

Amazing Grace

BY LYNN UNGAR, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP



*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
that saved a wretch like me.*

*I once was lost, but now am found,
was blind, but now I see.*

This must be the most popular song in the American religious canon. I've sung it in church and with friends at funky old pianos. I've sung it at funerals both public and private. I've sung it at campfires and with a couple hundred strangers. I've sung versions with problematic words edited out, and

I've done some impromptu editing myself. (Try starting with "amazing grapes" and see where you end up.)

I've also substituted in other words for "wretch" (our hymnbook suggests "soul" if you want an alternative), and I've sung it as is, but winced a bit. And then I learned the story behind the song. Perhaps you know it. John Newton, the author of the words, was an Englishman who made his living as a ship's captain, transporting slaves from Africa to America. Apparently he was given to rather rough living—drinking, gambling—the details aren't clear. Sometime during his slave trading years he had a conversion experience and became a Christian, which may have tidied up his life a bit, but didn't stop him from continuing to traffic in human beings. He found the job somewhat unpleasant, but assumed it to be his lot in life.

A few years later, however, an illness prevented Newton from embarking on his usual slave-trading voyage, and it was apparently during this relatively idle time that he realized the evil of slavery and his participation in it. As part of this deeper conversion experience he took responsibility for his actions and not only gave up the slave trade for the ministry, but also provided information that eventually led, shortly before his death, to the act of parliament ending British participation in the slave trade.

"Oh," said I, "this puts things in a whole different light." What I had assumed to be a kind of Calvinist assertion of human lowliness and lack of worth (unless redeemed by the salvation of Christ) turned out to be something very different—one man's humble, joyful and disarmingly straightforward description of how his life had been transformed. When he wrote "How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me," he really meant *me*, himself. If being in charge of a vessel which kidnaps people from their homes and transports them, stacked like firewood, to be sold as the property of other men is not wretched, I don't know what is. But, as John Newton's life and song assert, there is something in the universe, or something in the human heart, or both, which has the power to turn even a slave trader toward justice.

John Newton, of course, is not the only one with this experience. A story comes to mind of the Klansman who, through the gentle persistence of a Jewish man he was persecuting, came to renounce his anti-Semitism and embrace this Jewish man as a friend. I think also of the man who was a recruiter for the white-supremacist Aryan Nation—until he had a child born with a cleft palate who was deemed unacceptable and condemned to death. In realizing what the Aryan Nation was going to do to his

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Vol. LXVI, No. 6

June 2011

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

—Ramakrishna

A monthly for religious liberals

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child, this man suddenly understood what it was that the skinheads wanted to do to everyone whom they labeled unacceptable: Jews, Blacks and gays as well as his disabled child.

And so this man chose love and acceptance over prejudice, hate and fear. Instead of recruiting for the Aryan Nation, he now spends that time sharing what he knows with audiences around the country, so that the job of recruitment will be harder for those who continue to spread hate. Perhaps the Universalists are right, and the divine power of love is such that no person is, ultimately, unredeemable.

Of course, the fact that John Newton and some other wretches turned their lives around by some mysterious process which Newton called grace doesn't mean that we fine, upstanding folks ought to call ourselves wretches. Surely we have no need to be saved by grace. We don't need what sounds like some kind of a holy superhero—Amazing Grace, a Wonder Woman in white—to swoop down out of the sky and save us. But I wonder....

I wonder how many of us are complete strangers to wretchedness. How many of us have never lain awake at night, wondering if there might be a way to undo what we have done, unsay what we have said? How many of us have never, if only for a moment, given up on life, felt ourselves and everything around us to be utterly without worth? How many of us have never faced the heart-wrenching realization of just how fragile life is, how any of us or those we love could be gone in a matter of moments? How many of us have failed to notice that our very world and all of its living beings could be annihilated quickly in a nuclear war or over decades of environmental degradation?

Wretchedness, it seems to me, is not the sole property of a few of "them" out there. And neither is grace. I don't have a quick, absolute definition of grace, or perhaps anything that could be called a definition at all. But per-

haps I can manage a description.

