



Chalice Circle Packet

November 2020

Welcoming Grace



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Unity Church-Unitarian, St. Paul, Minnesota unityunitarian.org

GRACE

Few words have stirred as much theological debate and division over the centuries while still arriving in the current millennium as untarnished, as frequently and comfortably spoken and as difficult to define. Depending on who you ask and when, grace might be equated with salvation or with sacraments, with the presence of God, or with beauty or life itself. Grace is resilience. Grace is forgiveness. It is sin's opposite. It is healing. It is revelation, the oneness of all being. It is enlightenment. It is light. It comes before faith. It comes after faith. Some say it is faith.

Mostly, it seems, what we know about grace is that it's largely a matter of not knowing.

One of my favorite confessions of Augustine's is about grace. "What is grace?" he asked, right away admitting in a nearly palindromic puzzle, "I know until you ask me; when you ask me, I do not know." I concur. When I woke up this morning I knew exactly what to write about grace. It's when I got out of bed and put my fingers to the keyboard that things got a little difficult.

Perhaps this is as it should be. Grace, after all, begins with beyond. Grace shows up in the portal of not knowing.

When the heart is clenched tight, whether in anger or certitude, in fear or in grief, grace coaxes the fist open, looks into the palm and reads there a lifeline of a larger possibility.

Grace is an open hand, extended to the stranger, to the loved one, to the wounded one within. It is the open hand of relationship, of acceptance, of kindness.

Grace moves. Grace heals. Grace dances. Grace is the sigh we release on the last note of a song or when the end of the poem becomes clear.

When a room is closed and stuffy, it is grace that opens the window and grace that then blows in.

"Grace fills empty spaces," wrote Simon Weil in her journal. "But it can only enter where there is a void to receive it, and it is grace itself which makes this void."

Grace can knock us off our feet when we stand on the shore looking out. Then it's grace that catches us before we are washed out to sea.

Grace is given, and grace is received. It cannot be stolen, even by the best of thieves.

Grace is an opening. Just when we think we know exactly what's going on, who we are, who everyone else is and what can and cannot happen next, grace draws back the bolt of our knowing, flings wide a new view.

Grace is the guest of humility. Rumi said it plainly but not unkindly:

*You are so weak. Give up to grace.
The ocean takes care of each wave
till it gets to shore.
You need more help than you know.*

Grace never comes to the fully self-sufficient. But then, which of us really are? Grace comes to each of us in turn and to all of us unmerited. Which means, of course, it's all merited.

Grace points to the possibility of more. At the end of the sentence, at the bottom of the page, in the heart held wide open, there is always

more.

Karen

Karen Hering

Associate Minister

from the November 2020 issue of *CommUNITY*, adapted and reprinted from Karen Hering's earlier writings in the book, *Writing to Wake the Soul, and CommUNITY*.

Spiritual Practices

Option A

Visible Signs of Invisible Grace

St. Augustine called the sacraments visible signs of an invisible grace. Others today have used this phrase to describe the way that art, in any form, can turn us toward encounters with the holy.

In this first practice you are invited to collect your own images, sounds or expressions of grace, each day noticing and finding some way to collect pictures, words, music or other forms that made grace visible, audible, tangible, or otherwise apparent to you. Save a brief time at the end of each day for noting or recording one sign of grace you noticed or encountered during the day.

At the end of one or two weeks of this practice – and before your chalice circle meets – compile your collected signs of grace into some form of assemblage.

- If you've been collecting images, for instance, perhaps gathered as photos you take and print out, or cut from magazines or other sources, or printed out from the internet, or created yourself, if you are inclined! After you have enough images from doing this practice for a week or more, assemble them into a collage.
- Or, if you've been choosing one piece of music each day, compile a playlist of them in a way that you can listen to, beginning to end;
- Or, if you've been writing down phrases that you hear or read each day, after you have enough collected, assemble them into your own poem or word collage. (This can become especially playful if you put each phrase on a small piece of paper and then move them all around to experiment with their arrangement.)

After you have assembled your collected signs of grace, spend some time pondering what it tells. Notice both the individual images or expressions and how they relate to each other in the way you have arranged them. If you like, write a reflection on what it reveals about your understanding of grace.

