

Who is Grace?



REV. THERESA I. SOTO

Senior Minister, First Unitarian Church of Oakland, California

Perhaps the very simplicity of grace is what makes it hard to describe. I've been in more than one meandering conversation with Unitarian Universalists about what is grace anyway. Rather than focus on the what today, I want to tell you about the who: Grace Lee Boggs.

Grace was a Chinese-American activist who lived in Detroit and worked for seventy years, connected in community for Black liberation. She was a teacher and writer who believed that freedom was possible and that people could learn how to achieve it, especially by working together to make change. In one conversation with journalist Amy Goodman, Grace Lee Boggs said:

"One of the difficulties when you're coming out of oppression is that you get a concept of a messiah. You have to get to the point that we are the leaders we have been looking for. We are the children of Martin and Malcolm. I don't know what the next American Revolution is going to be like, but you might be able to imagine it if your imagination were rich enough."

Grace Lee Boggs offered the wisdom of change; as Unitarian Universalists, we find ourselves swimming in the

deep end of the ocean of change. Most congregations have not been meeting in their buildings for going on more than a year now. We find the political climate and even the meteorological climate to be in the process of change. This would not have been a surprise to Grace Lee Boggs. She viewed change as a container for possibility. She also gave this encouragement:

"Keep realizing that reality is changing and that your ideas have to change. Don't get stuck in old ideas."

What does that mean for Unitarian Universalists in this particular moment? First, it is true that no one is coming to save us. If one of the definitions of grace is refined movement, we come to the legacy of Grace Lee Boggs as a framework that can allow refinement of our movement, or the embodiment of grace. As a movement, we will continue to change. As the risk level of COVID-19 transmission decreases, we will move into multi-platform modes of worship, or online and in-person combinations of worship that continue to keep our communities safe and move toward a goal of in-person worship. We will encounter the changing political climate with courage and the stamina that it will take to change both feelings and ideas, toward equity, toward Beloved Community.

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But what we can do, as flawed as we are, is still see God in other people, and do our best to help them find their own grace. That's what I strive to do, that's what I pray to do every day.

BARACK OBAMA

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CLF member, incarcerated in FL

Does believing that God's grace extends to everyone prove there's an end to suffering? The contradiction mollifies itself because a loving, wrathful God is graceful and merciful from a Christian Universalism point of view.

When I was six or seven years old my mom read to my brother and I the Bible. I lit up! I believed all of it. She read to us for a few more years, and then we grew up. After that I rarely picked up the Bible, but I remember, one time I opened it to the book of Revelation and attempted to decipher it. I soon gave up.

Then, at twenty-two years of age, I was incarcerated because I went undiagnosed and untreated for more than a year with a major mental illness. This disorder did not allow me to refrain from thinking (and acting out) a false reality, in which my crime was necessary and sufficient to help — save — humanity from suffering, as well as my well-being, and my own recovery. This was a grandiose delusion, even though I should have known I was wrong from a black and white perspective, my mind colored every perspective in support of my delusion. Thus, I was strongly compelled to act on it contrary to the law, regardless of the real consequences which compromised my promises to society due to my insanity.

I could not understand why a loving God would allow my life to turn into, what seems like, a crash course with no end in sight. Fast forward eighteen years of incarceration with another twenty-two years remaining on this course and, in short, it seems God has let me down at every turn. I expected to finish the racecourse.

Fortunately, this is still the case because in my recurring delusions, this life is still the best, most true, and most real life I will ever have, unless the reality is far greater than the delusion. The point is that much did turn out far better for me than

I had expected! I can explain every circumstance and event, because I have tasted that the Lord is good (1 Peter 2:1-3).

Moreover, I have a peace that I know I have a choice. It is human nature, and the peace I feel comes from faith in my interpretation (from my experiences). It is my truth. Can I share it with you? May I? It is this Christianity — that almost has it right! That is much better than I expected, but it was that curiosity when I attempted to do something I thought no one on earth has done — justify my life with anything less than grace. ■

Grace

TIMOTHY, *CLF member incarcerated in NY*

I know her
 In times of turmoil she is unexpected respite
 I cherish what she is, what I am not
 Her countenance is hopeful
 Her words are kind without rebuke
 Hers is not charity, yet no debt is incurred
 She assumes I am worthy. I am sure I am not

I know her, but I have never been her
 When the turbulence passes
 She departs with this wise impress
 Do not wait for others to prove worthy
 They are already
 You are able to be Grace for them
 Are you willing?

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One of the ideas that we have the opportunity to embrace as refinement of our movement is the Eighth Principle.

“We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.”