Grace, it seems to me, has to do with the giftedness of life. It comes not *from* the self, but *through* the self. I think of being in a state of grace as akin to following the Tao, the path, moving with the flow of the river rather than against it. The river, the current of life, keeps flowing, regardless of our choices. But we can choose to step into the current and float, and sometimes the river even catches us from behind and carries us, whether we have chosen to move in its direction or not.

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Many years ago, during one of the most wretched periods of my life, I moved to Berkeley, leaving behind my community, my boring job, a failed relationship, and most of my sense of who I was or what I was doing with my life. I spent a lot of time staring out the window of my room in my sister's house. Just outside my window was a fuchsia bush that bloomed continually in the California sun, and numerous hummingbirds, glinting green backs and ruby throats, would come to feed on its flowers. There was no voice that spoke to me out of that bush, telling me what to do to get my life back on track, let alone doing it for me. But those hummingbirds were, for me, an act of grace, a promise of life and its fulfillment. That scene was a gift, given and received day after day. Somehow what emerged from those empty days of watching the hummingbirds was a call to ministry, the sense of a path opening before me, and the will to follow.

Grace is the light that comes, not when you expect it, but when you need it. It's the sudden hug from the toddler who's been driving you nuts with incessant, whiny demands. It's the sight of fog streaming over the hills at the end of a long day. It's remembering that your

spouse or your dog or your brother loves you absolutely, in spite of the fact that you made a hash of things at work. As Mary Oliver famously wrote in her poem "Wild Geese":

*the world offers itself to your
imagination
calls to you like the wild geese,
harsh and exciting—
over and over announcing your
place
in the family of things.*

In those moments when I refuse to listen to that call, I endanger myself and the rest of the world as well. To refuse grace—to refuse to acknowledge that my place in life is a gift I neither create nor earn—is to be lost to what Christians have traditionally called pride, the deadliest of the seven deadly sins. The Greeks referred to the same thing as hubris, and placed it at the center of all the great tragedies. The pride that led to the downfall of both Lucifer and the Greek heroes is that of putting yourself in the place of God or the gods, assuming that you can control the course of life, or that the world revolves around you.

This is not to be confused with what we generally consider pride, as in "I'm so proud of you," or self-esteem in the form of pride in work well done, or a conviction that we can change the world through our actions. Self-esteem provides us with the capacity to receive the gifts of grace, to enjoy our place in the world. Hubris denies our place in the world. Sometimes it takes the form of arrogance, assuming that the world and all its creatures exist simply as "resources," things to be used for our pleasure and convenience, with no regard for their existence separate from ourselves. The same arrogance frames friends as "contacts" and socializing as "networking," as if other people existed only for the purpose of one's own career advancement.

The opposite of hubris might seem to be cynicism and despair, but they are two sides of the same coin, both ways

to refuse grace. To believe that life is meaningless, without worth, is to defy the gift of creation. Despair contends that the creative wonder of billions of years of evolution can be set aside on the strength of one person's inability or refusal to participate in the ongoing dance of life.

But more often our pride emerges in small ways, as we get caught up in the busyness of our lives, in all the details and things that need to be done, so that the moments of grace simply get missed as we walk by with blinders on. Annie Dillard writes: "We are here to abet creation and to witness to it, to notice each other's beautiful face and complex nature so that creation need not play to an empty house." Grace offers us the chance to witness creation, to take our place in that crowded theater. But all too often we are too self-absorbed, too taken up with the manufactured importance of our deadlines and duties to look toward the lighted stage, let alone recognize that we ourselves are part of the drama. We lose our capacity to witness and wonder at creation, and then complain that so much of our lives are filled with drudgery.