Come to the circle prepared to share what you've learned (and possibly to show your collage if what you've assembled is visual).

Option B

Saying Grace

The words grace and gratitude trace back to the same roots. Similarly, some say gratitude is a posture that makes us more aware of and receptive to the movement of grace in our lives. In this month when many Americans celebrate Thanksgiving, you might wish to choose a practice based on gratitude.

Read the bilingual poem “Gracias/Grace” by Rafael Jesús González, posted here: <http://rjgonzalez.blogspot.com/2018/11/thanksgiving.html>. (Scroll down if you are looking for the English part of the poem.) Notice how the poet links gratitude with blessing, and how both are spun out from the meal on the table to the wider world that made the meal possible. Notice the generosity with which the poet offers his gratitude and thanks.

Begin this practice by writing a short reflection on where you see grace moving in the poem.

Then, for each day afterwards, save 15 minutes near the end of the day (or in the next morning) to write 1-5 phrases or sentences expressing your own gratitudes, beginning with one of these two phrases used by the poet:

Thanks and blessings to.....

or

Thanks be (to or for)....

Before your circle meets, review what you’ve written (or assemble it into your own poem) and pause to reflect, on paper or in your heart, what this reveals about the movement of grace in your life and your heart.

Option C:

You Are Accepted

Playwright Eugene O’Neill said that all humans are broken and each one of us “lives by mending. The grace of God is glue.” Have you ever experienced grace in a time when you were feeling broken or unacceptable – to yourself or others? Sometimes the glue that mends us then comes in the form of acceptance.

Read the words from Paul Tillich’s sermon on grace titled, “You Are Accepted,”

“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 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. After such an experience we may not be better than before, and we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed.”

Each day, begin by reading the words “You are accepted,” and pausing in silence long enough to receive them deeply. If you already have a daily meditation or prayer practice, you can just precede each day with these words. Gently and without judgement, notice your response to the words. Relief? Resistance? Acceptance? Analysis? Critique? There is no right or wrong answer. Notice how your body feels and where you feel it. Notice any emotions rising in you.

After a week or so of this practice, take time to reflect (in writing or in your heart) on how or whether your daily noticings have changed and what they reveal to you about your relationship with grace. Is it easy or hard for you to “accept the fact that you are accepted”? Come to the circle prepared to share something you’ve learned.

Questions to Ponder

Read through the questions below and notice which one(s) resonate with you. One or more of the questions might seem particularly compelling – or some might stir resistance in you. Either of these reactions might make the question fruitful to consider. Choose just one and take time to consider it, over several days if possible. Write it down on a piece of paper you carry in your pocket. Or take a picture of that paper with your phone. Or record it in your journal – and spend some time, each day if you can, reflecting on it in writing or otherwise, noticing where it leads you and what you learn from it and your response to it.

1. When you hear the words, “You are accepted, just as you are,” what does it feel like? What does it mean to you? Do you easily accept others’ acceptance of you? Why or why not?
2. Where does grace come from? How have you come to believe that? And does your belief affect the movement of grace in your life?
3. Does grace more often take you by surprise or do you expect it? Can you make grace happen, or increase the likelihood of experiencing grace?
4. Some theology describes the fall *from* grace. Others name the experience of falling *into* grace. What is the difference? And what does your theology say?
5. When you have experienced grace, where in your body do you feel it? What emotions does it stir and how?
6. What does it mean to be graceful? How is the grace of movement (as in dance) related to the grace of acceptance?
7. Has your experience or understanding of grace changed as you have aged? How so, and why?
8. What have you learned about grace from Nature?
9. What does it mean that we use the word *grace* for a prayer of thanks? How is gratitude related to grace?
10. What gets in the way of grace?
11. What is the relationship between grace and justice? What role does grace play in the work for racial justice?
12. What is the relationship between grace and suffering?
13. Is grace related to forgiveness? How so, or why not?
14. Is it possible for grace to come unrecognized? If so, what makes it hard to acknowledge it when it comes?
15. Does grace “redefine what is possible,” as Manning Marable suggests? What does your belief about that mean in your experience of grace?
16. **What’s your question?** Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what life is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to hear it. Or maybe the question or call you need to hear is waiting in one of the quotes listed below. Consider looking there!