It is both a new idea and a new practice to say this out loud and to plan to live into it. And we, who have now endured a season of change in which we had few choices, can use our adaptability to continue looking



PHOTO BY SEAN BONNER VIA FLICKR

for the ideas that will allow us to live into who we say we are, Seven Principles, then Eight, by which we love each other, our communities, and the

world, into healing, into wholeness, and into a new horizon of joy. Come. We are the ones who must lead us forward. ■

Looking for Sandworms

SCOTT

CLF member, incarcerated in CA

One of my favorite books is Frank Herbert's science fiction classic *Dune*. The story centers on the desert planet Dune, where enormous sandworms burrow under the sands. People who attempt to mine the valuable substance known as "the spice" constantly have their machines destroyed by the sandworms. Later in the story, the main character, Paul, manages to turn the sand worms into an asset rather than a liability.

I grew up in the Bay Area of California, which is well known for being balmy and temperate. Yet, life's slings and arrows pushed me south into the blaring hot Central Valley; it might as well have been the desert of Dune as far as I was concerned. Although I did not think of them as such at the time, I was also haunted by my own sandworms: depression that robbed me of my strength and hope, fears that devoured my courage. There is something about these unseen terrors that sabotage the best of intentions. The wounds endured early in

life have the tendency to fester and become their own unmanageable monsters. For a long time, I saw no way to overcome them.

In our culture, we have a lot of platitudes related to overcoming adversity. Many have become clichés, and I have never met someone who said they were saved by a cliché, myself included. How do you make lemonade out of lemon without sugar? That

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CLF Votes to Ordain Ali K.C. Bell



REV. DR. MICHAEL TINO

CLF Lead Ministry Team

In our UU tradition, ministers are ordained by congregations. Only the vote of a congregation can give someone the title “Reverend.” Only the vote of a congregation can place that sacred bond of trust onto the shoulders of someone seen as a minister.

It is with great joy that the membership of CLF on February 28, 2021 voted to ordain Ali K.C. Bell (who was previously known as Antonia Bell-Delgado) to the Unitarian Universalist ministry. It is with deeper joy that I report that our vote included some 92 “yes” votes from our incarcerated members, able to



Ali speaking during the February 28th online meeting in which the CLF voted to ordain xer to Unitarian Universalist ministry.

vote because of the tear-off sheet we printed in the January Quest.

Ali will be ordained by the CLF along with the UU Congregation at Montclair, NJ (where xe is completing

a ministerial internship) and the First UU Church of Wilmington, DE (xer home congregation). The ceremony will be Saturday, May 22, and we hope to feature an excerpt from the ceremony in our summer edition of Quest. ■

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is what I always wanted to know. And how exactly do you pass a “test given by God”? Professor G. never gave any lectures, and no angel ever came down to provide some tutoring. The alleged textbooks I was given second hand always left me with more questions than answers. I know people were just trying to be helpful when they told me these things, but their words became bricks in the wall I built around my heart.

That wall was there for a long time. However, no wall stands forever. There came a time when I could no longer hide my pain and was desperate enough to seek help. The healing was slow, but it did happen. My epiphany came when I realized all those problems I had helped make me the person I wanted to be: depression and fear made me sensitive to the struggles of others, making me an adept teacher – I now work as a paid tutor and I plan on becoming a professor. In the dark night of my soul, I found grace.

In *Dune*, Paul turns the sandworms into an asset by cooperating with the indigenous people of the desert. He learns the creatures are actually essential to the production of the sought-after spice. I have found that grace works the same way; it is a gift hidden within our struggles, within the everyday muck of life, rather than being bestowed from on high in the aftermath. So, now I make a habit of looking for sandworms, the power that burrows in the fell clutch of circumstance waiting for me to become its ally. ■

Notice of the CLF Annual Meeting

To all members of the Church of the Larger Fellowship, Unitarian Universalist:

Per Article VII, Sections 1 and 2, of the Church of the Larger Fellowship (CLF) Bylaws, the 48th Annual Meeting will be held via video/telephone conference call and screen sharing on **Sunday, June 6, 2021 at 6:30PM EDT**. To join the meeting, go to www.clfuu.org/joinannualmeeting.

We will be distributing materials electronically to all CLF members for whom we have a current email address, and posting the documents to our website (www.clfuu.org/annualmeeting). All incarcerated members will automatically receive paper copies of the materials along with postage-paid ballots to return. Others may request hard copies mailed to you by sending back the form on the final page of this issue of *Quest*, or calling the CLF office at 617-948-6150.

All those who have access to the Internet or phone are encouraged to join our meeting via Zoom and participate in the discussion. Meeting materials will include absentee ballots for those unable to attend in person.

The purpose of the meeting is to:

- Report on highlights of CLF activities and finances
- Vote for the following leadership positions (see nominations from Nominating Committee in the packet):
 - Elect three members to 3-year terms on the board of directors,
 - Elect one member to a 3-year term on the nominating committee,
 - Elect a clerk and treasurer for one year
- Vote to affirm the proposed 8th principle (see 8th principle and board recommendation in packet)
- Vote to approve revised bylaws (see revised bylaws in the packet)

We will elect a moderator from among members present to preside at the meeting.

