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WHAT’S SO AMAZING ABOUT GRACE?
I know nothing, except what everyone knows —
if there when Grace dances, I should dance.

W. H. Auden
I told a story in my book *The Jesus I Never Knew*, a true story that long afterward continued to haunt me. I heard it from a friend who works with the down-and-out in Chicago:

A prostitute came to me in wretched straits, homeless, sick, unable to buy food for her two-year-old daughter. Through sobs and tears, she told me she had been renting out her daughter—two years old!—to men interested in kinky sex. She made more renting out her daughter for an hour than she could earn on her own in a night. She had to do it, she said, to support her own drug habit. I could hardly bear hearing her sordid story. For one thing, it made me legally liable—I’m required to report cases of child abuse. I had no idea what to say to this woman.

At last I asked if she had ever thought of going to a church for help. I will never forget the look of pure, naive shock that crossed her face. “Church!” she cried. “Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They’d just make me feel worse.”

What struck me about my friend’s story is that women much like this prostitute fled toward Jesus, not away from him. The worse a person felt about herself, the more likely she saw Jesus as a refuge. Has the church lost that gift? Evidently the down-and-out, who flocked to Jesus when he lived on earth, no longer feel welcome among his followers. What has happened?
The more I pondered this question, the more I felt drawn to one word as the key. All that follows uncoils from that one word.

As a writer, I play with words all day long. I toy with them, listen for their overtones, crack them open, and try to stuff my thoughts inside. I’ve found that words tend to spoil over the years, like old meat. Their meaning rots away. Consider the word “charity,” for instance. When King James translators contemplated the highest form of love they settled on the word “charity” to convey it. Nowadays we hear the scornful protest, “I don’t want your charity!”

Perhaps I keep circling back to grace because it is one grand theological word that has not spoiled. I call it “the last best word” because every English usage I can find retains some of the glory of the original. Like a vast aquifer, the word underlies our proud civilization, reminding us that good things come not from our own efforts, rather by the grace of God. Even now, despite our secular drift, taproots still stretch toward grace. Listen to how we use the word.

Many people “say grace” before meals, acknowledging daily bread as a gift from God. We are grateful for someone’s kindness, gratified by good news, congratulated when successful, gracious in hosting friends. When a person’s service pleases us, we leave a gratuity. In each of these uses I hear a pang of childlike delight in the undeserved.

A composer of music may add grace notes to the score. Though not essential to the melody — they are gratuitous — these notes add a flourish whose presence would be missed. When I first attempt a piano sonata by Beethoven or Schubert I play it through a few times without the grace notes. The sonata carries along, but oh what a difference it makes when I am able to add in the grace notes, which season the piece like savory spices.

In England, some uses hint loudly at the word’s theological source. British subjects address royalty as “Your grace.” Students at Oxford and Cambridge may “receive a grace” exempting them from certain academic requirements. Parliament declares an “act of grace” to pardon a criminal.
New York publishers also suggest the theological meaning with their policy of gracing. If I sign up for twelve issues of a magazine, I may receive a few extra copies even after my subscription has expired. These are “grace issues,” sent free of charge (or, gratis) to tempt me to resubscribe. Credit cards, rental car agencies, and mortgage companies likewise extend to customers an undeserved “grace period.”

I also learn about a word from its opposite. Newspapers speak of communism’s “fall from grace,” a phrase similarly applied to Jimmy Swaggart, Richard Nixon, and O. J. Simpson. We insult a person by pointing out the dearth of grace: “You ingrate!” we say, or worse, “You’re a disgrace!” A truly despicable person has no “saving grace” about him. My favorite use of the root word grace occurs in the mellifluous phrase persona non grata: a person who offends the U.S. government by some act of treachery is officially proclaimed a “person without grace.”

The many uses of the word in English convince me that grace is indeed amazing—truly our last best word. It contains the essence of the gospel as a drop of water can contain the image of the sun. The world thirsts for grace in ways it does not even recognize; little wonder the hymn “Amazing Grace” edged its way onto the Top Ten charts two hundred years after composition. For a society that seems adrift, without moorings, I know of no better place to drop an anchor of faith.

Like grace notes in music, though, the state of grace proves fleeting. The Berlin Wall falls in a night of euphoria; South African blacks queue up in long, exuberant lines to cast their first votes ever; Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat shake hands in the Rose Garden—for a moment, grace descends. And then Eastern Europe sullenly settles into the long task of rebuilding, South Africa tries to figure out how to run a country, Arafat dodges bullets and Rabin is felled by one. Like a dying star, grace dissipates in a final burst of pale light, and is then engulfed by the black hole of “ungrace.”

“The great Christian revolutions,” said H. Richard Niebuhr, “come not by the discovery of something that was not known before. They
happen when somebody takes radically something that was always there.” Oddly, I sometimes find a shortage of grace within the church, an institution founded to proclaim, in Paul’s phrase, “the gospel of God’s grace.”