Resources

Recommended Resources for Personal Exploration & Reflection

The following resources are not required reading. They will not be analyzed in our circles. Instead they are here to companion you on your journey this month, get your thinking started and open you to new ways of thinking about what it means to live faithfully with an ethic of hospitality.

Word Definitions & Roots

Grace

- 1 simple elegance or refinement of movement.
- 2 courteous goodwill.
- 3 (in Christian belief) the free and unmerited favor of God, as manifested in the salvation of sinners and the bestowal of blessings.
- 4 a prayer of thanks said before or after a meal

Word Origin

Middle English: from Latin gratia, from gratus 'pleasing, thankful'; related to grateful.

Wise Words

We are not here because we have answers.
We are here because we are (each of us)
Lost and found, all at once -- Seeking grace and showing it
Finding our way home, together.
~ Hannah Roberts Villnave

She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it.
~ Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

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, *Confessions*

[excerpt from Learning to Fall, by Philip Simmons](#)

"Think again of falling as a figure of speech. We fall on our faces, we fall for a joke, we fall for someone, we fall in love. In each of these falls, what do we

fall away from? We fall from ego, we fall from our carefully constructed identities, our reputations, our precious selves. We fall from ambition, we fall from grasping, we fall, at least temporarily, from reason. And what do we fall into? We fall into passion, into terror, into unreasoning joy. We fall into humility, into compassion, into emptiness, into oneness with forces larger than ourselves, into oneness with others whom we realize are likewise falling. We fall, at last, into the presence of the sacred, into godliness, into mystery, into our better, diviner natures...

We are all—all of us—falling. We are all, now, this moment, in the midst of that descent, fallen from heights that may now seem only a dimly remembered dream, falling toward a depth we can only imagine, glimpsed beneath the water's surface shimmer. And so let us pray that if we are falling from grace, dear God let us also fall with grace, to grace. If we are falling toward pain and weakness, let us also fall toward sweetness and strength. If we are falling toward death, let us also fall toward life.
~ Philip Simmons, *Learning to Fall*
<https://www.learningtofall.com/excerpt.htm>

"For me the deepest existential source of coming to terms with white racism is music. In some ways, this is true for black America as a whole, from spirituals and blues through jazz, rhythm and blues, and even up to hip-hop. . . . This rich tradition of black music is not only an artistic response to the psychic wounds and social scars of a despised people. More importantly, it enacts in dramatic forms the creativity, dignity, grace, and elegance of African Americans."
— Cornel West, *Hope on a Tightrope*

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

Grace fills empty spaces, but it can only enter where there is a void to receive it.

—Simone Weil

In becoming grace, you start from a place of emptiness. When you empty of expectations, you open to the wonders that happen in moments and nanoseconds of revelation. With God's grace active in you, nothing can go wrong. Every thought, word, and action, when joined with grace, will be formless and serve goodness.

— Shoni Labowitz, *Miraculous Living*

Grace is the ability to redefine the boundaries of possibility.

~ Manning Marable

Grace is not the opposite of works. It is the gift of being loved and loving that enables the work of justice. . . . Grace is a power or an intensity of relationship that is more than we can predict or produce solely by our own volition. This surplus connoted by grace – the deep joy of loving and being loved, the amazing changes possible in peoples' lives – is sometimes interpreted as a gift from outside . . . Grace is not the manifestation of the divine in our lives, the gift of a separate or foundational being; . . . grace is all there is or need be of the divine.

~ Sharon Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*

We think of grace arriving like an ambulance, just-in-time delivery, an invisible divine cavalry cresting a hill of troubles, a bolt of jazz from the glittering horn of the Creator, but maybe it lives in us and is activated by illness of the spirit. Maybe we're loaded with grace. Maybe we're stuffed with the stuff. Maybe it's stitched into our DNA, a fifth ingredient in the deoxyribonucleic acidic soup.

