Do you believe this? Do you agree that grace is always there, if only we were willing to look? Maybe the bigger question is, “Do you WANT to believe?” Is restoring your faith in grace the work you need to do right now?

“I do not at all understand the mystery of grace. Only that it meets us where we are and does not leave us where it found us.”

- Anne Lamott

Recommended Resources

The pages that follow are not required reading. They include quotes, articles, on-line resources and a bibliography. They are simply meant to jumpstart you, and maybe open you to new ways of thinking about what grace means in our lives.

Wise Words

The winds of grace are always blowing, but you have to raise the sail.

- Ramakrishna

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 we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when year, after year, the longed for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsion 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. If that happens to us, we experience grace. After such an experience, we may not be better than before, and we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed.

- Paul Tillich

Grace is the ability to redefine the boundaries of possibility.

- Manning Marable

Community is another source of grace. In community we are meant to grace one another; to be sources of grace; healers by way of grace.

- Matthew Fox

Three times my life has opened. Once, into darkness and rain. Once, into what the body carries at all times within it and starts to remember each time it enters the act of love. Once, to the fire that holds all. These three were not different. You will recognize what I am saying or you will not. But outside my window all day a maple has stepped from her leaves like a woman in love with winter, dropping the colored silks.

Neither are we different in what we know. There is a door. It opens. Then it is closed. But a slip of light stays, like a scrap of unreadable paper left on the floor, or the one red leaf the snow releases in March.

- Jane Hirshfield

“For me, every hour is grace. And I feel gratitude in my heart each time I can meet someone and look at his or her smile.”

- Elie Wiesel

Sometimes, when you want to forgive, when you just don't want to fight anymore, but you don't know what else to do, your only job is to open the door to grace, the unexpected gift that makes a way out of no way. Sometimes, when it comes to forgiveness, the first step is not to hide what happened or move on from what happened, but to write what happened to you right out there for everyone to see – but you write it in sand, trusting... While you do your job of writing it out, you realize that you're not the wind that makes it all better. You don't even know if that wind is gonna come, and you sure don't know where it comes from or how to summon it. You're just the author who chooses to write in sand instead of rock. So you write, and then you stand back and you watch it and wait for grace to come.

- Soul Matters Minister

When despair for the world grows in me and I wake in the night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be, I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds. I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief. I come into the presence of still water. And I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light. For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

- Wendell Berry

Grace is the ability to redefine the boundaries of possibility.

- Manning Marable

Articles

Bestowers of Grace by Karen Gustafson



It was my good fortune to grow up in the midst of human graciousness. I am reminded of my father, whose practice when visiting Mexico was to patronize street vendors and bargain up. “How much do you want for that jewelry?” he would say. “Twenty pesos” they might say. “Oh, no,” my dad would respond, “Not enough. I’ll give you twenty-five.” It was not that he was a rich man, but rather that he was so grateful for what he had that he could not help but offer it up to others in surprising ways.

Gratitude is the wellspring of human grace. To know that we are blessed is to know that we have grace to offer. We become bestowers of grace. We do this when we give without regard to what we will receive in return (sometimes not so much as a thank-you). We are bestowers of grace when we do not count the cost, when we see another’s openness and guide them gently to what they are able to receive. We are bestowers of grace when- ever we engage in “senseless acts of kindness and random acts of beauty.”

May we find ourselves open to the life around us. May we humbly rejoice and give thanks for the infinite possibilities to receive the grace of the world and to bestow it upon others.

Every Day Grace by Matt Alspaugh

Grace is one of those words whose meaning has been diffused by so many strands of religious tradition that it is hard to use without confusion. Grace joins other terms like faith, evil, salvation- words which themselves have been twisted into knots and overloaded with multiple meanings.

Approaching grace, my seminary texts offer up variants like common grace and special grace, free grace and cheap grace, irresistible and habitual grace, and a good selection of more obscure variations that keep the theologians busy.

I like the fourth century theologian Augustine’s confession about grace; he asks, “What is grace?—I know until you ask me; when you ask me, I do not know.” That’s a bit more like it. At least a bit more like where I’m at with grace.

But this word can have meaning for us Unitarian Universalists. The great midcentury modern Christian theologian Paul Tillich wrote, “Grace does not mean that we suddenly believe that God exists, or that Jesus is the Savior, or that the Bible contains the truth . To believe that something is, is almost contrary to the meaning of grace.”

To Tillich, grace is active, something that addresses us directly. “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.”

Grace offers the possibility of sudden transformation—an awakening, not unlike what Zen Buddhists might seek through a practice of considering koans, those paradoxical anecdotes or riddles that can lead one to enlightenment.

Islamic mystics, particularly Sufis, understood this kind of transformation, too. Thirteenth century Persian poet Jalaluddin Rumi, here translated by Coleman Barks, tells us:

This is how a human being can change:

There's a worm addicted to eating grape leaves
 Suddenly he wakes up, call it grace, whatever, something
 wakes him and he's no longer a worm
 He's the entire vineyard
 and the orchard, too, the fruit, the trunks
 a growing wisdom and joy
 that doesn't need to devour.



As spiritual seekers, we may long to experience the grace that can offer such massive transformation. But grace may also come in small ways. Grace may appear in those small gifts, surprises, moments of good fortune that happen to us and around us if we only pay attention. Grace may come to us in the everyday through events called synchronicity, which is another of those terms whose original meaning is hard to discern.