And yet, through the distractions of busyness, through the moments of



despair or selfish pride, grace manages to break through with a gift of wonder and the

opportunity to float, if only for a moment, with the current of the river. If only for a moment, the illusion of our separateness is broken and our eyes are opened to the part we play in the shared drama of life. We hear the world calling to us, over and over announcing our place in the family of things, and, like the wild geese, we join our companions in the long journey toward home. ■

Grace Happens



BY **PETER A. FRIEDRICHS**, LEAD MINISTER, UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH OF DELAWARE COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA

Back when I was practicing law, I used to spend my

days negotiating loan documents for clients. I would sit down with the lawyers from the bank and talk about repayment terms, insurance clauses in mortgages, and who would be responsible for doing what if there was a flood or a fire. Most of our negotiations were based on "what if" scenarios that assumed something would go wrong in the relationship between the bank and my client. *What if* the property wasn't properly maintained? *What if* my client rented to a tenant of questionable character? *What if* my client missed a payment on the loan?

This last point was obviously of concern to both parties, so with every loan we negotiated the terms of a "grace period," which gave both the bank and the client a little wiggle room on the deadline for meeting any particular obligation under the loan. Usually, the grace period language also contained a provision that the bank would extend its grace only a certain number of times over the life of the loan. (This would protect the bank against a perpetually delinquent borrower.)

Now that I'm a minister rather than a lawyer, the term "grace period" takes on a whole new meaning. The idea of negotiating a period of "grace" sounds rather absurd. So does limiting the number of grace periods we're allowed in our lifetimes. Grace is no longer something to be bartered for, nor is it something to be handed out with expectations attached to it. Grace is a gift freely given. It is never earned and it's often undeserved. As the bumper sticker explains, "Grace Happens."

What is grace, anyway? Bonnie Bruno, author of *When God Steps In: Stories of Everyday Grace*, tells her own story of grace. It happened when she was two years old. Her family was driving across the desert Southwest on a long, lonely road in the middle of nowhere. She sat in the back seat, wedged between her two sleeping brothers, and her mother sat in the front, next to her father who was driving. When her mother fell asleep, Bonnie grabbed her mother's purse, reached inside and began eating the "mints" that she kept in a little bottle.

Only these weren't mints. It was her mother's thyroid medication. When her mother woke and saw that Bonnie had her purse, and she saw how pale Bonnie looked, she knew immediately what had happened. Her mother panicked and ordered her father to pull over. Not knowing what else to do, they prayed to God for help. Within minutes, a lone car appeared on the road. Stopping by the family's car on the side of the road, the driver asked what was wrong. When he learned of Bonnie's poisoning, he told them he was a doctor and he rushed Bonnie to the emergency room of a local hospital and administered treatment that saved her life. Several months later, when they'd yet to receive a bill from the doctor or the hospital, Bonnie's parents contacted the hospital. They were told that no one had seen that doctor since Bonnie's ER visit and they'd never received a bill.

According to Bonnie Bruno's theology, she is alive today by the grace of God. In her moment of need, God intervened, sending the mysterious physician to her at just the moment she needed him. As Bruno says, "Coincidence? I don't think so. God stepped in with a sacred embrace and a helping hand. That's why I'm alive today."

Tales like this, tales of miracle and mystery abound. But if you're like me, you read them with a healthy dose of skepticism. We think to ourselves: "Coincidence? Sure!" Or we explain by

speculating that Bruno's parents, over the years, embellished the story so that by the time she was old enough to tell the tale herself it had become a piece of family lore or mythology. The notion that some divine being would actively intervene in our lives in some tangible way doesn't sit well with many of us, especially when it takes the form of mysterious strangers appearing out of nowhere to come to our rescue.

To be sure, I am not dismissing this possibility, nor am I demeaning those for whom this story resonates. I am merely acknowledging that many Unitarian Universalists, including myself, struggle with this particular conception

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of grace, a notion that God sends in angels at just the moment we need them most. For me, the savior in the classic movie *It's a Wonderful Life* is George Bailey's wife Mary, not Clarence the angel.

As Unitarian Universalists, we claim that we may discover truth from, and come to know the holy through, a variety of sources. Our UU principles validate our own "direct experiences of transcending mystery and wonder." Grace is just one of those experiences. But like love, the concept of grace is an elusive one. It's almost an "I'll know it when I see it" kind of thing. But I think we can begin to define grace by its attributes.