Author Stephen Brown notes that a veterinarian can learn a lot about a dog owner he has never met just by observing the dog. What does the world learn about God by watching us his followers on earth? Trace the roots of grace, or charis in Greek, and you will find a verb that means “I rejoice, I am glad.” In my experience, rejoicing and gladness are not the first images that come to mind when people think of the church. They think of holier-than-thous. They think of church as a place to go after you have cleaned up your act, not before. They think of morality, not grace. “Church!” said the prostitute, “Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They’d just make me feel worse.”

Such an attitude comes partly from a misconception, or bias, by outsiders. I have visited soup kitchens, homeless shelters, hospices, and prison ministries staffed by Christian volunteers generous with grace. And yet the prostitute’s comment stings because she has found a weak spot in the church. Some of us seem so anxious about avoiding hell that we forget to celebrate our journey toward heaven. Others of us, rightly concerned about issues in a modern “culture war,” neglect the church’s mission as a haven of grace in this world of ungrace.

“Grace is everywhere,” said the dying priest in Georges Bernanos’s novel Diary of a Country Priest. Yes, but how easily we pass by, deaf to the euphony.

I attended a Bible college. Years later, when I was sitting next to the president of that school on an airplane, he asked me to assess my education. “Some good, some bad,” I replied. “I met many godly people there. In fact, I met God there. Who can place a value on that? And yet I later realized that in four years I learned almost nothing about grace. It may be the most important word in the Bible, the heart of the gospel. How could I have missed it?”

I related our conversation in a subsequent chapel address and, in doing so, offended the faculty. Some suggested I not be invited back to
One gentle soul wrote to ask whether I should have phrased things differently. Shouldn’t I have said that as a student I lacked the receptors to receive the grace that was all around me? Because I respect and love this man, I thought long and hard about his question. Ultimately, however, I concluded that I had experienced as much ungrace on the campus of a Bible college as I had anywhere else in life.

A counselor, David Seamands, summed up his career this way:

Many years ago I was driven to the conclusion that the two major causes of most emotional problems among evangelical Christians are these: the failure to understand, receive, and live out God’s unconditional grace and forgiveness; and the failure to give out that unconditional love, forgiveness, and grace to other people…. We read, we hear, we believe a good theology of grace. But that’s not the way we live. The good news of the Gospel of grace has not penetrated the level of our emotions.

The world can do almost anything as well as or better than the church,” says Gordon MacDonald. “You need not be a Christian to build houses, feed the hungry, or heal the sick. There is only one thing the world cannot do. It cannot offer grace.” MacDonald has put his finger on the church’s single most important contribution. Where else can the world go to find grace?

The Italian novelist Ignazio Silone wrote about a revolutionary hunted by the police. In order to hide him, his comrades dressed him in the garb of a priest and sent him to a remote village in the foothills of the Alps. Word got out, and soon a long line of peasants appeared at his door, full of stories of their sins and broken lives. The “priest” protested and tried to turn them away, to no avail. He had no recourse but to sit and listen to the stories of people starving for grace.

I sense, in fact, that is why any person goes to church: out of hunger for grace. The book *Growing Up Fundamentalist* tells of a reunion of students from a missionary academy in Japan. “With one or two exceptions, all had left the faith and come back,” one of the students reported. “And
those of us who had come back had one thing in common: we had all discovered grace..."

As I look back on my own pilgrimage, marked by wanderings, detours, and dead ends, I see now that what pulled me along was my search for grace. I rejected the church for a time because I found so little grace there. I returned because I found grace nowhere else.

I have barely tasted of grace myself, have rendered less than I have received, and am in no wise an “expert” on grace. These are, in fact, the very reasons that impel me to write. I want to know more, to understand more, to experience more grace. I dare not—and the danger is very real—write an ungracious book about grace. Accept then, here at the beginning, that I write as a pilgrim qualified only by my craving for grace.

Grace does not offer an easy subject for a writer. To borrow E. B. White’s comment about humor, “[Grace] can be dissected, as a frog, but the thing dies in the process, and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind.” I have just read a thirteen-page treatise on grace in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, which has cured me of any desire to dissect grace and display its innards. I do not want the thing to die. For this reason, I will rely more on stories than on syllogisms.

In sum, I would far rather convey grace than explain it.
ONE

HOW SWEET THE SOUND
Kare Blixen, Danish by birth, married a baron and spent the years 1914–31 managing a coffee plantation in British East Africa (her *Out of Africa* tells of these years). After a divorce she returned to Denmark and began writing in English under the pseudonym Isak Dinesen. One of her stories, “Babette’s Feast,” became a cult classic after being made into a movie in the 1980s.

Dinesen set her story in Norway, but the Danish filmmakers changed the location to an impoverished fishing village on the coast of Denmark, a town of muddy streets and thatched-roof hovels. In this grim setting, a white-bearded Dean led a group of worshipers in an austere Lutheran sect.

What few worldly pleasures could tempt a peasant in Norre Vosburg, this sect renounced. All wore black. Their diet consisted of boiled cod and a gruel made from boiling bread in water fortified with a splash of ale. On the Sabbath, the group met together and sang songs about “Jerusalem, my happy home, name ever dear to me.” They had fixed their compasses on the New Jerusalem, with life on earth tolerated as a way to get there.

