

# Grace

## *The Phenomenology of Unconditional Love*

August 2026

I grew up in Sri Lanka, where devotion entered the day before explanation did. I watched my parents and neighbors burn oil lamps in the evening, present flowers before stone figures, press their palms together in front of altars crowded with deities and ancestors, and repeat words whose meanings I did not yet understand. Religion was not only a belief about the universe. It was a posture of the body, a rhythm of the household, a vocabulary for grief that many families could not otherwise speak.

As a child, I often read these rituals as performance. They seemed like a social shield, a negotiation with the cosmos, a dialect for everything that remained unspoken about suffering. I became an agnostic without much rage. Mostly, I felt peaceful about it. If love was genuine, I thought, I should be able to discover or construct it without claiming knowledge I did not possess.

Engineering gave me a method. Reduce a problem to its first principles, identify the parts that cannot be removed, then build upward. I applied the method to morality. My starting axiom was simple: every person has intrinsic worth. Compassion followed as the recognition of that worth. Fairness became its distributive form. Forgiveness became a kind of systemic reset - not an erasure of harm, but a refusal to let one failure define the whole person.

It was a beautiful construction. I could explain it at parties. I could defend it in debates. I had built a cathedral of reason, and I thought I could live inside it eternally.

Then I moved from constantly sunny Sri Lanka to the United States and learned that cathedrals of pure reason do not warm in winters.

That confidence lasted until life became difficult - failure, rejection, fear, loneliness. The architecture shook. The thought of my intrinsic worth could comfort me, but it did not make me feel embraced. When I became angry with someone I loved, I could reason my way toward forgiveness, but the process felt like Sisyphus pushing a boulder up a slope. Recall: their worth is intrinsic. Recall: your heart chooses compassion. Recall: one action is not the entire person.

My mind could make blueprints. It could not always cast foundations or erect walls. There was a rift between knowing what unconditional love should mean and being able to inhabit it as a stable fact about myself and other people.

The contradiction embarrassed me. My unconditional love was conditional on my ability to reason my way into it. It depended on energy, emotional resilience, intellectual clarity, and the capacity to rebuild the argument each time it collapsed. When I was depleted, ashamed, or angry, the system asked me to function before it would let love enter. Yet love was exactly what I needed when functioning had failed.

For a long time I treated that gap as a private deficiency. Then I started noticing the structures other people used to cross it.

A friend whose family had been fractured by politics and distorted faith told me that one of the first things that helped her heal was the insistence that a loving God remained present. She did not describe a supernatural sensation. She described a habit. She would sit in an empty chapel and repeat a sentence until it acquired weight: I am held. Nothing theatrical happened. She was using a language she had inherited to build a house for a love she could not reliably produce by herself.

Another friend told me that she tried to remember that the world was made with love. The proposition changed how she understood anger. If existence was only an indifferent accident, resentment could feel like the final truth. If love was somehow prior, resentment became weather: real, sometimes violent, but not the climate she was required to house forever.

What my friends were giving me, without calling it that, was a different grammar. Many of us grow up fluent in conditional love. Affection is attached to usefulness, obedience, achievement, beauty, silence, family reputation, or the ability to avoid becoming inconvenient. Love arrives as payment: I love you because you are good, successful, respectable, easy to explain to the neighbors. The child learns the grammar and later speaks it inwardly. I may belong when I perform. I may rest when I have earned it. I may forgive myself after I become someone else.

Unconditional love changes the grammar. It says that worth precedes worthiness. You are not loved because you have completed the repair. Love creates the secure ground from which repair becomes possible.

That needs a boundary, because the language of unconditional love can become sentimental and dangerous. Unconditional worth is not unconditional approval. It is not unlimited access to another person, the cancellation of consequences, or an obligation to remain inside a harmful relationship. I can believe that you possess irreducible human dignity and still leave. I can forgive without trusting you. I can refuse revenge while requiring restitution. I can love what is human in you while preventing you from harming me again.

Belonging and accountability are not opposites. A person can hear: you remain human, and what you did was wrong. You remain capable of return, and return requires truth. You cannot lose your metaphysical worth, and you can lose a role, a privilege, a relationship, or someone's confidence. Foundation without direction becomes enabling. Direction without foundation becomes humiliation. Together they make transformation possible without turning love into a wage.

The question, then, is practical. Where do we learn this grammar? How do we practice it until it is still available when our own reasoning is tired?

For billions of people, religion has been one place to learn it. Christianity offers one version through grace. Christian traditions disagree about how faith, works, freedom, sacraments, and cooperation relate to salvation. Lutheran teaching states the Reformation claim sharply: justification is by grace alone through faith alone. Catholic teaching likewise insists that grace precedes human merit while describing the human person's free cooperation with grace. Orthodox Christianity speaks of synergy, the cooperation of divine grace and human freedom.<sup>1</sup>

Those differences matter; Christianity cannot be compressed into one formula. Still, the common psychological force is recognizable. Repair does not begin from abandonment. A person does not have to become flawless before approaching love. Grace arrives before the self has organized a persuasive defense.