I've heard many people talk about synchronicity in their lives, and I've always understood them to be talking about some kind of divine intervention by God or the universe, an intervention that lines up life events so they go click, click, click, like the tumblers in a safe's lock.

It's a lovely concept, and I don't want to quibble with them, since most of the time the synchronous events they talk about are joyful ones. Someone loses their job, and suddenly gets an out-of-the-blue offer for a better one. A chance encounter in the grocery store leads to a friendship or a relationship. Drop a greenback in the Salvation Army bucket and an unexpected insurance refund check appears in the mailbox.

But synchronicity has a deeper and more interesting meaning. Carl Jung invented the term to describe events that happen at the same time, not because they necessarily have a related cause, but rather because they have related meaning.

Jung first used "synchronicity" to describe a coincidental event that happened to him as he was working with a psychotherapy patient. This patient was particularly resistant to Jung's invitation to explore her unconscious, but she had had a dream in which a golden scarab beetle appeared. Just as she was describing the dream, a real beetle banged against the inside of his cabinet window. Jung caught it, and discovered it was a golden scarab beetle, unusual for that locale and season. He showed it to the patient, and the event helped her break through and make progress in therapy. Jung concluded that events are synchronous because we see them that way; we connect them together and thereby find greater meaning, as he was able to do with his patient.

I find this approach to synchronicity much more satisfying than my earlier understanding. It's not the universe- or God-running around behind my back making things happen with spooky simultaneity. Rather, it's how I perceive and connect the events that happen around me, and then come to a greater understanding of the universe by noticing their synchronicity.

In his classic book, *The Road Less Traveled*, M. Scott Peck describes grace as "a powerful force that exists outside human consciousness and nurtures the spiritual growth of human beings." Indeed, this spiritual development is part of our purpose in the universe. We are eyes and ears and rational intelligences of the universe, and we are becoming a spiritual intelligence in the universe. We are the universe coming to understand itself.

But what of the highest aspect of our evolution, the part that drives us to grow and develop as spiritual beings? Peck gives this creative spiritual drive a name - Love. He says:

It is through love that we elevate ourselves. And it is through love for others that we assist others to elevate themselves. Love, the extension of the self, is the very act of evolution. It is evolution in progress. The evolutionary force, present in all of life, manifests itself in [humankind] as human love. Among humanity love is the miraculous force that defies the natural law of entropy.

This love is a gift of the universe, or of whomever or whatever created the universe and its laws and conditions. It is nurtured through grace and difficult to put into words. Of all those who understand and try to describe this love, I find Sufi Muslim mystics, in loose translation by Western poets, to be most clear and vivid and true.

The fourteenth century Persian poet Shams-du-din Mohammad Hafiz, here translated by Daniel Ladinsky, offers this:

We have not come here to take prisoners,
 But to surrender ever more deeply To freedom and joy.
 We have not come into this exquisite world
 To hold ourselves hostage from love.
 We have a duty to befriend
 Those aspects of obedience
 That stand outside of our house
 And shout to our reason
 "O please, O please, Come out and play."
 For we have not come here to take prisoners
 Or to confine our wondrous spirits,
 But to experience ever and ever more deeply
 Our divine courage, freedom and Light!

Could not grace, source of that nurturing love, be calling to us, "O please, come out and play"? Could not grace, breaking in on and transforming us, carry us away in abandon to freedom and joy?



Rumi tells us:

On a day when the wind is perfect, the sail just needs to open and the world is full of beauty. On a day when the wind is perfect, the sail just needs to open and the love starts. Today is such a day. Grace breaks through. Grace fills the open sail, and brings transforming love. Grace is not so amazing. Grace is not so rare. Grace is everyday. Today is such a day.

The winds of grace are always blowing, but you have to raise the sail.

- Ramakrishna

Videos and Online

Giving is the Best Communication: This one's about grace and gratitude, giving without expectation of any return.

<http://www.karmatube.org/videos.php?id=4443>

Phil Hansen: Embrace the shake... this is about an unexpected gift to an artist.

http://www.ted.com/talks/phil_hansen_embrace_the_shake?language=en

Books

Grace Eventually by Anne Lamott

Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith by Kathleen Norris

Addiction and Grace: Love and Spirituality in the Healing of Addictions

by Gerald May

Breathing Underwater: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps by Richard Rohr

Beginner's Grace: Bringing Prayer to Life by Kate Braestrup

The Unmistakable Touch of Grace by Cheryl Richardson

What the Body Wants: From the Creators of Interplay by Cynthia Winton-Henry

Movies

Amélie

"The rarest of cinematic rarities – a schmaltz-free feelgooder which doesn't just make you feel good, but reminds you that love [and grace] exist and can be found in even the most seemingly mundane of places."

<http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/amelie/>

Tree of Life

A metaphysical, yet narrative film about the way of the world through grace or nature. Read an article about it too.

<http://www.npr.org/blogs/13.7/2011/08/17/139680194/thetree-of-life-need-we-choose-between-grace-and-nature>

The Man Who Learned To Fall

A documentary about a man dying of ALS proves that grace abounds in the process of letting go and preparing for death.

<http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/films/films.php?id=10191>

Holes

An imaginative children's film traces a boy's journey in the desert where he keeps experiencing coincidences and where hints of grace shower down upon him at a place called God's Thumb.

Forrest Gump

A feel good story about a man who gave and received abundant grace.

Get Ready for November's Theme: Integrity!