The first characteristic of grace is that it's unexpected. We may pray for it and yearn for it. We may wait for a moment of grace and wish it to become true. We may even bargain for it, like I did for my clients with their banks. But the truth is that, unlike in Bruno's case, it rarely materializes in those times. Like a long-lost friend who one day

shows up on our doorstep unannounced, grace catches us unawares. When grace moves in our lives, it is usually at times when we're not looking. But to say that we're not looking doesn't mean we're not paying attention. Because if we're not attentive, a "grace period" can easily be missed.

In her book *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor tells the story of taking out the trash one evening. It was just about sunset, and the bag was heavy. As she struggled to get it from her back door to the garage, she passed by her garden. Glancing through the gate, she noticed that the light was hitting the garden just so and, she said, she got "the whole dose of loveliness at once" as the setting sun turned the scene golden. But she felt she had to dump the trash first, and when she went back just a few moments later, the light had changed and the garden had returned to normal. Taylor had noticed this moment of grace, but she passed it by.

That's another characteristic of grace: it's fleeting. So we not only need to pay attention and be open to the possibility of a grace-filled moment arriving on our doorstep, but we also need to put down the metaphorical trash when it happens. Otherwise we might miss "the whole dose of loveliness." Noticing grace requires us to be ready to set aside the everyday business and busyness of our lives, to be willing to be a little late to a meeting, to not answer that ringing cell phone in our pocket, or simply to pull over to the side of the road when grace makes an appearance. If we don't, we may catch a glimpse of grace, but we'll miss out on the experience.

Another characteristic of grace is that it is transformative. I guess this is more about what grace does than what it is, but we can know a moment of grace by the effect it has on us. After grace has settled on our shoulder, if even for just an instant, we are usually not the same as we were before. Something inside of

us shifts. We look at the world, and our place in it, just a little differently. Grace opens us up to possibility. It grounds us and reconnects us with our center. It shows us that what we see is not necessarily all that is. Grace lifts a veil and parts a curtain, offering us a view of another reality, a new way of being. Granted, the transformation may not be dramatic—an experience of grace may be a small tremor that precedes a seismic shift. It can be a portent of things to come.

Finally, and here's the really good news—grace happens. It happens not just to those who pray or to those who believe in angels or just to those who believe in God. Grace is universal in its reach and scope. It doesn't discriminate. Anyone and everyone is eligible to receive it without negotiation. And we're not limited to a certain number of grace periods during our lifetime. As I've said, we might miss a moment of grace if we're not paying attention, and we might not recognize it when it erupts in our lives, but it's out there for us—all of us—nonetheless.

Grace, by definition, comes unbidden. But that doesn't mean we can't cultivate the conditions for its arrival. One of those conditions, as I've mentioned above, is attentiveness. Another is to seek the sacred in the mundane. Author Kent Nerburn, in his book of the same name, urges us to notice and name the *Small Graces* of our everyday lives. He reminds us that we are sometimes so consumed in seeking or praying for the great and grand "a-ha!" experiences, those moments when we are completely transformed, that we miss out on the small graces.

There is, too, one more way that we can prepare the path for grace to enter our lives. And that is to learn to trust that it will. To have the faith that the universe is so ordered that, in the words of mystic Paul Coehlo, "it conspires to meet our needs." We cannot rely on the fact that grace will show up when we call it. But we are called to

trust that it will show up when we need it.

I would like to close with a story of one of my own “grace periods.” It was many years ago that my father was diagnosed with prostate cancer. He was recovering from surgery at Mary Hitchcock Medical Center in Hanover, New Hampshire, and I had gone to visit him in the hospital. I was at the time struggling with clinical depression, a condition that despite medication and therapy had plagued me for several years. After spending time with my father and learning that his prognosis was good, I left to drive back to Maine. Route 93 winds through the hills, and it was late afternoon. The sun was behind me as I came around a long, sweeping curve that opened up on a wide panorama. As I made this turn, I was struck by how the sun was hitting the trees and the hills, and I was overcome by the beauty of the scene.