For someone trained by conditional affection, this is disorienting. There is nothing to barter. Goodness is no longer a payment offered to purchase belonging. Moral action becomes a response to love rather than an entrance fee for it.

That reversal creates a practical framework for self-compassion. After failure, the question is not, Have I ceased to possess value? It becomes, How do I return to a love that was not created by my performance? Forgiveness of another person also becomes less like a private feat of moral strength. It can be understood as participation in a mercy one has first received.

Grace is not permission to remain unchanged. In its serious forms, it intensifies responsibility because the person is no longer defending against annihilation. Confession can name harm precisely because belonging is not entirely at stake. Repentance becomes possible when truth no longer threatens to erase the self.

Judaism approaches the same need through covenant. Biblical covenant language developed within a wider ancient Near Eastern world of treaties and obligations, but the relationship between God and a people acquired a distinctive theological force.<sup>2</sup> Covenant is not a deal without duties. The Hebrew Bible is filled with commandments, consequences, rupture, exile, protest, and return. What matters for my inquiry is not that failure has no cost. It is that failure does not necessarily end the relationship.

The tradition is remarkably candid about human beings. Abraham deceives. Jacob manipulates. Moses loses his temper. David commits adultery and arranges a man's death. These are not sanitized mascots. They remain inside a moral history that can judge them without pretending they were never part of the people.

Teshuvah, commonly translated as repentance, carries the sense of return. Return is not merely feeling terrible about oneself. It involves leaving the harmful action, naming it, changing direction, and repairing what can be repaired. Maimonides makes the interpersonal demand especially concrete: Yom Kippur does not atone for wrongs committed against another person until the wrongdoer makes restitution and seeks that person's forgiveness.<sup>3</sup> God is not used to bypass the injured human being.

That gives love enough strength to hold continuity and consequence at once. The door can remain open without pretending the room was never damaged. Repair clears rubble; it does not declare rubble imaginary.

The communal dimension matters as well. Worth is not reflected only by an isolated mind performing an argument about itself. A people carries stories, obligations, calendars, meals, songs, and practices across generations. When individual will fails, the community can hold the language temporarily. Someone else remembers the covenant when you cannot.

Islam places mercy at the front of its speech. With one exception, every surah of the Qur'an opens with the basmala, invoking God as al-Rahman and al-Rahim, commonly rendered the Most Compassionate and the Most Merciful. The Qur'an repeatedly describes divine mercy as vast and tells people who have wronged themselves not to despair of it.<sup>4</sup>

The concept of *fitrah* adds another layer. A well-known prophetic tradition says that every child is born upon *fitrah*, often understood as an original disposition oriented toward God and the good.<sup>5</sup> Interpretations vary, and *fitrah* should not be reduced to the claim that human beings are incapable of evil. Its contrast with inherited guilt is still powerful: the self is not born as an irreparable defect. Wrongdoing is real, but it does not become the deepest possible description of what a person is.

Tawbah is the act of turning back. The door remains open while return is possible. As in the Jewish account, repentance is not simply shame. It involves recognition, remorse, stopping the harmful action, and changing conduct. Mercy does not make action irrelevant; it makes action possible without the paralysis of believing that one's essence has become identical to one's worst act.

For someone caught in a shame loop, the distinction can be radical. I did something wrong is a moral statement. I am a substance from which no good can come is a metaphysical sentence of death. The first can guide repair. The second often prevents it.

But I do not want to romanticize any of this. Human beings can turn grace into a loyalty test, covenant into exclusion, and mercy into a slogan offered to the powerful while the harmed are told to remain silent. Religion has been used to shame, manipulate, ostracize, discipline bodies, protect abusers, and restore conditional belonging under sacred language: become pure enough, straight enough, obedient enough, quiet enough, and then perhaps you may be loved.

The existence of a tradition does not guarantee that its institutions embody its moral center. A ritual can regulate emotion, and it can also regulate dissent. A community can carry a person when individual strength fails, and it can crush a person by making departure equivalent to damnation. Stories are powerful partly because they can outlast critical thought. That is exactly why discernment matters.

My claim is monopoly. Religion does not create unconditional love from nothing, and religious people do not possess a monopoly on it. These traditions contain durable languages and practices through which many people learn to experience worth as prior to performance. Even for an agnostic, they can be examined as inherited architectures of attention, memory, accountability, and return.

This is where psychology becomes useful to me, without settling the metaphysics. Research suggests that repeated, structured action can change how people respond to uncertainty, failure, and one another. Experimental work has found that ritual can reduce anxiety and alter responses to performance failure. Other studies suggest that secular rituals can increase social connection. Research on narrative identity describes the self not as a list of propositions but as an evolving story through which a person integrates the remembered past and imagined future.<sup>6</sup>

None of that proves a theology. It does help explain why a theorem about dignity and a practiced language of dignity feel different. A proposition is available when it can be retrieved. A ritual recruits the body, environment, timing, memory, and often other people. It places reminders outside the exhausted mind.

