

Soul Matters 2014-15  
November

*What Does It Mean To Be  
a People of Grace?*

“there is a sacred

Otherness

to the world which is

breathtakingly

helpful

Simply because it is not us.”



## *What Does It Mean To Be A People of Grace?*

“A people of grace”? It’s not a phrase we usually use to describe ourselves. Grace is the property of our good friends across the street at the Christian church. Grace is the 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. And so, for a long time now, many of us Unitarian Universalists have treated the idea of grace with benign neglect.

But it doesn’t take much to notice that a new openness is taking hold. We seem to be done with the work of criticizing the word and have turned to the joy of reclaiming it. Yes, joy! Despite all its theological baggage, at its core the idea of grace simply celebrates a gift. Or maybe it’s more accurate to say, it celebrates the giftedness of life. The deepest and most sacred experience of joy comes from encountering a gift you didn’t expect, earn, create or even deserve. And who of us hasn’t been a recipient of that kind of gift? Reclaiming the word “grace” is our way as Unitarian Universalists of saying thanks! It’s our way of humbly and gratefully acknowledging that when we are at the end of our ability or at the end of a rope, life has a way of surprising us. It’s our way of acknowledging the astounding fact that no matter how tragic or bleak things get, the bad simply can’t shut out all the good, the dark can’t squeeze out all the light!

Grace has also healed us as a faith community. 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 now are satisfied with simply coming together to celebrate the gift.

And not just celebrating it, but giving it a little bit of help as well. This is also what it means to us to be “a people of grace.” Grace operates –often maddeningly– by its own set of rules. Independence and inscrutability are grace’s hallmarks. But it also seems that grace enjoys pulling us in as its partner-in-crime. 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.

In fact that’s 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!

# Our Spiritual Exercises:

## 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!"

Here is some inspiration to help you. (Notice that some of these ideas involve you getting grace to many people at once. If that's your calling as well, go for it!):

- *Check out this post:* [http://www.oddee.com/item\\_98410.aspx](http://www.oddee.com/item_98410.aspx)
- *Visit this pinterest site:* <http://www.pinterest.com/momofmadzakzoe/random-acts-of-kindness/>
- *Watch this movie: Amélie -* <http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/amelie/>

Come to your group prepared not only to tell the story of how you gave grace a hand, but also to share your answers to these questions:

1. Was remaining anonymous harder than you thought? Did the difficulty have more to do with you wanting credit or with you wanting to vicariously experience the recipients joy?
2. Why did you choose the recipient you did? Does this say anything about what kinds of people you think "deserve grace"?
3. How was this spiritual for you? Did it just make you feel happy? Or part of something larger than yourself?
4. Did the recipient have any trouble receiving the gift? Did others have trouble with the fact that they didn't get the gift themselves?

## Alternate Exercises:

1. **Bring 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. Come to your group prepared to share what your list taught you.
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:**

*As always, don't 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. And then come to your Soul Matters meeting prepared to share that journey with your group.*

- 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-in-crime. 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?

## Recommended Resources:

*As always, this is not required reading. We will not analyze or dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to get your thinking started, and maybe to open you to new ways of thinking about what it means to “be a people of grace.”*

### First Thoughts:

grace n.

1. Elegance or beauty of form
2. Favor or goodwill
3. Mercy, clemency, pardon
4. A short prayer before or after a meal

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

### Wise Words:

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

- Anne Lamott

Grace is uncontrollable, arbitrary to our senses, apparently unmerited. It's utterly free, ferociously strong, about as mysterious a thing as you could imagine. First rule of grace: grace rules.

— Brian Doyle

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

The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you. There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it. Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too.

--Frederick Buechner

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

God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things which should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.

--Reinhold Niebuhr

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

Here is what I know about grace. I know sun breaking through clouds and calling me out of my spiral of worries. I know stars splashed extravagantly across an expanse of dark night sky reminding me that my life is really rather small and fleeting in the grand scheme of things. I know the weight of a sleepy, contented baby in my arms inviting me to rest in the beauty of a moment. I know the kindness of a friend reaching across the miles to soothe my wounded spirit. I know the beauty of a match lighting a candle in the midst of the dark winter, illuminating a table with enough. I know the warm embrace that comes sometimes here in our sanctuary when something in the music or the prayer or the ritual or the silence catches us just right and it is clear that we are all right here, together in crafting something that is truly of worth.

And I know this about grace, too – it cannot be controlled. I can't craft it into our worship. I can't will it into being when I need it. I can't conjure it for myself or for anyone else. It cannot be bought or commanded or bargained into being. Grace works on its own terms, terms that are utterly mysterious to us. Grace comes when it comes.  
-Soul Matters Minister

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

## Videos & Online:

**Random Acts of Kindness (and Grace)**  
[http://www.oddee.com/item\\_98410.aspx](http://www.oddee.com/item_98410.aspx)

**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](http://www.ted.com/talks/phil_hansen_embrace_the_shake?language=en)

## Articles:

**A Moment of Grace,**  
Reflection by Rev. Alicia Forde  
<http://www.questformeaning.org/reflecting/post/a-moment-of-grace>

**The Grace of a Bungee Jump,**  
Reflection by Rev. Louise Green  
<http://www.questformeaning.org/page/reflecting/the-grace-of-a-bungee-jump>

**Grace/Blessing: "Open the Window, Let the Dove Fly in"**  
Blog by Rev. Nancy Jones Palmer.  
<http://sanjoseuu.org/revnpjblog/?p=56>

## The Infinite Demand

Blog by Rev. Tom Schade.

The inconsistency of grace and how we appreciate it.

<http://www.tomschade.com/2013/12/the-infinite-demand.html>

What the Body Wants: From the Creators of Interplay by Cynthia Winton-Henry (check out chapter 2)

## **Books:**

*Grace Eventually*, Anne Lamott

*Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, Kathleen Norris

*Addiction and Grace: Love and Spirituality in the Healing of Addictions*, Gerald May

*Breathing Underwater: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*, Richard Rohr

*Beginner's Grace: Bringing Prayer to Life*, Kate Braestrup

*The Unmistakable Touch of Grace*, Cheryl Richardson

*What the Body Wants: From the Creators of Interplay* by Cynthia Winton-Henry (check out chapter 2)

## **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/the-tree-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.

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### **SOUL MATTERS FACEBOOK PAGE**

Join our Soul Matters Facebook group at:  
<http://www.facebook.com/groups/soulmatters/>

A great way to connect the dozens of Soul Matters participants and groups from congregations around the country. Inspire each other by sharing your thoughts and discoveries related to the monthly themes!

### **SOUL MATTERS PINTEREST PAGE**

Join our Soul Matters Pinterest boards at:  
<http://www.pinterest.com/soulmatters2014/>

Pins and Pics for each of our monthly themes. Check them out and explore our themes in a more visual way!

**December's Theme:  
What Does It Mean To Be  
A People of Wonder?**