— Brian Doyle, *The Best Spiritual Writing 2001*

Grace is all around us, if only we have the eyes to see it. The good moments are grace, the difficult moments are grace, the confusing moments are grace. When we can begin to open enough to realize that there is grace in every situation, in each person we meet, no matter how easy or difficult we perceive them to be, our hearts will flower and we'll be able to express the peace and love that each of us has within us.

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 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, *Falling Into Grace*

Poetry

The Birds Outside My Window Sing During a Pandemic

What we need has always been inside of us. For some—a few poets or farmers, perhaps—it's always near the surface. Others, it's buried. It was in our original design, though—pre-machine, pre-border, pre-pandemic. I imagine it like the light one might feel through the body before dying, a warm calm, a slow breath, a sweet rush. There is, by every measure, reason for fear, concern, a concert in the balcony of anxiety made of what has also always been inside of us: a kind of knowing that everything could break. But it hasn't quite yet and probably won't. What I mean to say is, I had a daydream and got lost inside of it. There were dozens of birds for some reason, who sounded like they were singing in different accents: *shelter in place, shelter in place. You're made of stars and grace. Stars and grace. Stars—and grace.*

~ Lee Herrick

The Peace of Wild Things

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

"Gracias/Grace"

A Thanksgiving poem in Spanish and English by
Rafael Jesús González. (Link to the full poem.)

*Gracias por el sustento y la fuerza
para nuestro bailar y nuestra labor
—por la justicia y la paz.*

<http://rjgonzalez.blogspot.com/2018/11/thanksgiving.html>

Forgiveness

This morning's fall of white lends the rough sedge
a fresh perfection (much as powder on a face
will hide a rash), and lays on roof and ledge
this tablecloth, covering every trace

of wounded earth. Old injury is now erased,
as wood and mossy tile and road and bridge
are evened out with flakes as fine as lace
on which each footprint seems a sacrilege.

Even the tire tracks across the bridge
are filling with new white that will embrace
the contrasts between muddy groove and ridge,
like contrarities within the human race.

Earth's sores and blemishes are each erased,
under the kind gauze of bandages—
dressings that high heaven has cleanly placed
over the roughened roadside foliage,

healing the raggedness of grass and hedge.
This patient snow refreshes morning's face,
forgives shortcomings, rounding every edge,
a blessing looking very much like Grace.
~ Luci Shaw, *Harvesting Fog*

excerpt from "The Grace that Scorches Us"

Bring your sorrow.
Bring your grief.
Bring your fear.
Bring your weariness,
your pain,
your disgust at how broken
the world is,
how fractured,
how fragmented
by its fighting,
its wars,
its hungers,
its penchant for power,
its ceaseless repetition
of the history it refuses
to rise above.

I will not tell you
this blessing will fix all that.

But in the place
where you have gathered,
wait.
Watch.
Listen.
Lay aside your inability
to be surprised,
your resistance to what you
do not understand.

See then whether this blessing
turns to flame on your tongue,
sets you to speaking
what you cannot fathom

or opens your ear
to a language
beyond your imagining
that sometimes comes as a knowing
in your bones,

a clarity
in your heart
that tells you

this is the reason
we were made:
for this ache
that finally opens us,

for this struggle,
this grace
that scorches us
toward one another
and into
the blazing day.

Jan Richardson, *Circle of Grace*

Music

A playlist inspired by the opening reflection on this month's theme, may be added later. Revisit the website link to the chalice packet in the future to watch for a Spotify link.

Videos & Podcasts

["Serene Jones On Grace," On Being Podcast, December 5, 2019](#)

Serene Jones describes theology as the place and story you think of when you ask yourself about the meaning of your life, the world, and the possibility of God. For her, that place is a "dusty piece of land" on the plains of Oklahoma where she grew up. "I go there to find my story — my theology. I go there to be born again; to be made whole; to unite with what I was, what I am, and what I will become." In her work as a public theologian, Jones explores theology as a clarifying lens on the present — from grace to repentance to the importance of moving from grieving to mourning.