And then I was overcome by the fact that I was *able* to notice and appreciate the beauty, that a bit of color had crept into my world—a world that, for years, had been so full only of shades of gray. It had been years since anything looked beautiful. And it was at that moment that a curtain parted, just a little, and I glimpsed a hint of hope amidst my despair. I was transformed by that moment of grace, and it was in that moment that I began my long journey out of the depths.

We give thanks for moments of grace—unbidden and fleeting, perhaps, but transformative and trustworthy—those times in our lives when love arrives to cast out fear and doubt. May we all keep our eyes open to the possibility of graces great and small, and appreciate them when they appear. ■



The Grace of a Bungee Jump

BY LOUISE GREEN,
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A few years back, I went with my family in North Carolina to a big amusement park. After turns on the merry-go-round, the water slide and the roller coaster, our sights turned towards the bungee jump. My sister, my nieces and I stood watching the huge crane lift two people at a time up and up to the height of a 10-story building, then drop them towards the pavement. My sister Kathy and niece Kailey immediately said “No way!” My niece Lauren and I stepped bravely forward.

We lay down on our stomachs on a mat and were strapped into connecting vests with a large metal hoop on the back. The bungee cord hook clicked in, and the crane started to draw us up into the air slowly. The parking lot, the Ferris wheel, my family were all getting smaller and smaller. My adrenaline started to flow, and the fight-or-flight instinct kicked in fiercely. I had an overwhelming feeling of wanting escape, yet there was nowhere to go. My niece, only 13, started to whimper, then cry. “I can’t do this, Aunt Louise,” she squeaked. “I want to get down!” “It’s too late, Lauren; they can’t hear us,” I said. “We are going to have to let g...”



The word “go” stuck in my mouth because we suddenly were plunging to the earth on a bungee cord. The air was whipping by our ears and all was a blur. I felt a surge of true terror, shut my eyes tightly, and screamed spontaneously at the top of my lungs, along with Lauren. We dropped endlessly, it seemed, and then, at the bottom, something fantastic happened.

We bounced up and down, and then launched into flight. The bungee cord contraction and release sent us into an arc, and we were swinging back and forth like a pendulum. Our eyes flew open in astonishment. Following the horrible seconds of falling there came an exhilarating flight, the flying of birds, or planes, or vivid dreams. We gazed out in delight and laughter, watching the amusement park swing by, the larger landscape to the horizon, all the way to the distant toy skyline of downtown Charlotte. It was quiet and peaceful, absolutely calm. We had completely let go—no choice really, once we hooked onto the cord and crane—and the result was a freedom to fly that we had not imagined. We saw the wide earth below us.

The bungee cord, the plunging, the bouncing: all of that is life. The arc of the pendulum, the flight after you are forced to let go: that is grace. It’s not what you expected; it might come after a hair-raising drop or challenging event—and still, grace arrives as a gift you did not know you would receive. Perhaps you have your own description of the sensation. Grace is the absolute calm of being caught. Grace is the peaceful knowing you are beloved. It is ending your scream, opening your eyes, and smiling at a new landscape. ■

The CLF has a long tradition of growing Unitarian Universalism. The latest frontier we can use to capture the attention of spiritual seekers? The internet. The opportunity for outreach has never been better!

At GA this year, visit the CLF booth to learn how the CLF website will soon become more compelling, interactive, dynamic, and wide reaching. Help us by using the enclosed envelope or going online to make an offering to support CLF programs. ■



From Pens and Postage to the Digital Age

by **Stefan Jonasson**, MINISTER OF THE UNITARIAN CHURCH IN ARBORG, MANITOBA, COORDINATOR OF SERVICES TO LARGE CONGREGATIONS FOR THE UUA, AND CO-CHAIR OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF THE CLF



Like many other Unitarian Universalist congregations, the church of my younger years owes its existence to the Post Office Mission, a forerunner of the present-day Church of the Larger Fellowship. The Post Office Mission was established in 1881 through the efforts of Sallie Ellis, a member of the Unitarian church in Cincinnati, who enlisted the support of her minister, Charles W. Wendte, and the women's auxiliary of her congregation to promote our liberal faith and serve the needs of isolated Unitarians by distributing sermons, tracts, and other publications through the mail. She placed newspaper ads in various dailies and received such an overwhelming and encouraging response that the model quickly spread to other congregations and women's auxiliaries. By 1885, the original Cincinnati mission had distributed 22,000 tracts and Sallie Ellis had personally written more than 2,500 letters to inquirers!