Danielle Di Bona, *Clerk*

If you are a free world member of the CLF and you would like to receive Annual Meeting materials by mail, please use the tear-off form on the final page of this issue to submit your request.

All incarcerated members will automatically receive these materials by mail.

Why Pray?



REV. JENNIFER JOHNSON
CLF Learning Fellow

Growing up in a mostly secular family, I had very little exposure to prayer in my home. I have only vague memories of my grandmother on my mother's side raising her hands over the lit candles of her Seder table and reciting the Hebrew blessings for Passover. My father, a preacher's grandkid, fled his southern evangelical Christian upbringing with its fiery rhetoric of eternal damnation.

My own early relationship to prayer was, well, awkward. I was untaught and unversed in prayer. That made me different from my childhood peers, almost all of whom were raised in practicing and sometimes devout Catholic families. As they prepared for first communion, my friends shared the prayers they'd learned, the Our Father and the Hail Mary. They punctuated their reverent words with graceful hand motions—fingertips to head, heart, one shoulder, and the other.

I was intrigued... and envious. My friends seemed to know a wondrous, rhythmic language that was utterly unfamiliar to my lips. They had access to a world of rituals from which I was apart.

My feeling of awkwardness is best captured in a singular memory. I was six years old and sleeping over a friend's for the first time. Missy's parents had considerably prepared



PHOTO BY PEDRO DIAS VIA UNSPLASH

my favorite dinner. As soon as the steaming plates were set and everyone seated at the kitchen table, I eagerly tucked into my spaghetti. Missy gently nudged my arm with her elbow. Looking up, I beheld the family raising their hands to their heads as they began to pray. Meanwhile, I sat frozen and silent, my fork suspended in front of my face, saucy spaghetti strands dangling in the air... Awkward.

That awkwardness caused me to avoid prayer and religious life for a long time. Praying was simply something I had never learned to do, akin to riding a bike or playing an instrument. I would rather not expose my ineptitude. Yet, I couldn't shake a longing to speak a language of reverence and to enter a world of ritual.

Unitarian Universalism opened a door to that world and extended lessons in that language. Our faith

tradition has encouraged me to bring my awkwardness through the doors with me, to take it as a starting point for spiritual exploration, deepening, and growth.

Unitarian Universalism invited me to understand prayer not as a predetermined language or skill that I had failed to master, but rather as a means of spiritual self-expression that we are called to develop and practice over a lifetime. Unitarian Universalism encourages us to ask the "Why" and "How" and "What" of prayer, and to earnestly seek answers in dialogue with our friends on the journey. Our prayers may not all look the same, or sound the same, or invoke the same source. They may change with the seasons of our lives, and as our understanding evolves. And that's ok.

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Last fall, the Worthy Now prison ministry extended an invitation to our incarcerated members to explore the meaning, purpose, and practice of prayer in their lives by taking part in the “Spirit of Life” faith formation course.

Participants reflected on why they pray, and some composed their own prayers. Weaving together their shared insights and prayers, I offer this prayer in their honor:

*Spirit of Life, Goddess of Reality,
Heavenly Mother, Heavenly Father,
Children, Air, Fire, Earth, Water,*

*Source of All,
We pray to remember the transcendent
in our daily lives.*

*We pray to connect with Nature and
the Divine.*

*We pray to become one with the
Universe.*

*We pray to confess without fear of
judgment.*

*We pray to give voice to the experiences
of injustice, pain, and suffering, in
and around us.*

*We pray that we may know we belong
to one another.*

*We pray for comfort and nourishment;
for hope, love and joy;
for wisdom, courage, and balance;
for acceptance.*

*We pray for the strength to fight the
systems of oppression*

*that confine and separate us.
We pray for another chance to live
freely on the outside.*

*We pray for health and survival.
We pray for liberation.*

*May it be so. May we make it so.
Amen.*

I invite you to explore your relationship to prayer. Why do (or don't) you pray? How has your relationship to prayer changed over the course of your life? If prayer is part of your practice, to whom or what do you pray? For what do you pray? How do you pray? With whom do you pray? How do you believe your prayers impact the wider world? ■

FOR YOUR REFLECTION

Each month or so, we will offer a question or two for reflection based on the idea explored in this issue. You may wish to explore it individually or as part of a group discussion. Consider submitting your reflection response for possible inclusion in a future issue of Quest. To submit this reflection, you can tear off your answer and mail it back to us using the envelope included in the middle of this issue, or mail a longer reflection separately.

Each week during the CLF online worship service, we pray for the Joys and Sorrows of our community. The cruelty of the prison industrial complex prevents our incarcerated members from attending; even still, we can gather in spirit if not in body. If you are incarcerated or otherwise unable to attend online worship, we invite you to submit brief prayers of joy/sorrow/grief/gratitude to be shared during an upcoming worship service.



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Unitarian Universalist

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