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One bright wintery day in January, I trudged through the snow to pay a visit to the Reverend Gary Smith, minister at my home church in Concord Massachusetts. I was twenty five, and ready for a change in my life. I was applying to seminaries and wanted Gary to interview me for a recommendation to get his perspective on my future path. We settled into talking in his warm and inviting office, and he inquired about my mother and my siblings. Finally, we got to talking about seminary, and as I confessed my call to ministry I felt he smiled with a warmth that filled the room. His eyes flashed with kindhearted excitement as he leaned in earnestly and asked. "Just one question.... What does grace mean to you?"

I was taken aback. I hadn't counted on that question. Grace? I scoured my brain for a good definition. I surely hadn't learned about that in Unitarian Universalist Sunday school, and I couldn't really recall what if anything I had explored in my undergraduate in religious studies. I can remember my confidence faltering for a moment, my face getting hot as I stumbled a bit over my words, "I'm not sure exactly what it means, but I think it has something to do with love."

He nodded and smiled again. In his recommendation letter, he generously wrote that I had a pastor's heart, and I was admitted to seminary. I thought that was kind of him to say, given I had clearly flunked the grace test. Here I was, a lifelong Unitarian Universalist and religious studies scholar and I couldn't really answer a simple religious question. Of course, seminary would educate me in the traditional theological meanings of the word. .As it turned out, I hadn't flunked the grace test at all, I just needed to understand it from our unique Universalist perspective.

Grace in the orthodox Christian tradition is God's love and mercy lavished upon humankind, not because people have earned it, but simply because God loves God's people just as they are—sins and all— and wants to show them. In the strict Calvinist tradition, grace is only offered to a small elect of believers—those who confess their allegiance to Jesus Christ through a strict Calvinist doctrine.



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Perhaps the harshest Calvinists today are the small conservative “church” called Westboro Baptists. This fringe group, identified as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center, has decided that God hates everyone except for them. They travel around the country picketing with their vile signs and hateful rhetoric. And next Monday morning, they have decided that they will picket Sequoyah high school on our campus. The target of the protest is high school senior Louis Siskel, Pasadena's Queen of the Rose Parade—proudly bisexual, Jewish, and, perhaps most controversially, a wearer of glasses. Many in this community and our larger Pasadena community have expressed interest in participating in a peaceful response. There is no reason to be afraid of this group, only to let their hateful presence embolden us to let our love shine even brighter.

We are obviously as far away as we could possibly be from these fringe groups. But our Universalist history evolved from a different time when political uncertainty, mass immigration and the industrial revolution had also produced a very potent brand of religious fire and brimstone. Universalism was a radical message at the time, claiming we are all worthy and deserving of love and God's grace. In historical Universalism, if we are already beloved by God, and need no predetermination to be saved, our heaven is what we make of it here on earth. It is not only God that loves and bestows grace, it is humankind that bears the collective responsibility to love one another as God loves. This is where our imperative to do justice, but also where the redemptive dimension to grace comes in.

God showers kindness and love on everyone, sinners or saints, and so it is our duty to reflect God's love back onto the world. Universalism proclaims no special blessing is deserved by any one group or sect, and honors no savior but the one we discover in ourselves and in one another, no hell but the one we create on this earth. Grace is known as a spiritual “mystery.” To even the most liberal Christians, grace is always a surprise and catches the receiver off guard in the most unexpected moments.

Author and radical cultural critic bell hooks writes of her Christian childhood: “In my home church we would sing “grace woke me up this morning, grace started me on my



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way." This grace was understood as a recognition of the presence of mystery. We trust from childhood on that we can sleep and wake, that we can rise, that our open eyes will see." As hooks turned away from her Christian childhood and towards a Buddhist practice, her experience of the mystery of grace was still powerful for her, particularly through a mystical connection the natural world. She writes: "Everywhere I turned in nature I could see and feel the mystery — the wonder of that which could not be accounted for by human reason."

Finding grace in nature is one place where Christians and agnostics, atheists and humanists can find common ground. In her new book *Shameless*, radical Calvinist Nadia Bolz Weber compares grace to a sudden rainstorm: "...we don't earn rain, and we don't control it. We don't get to decide where it falls and in what amount." This week as the rain flowed and flowed, I thought about the climate science behind these torrential rains, but also about the mystery of it all, as I marveled at how the nourishing rains produced the lush green hills, the majestic snow-capped mountains and the crisp fresh air.

One of the best theologians of this naturalistic understanding of grace is the poet Mary Oliver. Mary Oliver died recently at the age of 83, and is the unofficial poet of our Unitarian Universalist faith. She was also by far the most popular and best-selling American poet of our time. Why? Because she described a fierce love of the world, which was to be both given and received. She was ultimately a poet whose subject was the grace of the natural world, as studied by paying attention.

You might be asking why we need a theology of grace. What are we missing actually by not having one? I think without a theology of grace, we are setting ourselves up to emulate a kind of Puritan perfectionism that can do us much more harm than good. Without any net to catch us when we fall, or an extra helping of love, we can be trapped by impossibly high standards which make us our own harshest critics. We will always fall short of our expectations, but we are allowed to be human, and to have our mistakes and shortcomings be gentle teachers urging us to grow, not forms of punishment or condemnation. Grace is an elemental part of life—a love flowing from the world and healing our imperfections, catching us when we fall, and assuring us that there is always a



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second chance. Grace is as invisible as the air we breathe but just as necessary for our thriving. As it turns out, I was wrong. You can never flunk the grace test, only to feel yourself loved, again and again. "You can have the other words," Mary Oliver wrote in her poem *Sand Dabs*, "chance, luck, coincidence, serendipity. I'll take grace. I don't know what it is exactly, but I'll take it."

Blessed be, and Amen