Inspired by this successful ministry through the mail, the Minnesota Unitarian Conference launched a branch office at Unity Church in St. Paul, where Jennie McCaine took charge of the missionary enterprise. Not only did this ministry reach existing Unitarians in sparsely-populated communities, but it also proved its value in several unexpected ways—by enhancing the spiritual lives of those already involved in congregations and by reaching out to those for whom it was their very first encounter with the liberal gospel. Moreover, the Post Office Mission

offered a safe point of contact for those who were experiencing doubts about their existing faith, allowing them to explore liberal religion quietly and carefully as they considered whether or not it could be a meaningful path for them. Several new ministers were recruited for the growing mission field and, in time, "Sunday circles" and new congregations were organized where the Post Office Mission was able to bring together a critical mass of kindred spirits in one place. One of these places was Winnipeg, where Jennie McCaine had recruited a missionary to evangelize the Icelandic immigrants in my home city, helping to establish the first Unitarian congregation in all of western Canada—but not before marrying the missionary she'd discovered, Björn Pétursson!

In the early years of the twentieth century, William Channing Gannett launched a similar initiative out of the First Unitarian Church of Rochester, New York, but with a twist—he came to conceive of the recipients of his monthly mailings and pastoral letters as a congregation in and of themselves, the "Church of All Souls." Although this "church" did not include a mechanism for becoming a member, the idea that those who received mailings could be something more than passive recipients of printed tracts marked an important change of thinking.

During his second term as American Unitarian Association president, Frederick May Eliot expressed his desire to establish an unconventional congregation to serve both military personnel and individuals living in communities without existing Unitarian churches—a "church in the fullest sense of the word, a church which will serve isolated religious liberals wherever they live." At the AUA's May Meetings in 1944, the Church of the Larger Fellowship was organized with 34 members and the pastoral support of Dr. Albert Dieffenbach. (The Universalists established their own CLF three years later under the leadership of Clinton Lee Scott.)

In the postwar years, the CLF was an instrumental part of the emerging fellowship movement and it can be fairly said that the CLF has "spun off" more new congregations than any other—perhaps more than *every* other! When Unitarians and Universalists merged their two congregations in 1961 they established a single CLF. Today we claim this proud history while imagining new and innovative ways to serve our unique mission. From modest beginnings, CLF has grown into a vibrant, worldwide congregation which continues to influence the growth and vitality of Unitarian Universalism, confident that our best years lie ahead of us.



In the 130 years since Sallie Ellis mailed out her first tract, the phenomenon that became CLF has seen both remarkable continuity of purpose and almost unimaginable changes in method and structure. We may not be inclined to think of the postal service as a "technology" but, if we do, it will be readily apparent that the women who established the Post Office Mission were exploiting the best technologies available to them to serve religious liberals and promote our shared faith. As times changed, the mission and methods have changed to meet new challenges and exploit new technologies and techniques. Can we be equally imaginative today? How different might the CLF appear to us 130 years from now? Or, in this rapidly changing digital age in which we live, how different must we be just 130 *days* from now, if we are to fulfill our evolving mission? We're very excited that in the coming months the CLF will be unfolding our new "virtual sanctuary," a completely revised website designed to welcome religious seekers as well as to provide resources and community for our members. As we work to embrace new technologies, Jennie McCaine's spirit of reaching out to all who might welcome the good news of a liberal religion continues to guide our steps. ■



June 2011

REsources for Living

BY GUEST COLUMNIST **MEG RILEY**,
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CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

Have you ever been homesick? Maybe you were away at camp, or maybe your family moved to a new place that didn't feel like home. Maybe you were at someone else's house, where all the food tasted different, and the smells were different, and you couldn't quite make sense of the rules for behavior. Whatever was going on, you wanted only to go home!