Prayer, liturgy, communal gathering, fasting, confession, gratitude, and repeated phrases can become training. They are not merely performances layered on top of belief. They can turn belief into attention, habit, and reflex. A person practices forgiveness before the most difficult injury arrives. A community rehearses return before someone is lost. A story keeps running when the individual narrator has temporarily failed.

The engineer in me wants to call these systems. The word is useful and insufficient. A system implies components and functions; a tradition also contains beauty, history, authority, conflict, and people for whom the metaphysics are not optional metaphors. An agnostic who borrows from religion should do so with humility. Practices are not free-floating productivity tools. They belong to communities and carry meanings that exceed my private use.

I remain agnostic. I do not claim to know whether these narratives describe metaphysical reality. I also no longer believe that reason must reject every structure it did not invent.

At my best, I can still derive compassion and forgiveness from the first principle of human dignity. I value the precision of that argument. It protects me from confusing tradition with truth merely because a tradition is old, and it lets me criticize religious systems when they make belonging conditional or hide harm.

But I have also accepted practices that hold me when I am not at my best. I borrow the concept of being held. I practice gratitude as a form of prayer - not necessarily to a God I can describe, but as a way of training my attention toward love that already exists. I create small rituals that remind me I am more than my worst moment. I take friends out for ice cream when they pass an exam. I send the message I was tempted to postpone. I repeat the sentence that reason has already proven but emotion has forgotten.

I have also begun to reinterpret my parents' rituals. I no longer see only emptiness or fear. They were using the tools available to build shelter. The shelter was imperfect. It did not stop all the rain. But their obligations, repetitions, offerings, and gestures were often love letters written in a language I had not yet learned to read.

This hybrid method is not a compromise between intelligence and superstition. It is an admission about human architecture. We are not constructed from logic alone. We are also constructed from story, repetition, place, touch, food, song, and the presence of other people. A complete moral philosophy has to account for the conditions under which a person can keep practicing what the philosophy says is true.

So I no longer ask only whether unconditional love is true. I also ask what makes it livable. If you recognize that human beings possess dignity regardless of performance and still find that conviction difficult to maintain when life becomes hard, the difficulty is not proof that the conviction is false. It is not necessarily a personal failure. The gap between understanding and inhabiting a truth is part of being human.

You may build a structure from secular philosophy, therapy, friendship, art, political commitment, family ritual, or religious tradition. You may use Christianity's language of grace, Judaism's practice of return, Islam's insistence on mercy, or a vocabulary that belongs to none of them. What matters is not building an attractive shelter that avoids accountability. It is building one strong enough to preserve worth while truth is spoken.

Leonard Cohen gives the movement a simple imperative: "Dance me to the end of love."<sup>7</sup> A dance is not solved once. The body learns by returning to the movement. At first the steps are deliberate. Eventually the pattern is available without a fresh proof.

That is what practice can supply at its best. It trains unconditional love as a felt orientation, not only a philosophical stance. It gives the mind a story, the body a rhythm, and the community a way to remember on our behalf. It does not remove the need for reason. It carries reason across the distances reason cannot always cross alone.

I am still, at my core, an engineer. I still try to build my philosophies from first principles. I simply no longer confuse a valid blueprint with a habitable house.

The love was there in principle. Sometimes we need the practice to find our way to it and bring it, at last, home.

1. For representative formulations: Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, "Sola Gratia: Grace Alone"; Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraphs 1996-2011; Orthodox Church in America, "Salvation Is Indeed By Grace." [Source](#)

2. George E. Mendenhall, "Covenant Form in Israelite Tradition," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 17, no. 3 (1954): 50-76. [Source](#)

3. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Hilchot Teshuvah (Laws of Repentance) 2:2 and 2:9. [Source](#)

4. The Qur'an, 11, 71;156, 97,1, and 39;53-54. Translations differ; the discussion here paraphrases the recurring theological themes rather than relying on a single English rendering. [Source](#)

5. Sahih Muslim 2658d, "No child is born but upon fitrah," linked in the tradition to Qur'an 30:30. [Source](#)

6. Nicholas M. Hobson et al., "The Psychology of Rituals: An Integrative Review and Process-Based Framework," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 22, no. 3 (2018): 260-284; Hobson and Michael Inzlicht, "Rituals Decrease the Neural Response to Performance Failure," *PeerJ* 5 (2017); Scott J. Charles et al., "United on Sunday: The Effects of Secular Rituals on Social Connection," *PLoS ONE* 16, no. 1 (2021); Dan P. McAdams, "The Psychology of Life Stories," *Review of General Psychology* 5, no. 2 (2001): 100-122. [Source](#)

7. Leonard Cohen, "Dance Me to the End of Love," Various Positions, Columbia Records, 1984.