<https://onbeing.org/programs/serene-jones-on-grace/>

["It is in the Shelter of One Another," Pádraig Ó Tuama, BBC May 2014 podcast](#)

Poet Pádraig Ó Tuama reflects on the theme of the Irish seanfhocail 'It is in the shelter of each other that the people live.'

<http://www.padraigotuama.com/news/audio-something-understood-in-the-shelter-of-each-other-bbc-radio-4-may-25-2014/2014/5/25>

Video - [Stormy with a Chance of Grace | Have A Little Faith with Nadia Bolz-Weber](#)

A three-minute reflection on the resilience that arises when we can finally "trust grace in the moment not in retrospect."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ewTyRrO3KA>

Video - [Anne Lamott discusses the concept of grace...](#) a brief perspective on grace as the thing that gives us courage to face our fears.

<https://vimeo.com/15935322>

Reflection - [Brother David Steindl-Rast in conversation with Jack Kornfield](#)

On grace as a dancer, not as a thing poured into us to make us better, but that flow with life that arises when impediments are stripped away. Grace as a removal that allows us to [resiliently] reconnect with the flow of life.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=SY46bppbn9I&feature=emb_logo (Specifically about grace beginning at minute 5:30)

Articles and Online Sources

["Grace to the Rescue,"](#) by Myriam Renaud, *UU World*, September 26, 2012: a summary of three Unitarian Universalist theologians' understandings of grace. <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/grace-rescue>

["Teach Me Thy Grace,"](#) by Howard Thurman, a brief reflection.

["You Are Accepted,"](#) Paul Tillich's sermon on grace, including these excerpts:

"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 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. After such an experience we may not be better than before, and we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed.”

Books

[Learning to Fall: The Blessings of an Imperfect Life,](#) by Philip Simmons

See excerpt in “Wise Words,” above. Philip Simmons was just 35 when he learned that he had ALS, or Lou Gehrig’s disease. In this surprisingly joyous and spirit-renewing book, he chronicles his search for peace and his deepening relationship with the mysteries of everyday life. From our first faltering steps, Simmons says, we may fall into disappointment or grief, fall into or out of love, fall from youth or health. And though we have little choice as to the timing or means of our descent, we may, as he affirms, “fall with grace, to grace.”

<https://www.learningtofall.com>

**[Amazing Grace, children’s book by Mary Hoffman,](#)
[illus by Caroline Binch](#) *Grace loves stories, whether they're from books, movies, or the kind her grandmother tells. When her school decides to perform Peter Pan, Grace longs to play the lead, but her classmates point out that Peter was a boy, and he wasn't black. With the support of her family, Grace learns that she can be anything she wants to be.*
https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/765193.Amazing_Grace**

[Healing the Heart of Democracy, by Parker J. Palmer](#)

A timely, courageous and practical work—intensely personal as well as political. [It] is not about them, “those people” in Washington D.C., or in our state capitals, on whom we blame our political problems. It’s about us, “We the People,” and what we can do in everyday settings like families, neighborhoods, classrooms, congregations and workplaces to resist divide-and-conquer politics and restore a government “of the people, by the people, for the people.”
<http://www.couragerenewal.org/healing-the-heart-of-democracy/>

[Falling Upward, by Richard Rohr](#)

“Most of us tend to think of the second half of life as largely about getting old, dealing with health issues and letting go of our physical life, but the whole thesis of this book is exactly the opposite. What looks like falling can largely be experienced as falling upward and onward into a broader and deeper world, where the soul has found its fullness, is finally connected to the whole, and lives inside the Big Picture.

<https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/view/21039/falling-upward>

Movies

[Ram Dass Fierce Grace](#): An extraordinary documentary profiles the bestselling author and New Age teacher Ram Dass and his recovery from the "fierce grace" of a stroke.

[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.

[Whale Rider](#): award-winning feature film directed by Niki Caro. A contemporary story of love, rejection and triumph as a young Maori girl fights to fulfill a destiny her grandfather refuses to recognize.

This packet was created for use at Unity Church-Unitarian, St. Paul, Minnesota, and includes excerpts from Soul Matters packet on Grace (<https://www.soulmatterssharingcircle.com>).

[unitychurchunitarian.org](https://www.unitychurchunitarian.org)