But what if you were already at home and you were still homesick? Has that ever happened to you? I remember, for instance, when I was a kid and I did something that I knew I was going to get in trouble for when my parents figured it out. Then I was homesick for someplace else! Another way we might be home and still feel homesick is when something there makes us upset—someone we love is sick, or people we care about are fighting with each other, or our parent has lost a job. We feel kind of sick to our stomachs at these times, and wish that we could go to a different home where everything was OK.



And I think most of us feel homesick for a different world we might imagine, where people are kinder and life is fairer, where everyone is safe and happy. The truth is, on our planet most everyone has some kind of trouble in our lives. Not having a job is trouble, and workplaces have trouble.



Schools have trouble, and polar ice caps have trouble. That perfect place we're homesick for really only exists in our imagination.

So, we could spend our days grumbling to ourselves about just how bad things are, and worrying that they will get worse. We could all be miserable, comparing our dream life to the messier reality we actually experience. But we'll be happier if we can figure out ways to be at home right in the middle of the big mess, to allow ourselves to know that we are still OK even though life is not now and won't ever be perfect.

This doesn't mean that we don't spend our days on earth trying to make things a little better for ourselves and for everyone. We do! At the same time, we might as well face it that life will always hold pain and suffering. That's why this month's Quest is celebrating the reality that—right in the middle of the whole big mess, and sometimes for no reason at all—a sense of well-being comes upon us, and we know we're OK. We know we're more than OK, in fact. We know we're GREAT. We're great, we're at peace, we're part of something that's big and wonderful that connects everything together.

When that feeling of being OK—no-matter-what comes upon us, it is a huge blessing. We can't predict when it will happen. Some people use the word 'grace' to describe that sense of being one with everything, being at home no matter where we are. (Grace is also used to describe blessings we offer before we eat, but that is a different use of the word.) Grace is a gift that comes to us in its own time. We might (or might not) experience grace when we see a beautiful full moon, hear music that unexpectedly lifts up our spirits, wake up happy from a dream we can't quite remember, or snuggle with a person or a pet and feel the deep joy of their kinship. Suddenly we just know we are blessed and lucky to be right here on earth, even with all of its troubles!

But grace isn't something you control: that's the tricky part! We can look at a beautiful moon while listening to our favorite music and holding the hand of the person we love most in the world, and we might feel mildly happy but not at one with everything. Grace is a gift, and it's fleeting. When it comes, drop everything and savor it!

We can't control when we will receive the gift of grace, but we can create opportunities in our life that are most likely to help us let go of everything so that we can feel grace rush in.

Grace is a gift, and it's fleeting. When it comes, drop everything and savor it!

Different people may experience it in different ways. My favorite way to experience grace, personally, is through laughing. Nothing helps me to feel like I am at home in the world more than laughing with someone. And sometimes laughing right in the middle of trouble can make the trouble seem not quite as large.

Years ago, when my Mom was dying of cancer, my family felt really awkward together. It was a sad time and we all felt kind of lost—homesick for the family we used to be. Then my brother put a very silly movie on, and by the time we had all watched it and laughed loudly together, we knew that life was OK, even though at the same time it wasn't. My mom was going to die, *and* things were still going to be funny even without her laughing there beside us.

So, people mean a lot of different things when they talk about grace, but here's my image: a circle of people, laughing so hard we are almost crying, sharing the sense of connection and joy and loose bones that comes when you let everything fall off of you except the experience of the laughter. ■



**Church of the Larger Fellowship
Unitarian Universalist**

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After centuries of handling and mishandling, most religious words have become so shopworn 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 can 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. Have you ever tried to love somebody?

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 touch it is a gift, too. ■

by **Frederick Buechner**, from *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, published by *Harper Collins* in 1973.