The old Dean, a widower, had two teenage daughters: Martine, named for Martin Luther, and Philippa, named for
Luther’s disciple Philip Melanchthon. Villagers used to attend the church just to feast their eyes on these two, whose radiant beauty could not be suppressed despite the sisters’ best efforts.

Martine caught the eye of a dashing young cavalry officer. When she successfully resisted his advances—after all, who would care for her aging father?—he rode away to marry instead a lady-in-waiting to Queen Sophia.

Philippa possessed not only beauty but also the voice of a nightingale. When she sang about Jerusalem, shimmering visions of the heavenly city seemed to appear. And so it happened that Philippa made the acquaintance of the most famous operatic singer of the day, the Frenchman Achille Papin, who was spending some time on the coast for his health. As he walked the dirt paths of a backwater town, Papin heard to his astonishment a voice worthy of the Grand Opera of Paris.

Allow me to teach you to sing properly, he urged Philippa, and all of France will fall at your feet. Royalty will line up to meet you, and you will ride in a horse-drawn carriage to dine at the magnificent Café Anglais. Flattered, Philippa consented to a few lessons, but only a few. Singing about love made her nervous, the flutterings she felt inside troubled her further, and when an aria from *Don Giovanni* ended with her being held in Papin’s embrace, his lips brushing hers, she knew beyond doubt that these new pleasures must be renounced. Her father wrote a note declining all future lessons, and Achille Papin returned to Paris, as disconsolate as if he’d misplaced a winning lottery ticket.

Fifteen years passed, and much changed in the village. The two sisters, now middle-aged spinsters, had attempted to carry on the mission of their deceased father, but without his stern leadership the sect splintered badly. One Brother bore a grudge against another concerning some business matter. Rumors
spread about a thirty-year-old sexual affair involving two of the members. A pair of old ladies had not spoken to each other for a decade. Although the sect still met on the Sabbath and sang the old hymns, only a handful bothered to attend, and the music had lost its luster. Despite all these problems, the Dean’s two daughters remained faithful, organizing the services and boiling bread for the toothless elders of the village.

One night, a night too rainy for anyone to venture on the muddy streets, the sisters heard a heavy thump at the door. When they opened it, a woman collapsed in a swoon. They revived her only to find she spoke no Danish. She handed them a letter from Achille Papin. At the sight of his name Philippa’s face flushed, and her hand trembled as she read the letter of introduction. The woman’s name was Babette, and she had lost her husband and son during the civil war in France. Her life in danger, she had to flee, and Papin had found her passage on a ship in hopes that this village might show her mercy. “Babette can cook,” the letter read.

The sisters had no money to pay Babette and felt dubious about employing a maid in the first place. They distrusted her cooking—didn’t the French eat horses and frogs? But through gestures and pleading, Babette softened their hearts. She would do any chores in exchange for room and board.

For the next twelve years Babette worked for the sisters. The first time Martine showed her how to split a cod and cook the gruel, Babette’s eyebrow shot upward and her nose wrinkled a little, but she never once questioned her assignments. She fed the poor people of the town and took over all housekeeping chores. She even helped with Sabbath services. Everyone had to agree that Babette brought new life to the stagnant community.

Since Babette never referred to her past life in France, it came as a great surprise to Martine and Philippa when one day,
after twelve years, she received her very first letter. Babette read it, looked up to see the sisters staring at her, and announced matter-of-factly that a wonderful thing had happened to her. Each year a friend in Paris had renewed Babette’s number in the French lottery. This year, her ticket had won. Ten thousand francs!

The sisters pressed Babette’s hands in congratulations, but inwardly their hearts sank. They knew that soon Babette would be leaving.

As it happened, Babette’s winning the lottery coincided with the very time the sisters were discussing a celebration to honor the hundredth anniversary of their father’s birth. Babette came to them with a request. In twelve years I have asked nothing of you, she began. They nodded. But now I have a request: I would like to prepare the meal for the anniversary service. I would like to cook you a real French dinner.

Although the sisters had grave misgivings about this plan, Babette was certainly right that she had asked no favors in twelve years. What choice had they but to agree?

When the money arrived from France, Babette went away briefly to make arrangements for the dinner. Over the next few weeks after her return, the residents of Norre Vosburg were treated to one amazing sight after another as boats docked to unload provisions for Babette’s kitchen. Workmen pushed wheelbarrows loaded with crates of small birds. Cases of champagne — champagne! — and wine soon followed. The entire head of a cow, fresh vegetables, truffles, pheasants, ham, strange creatures that lived in the sea, a huge tortoise still alive and moving his snakelike head from side to side — all these ended up in the sisters’ kitchen now firmly ruled by Babette.
Martine and Philippa, alarmed over this apparent witch’s brew, explained their predicament to the members of the sect, now old and gray and only eleven in number. Everyone clucked in sympathy. After some discussion they agreed to eat the French meal, withholding comment about it lest Babette get the wrong idea. Tongues were meant for praise and thanksgiving, not for indulging in exotic tastes.

It snowed on December 15, the day of the dinner, brightening the dull village with a gloss of white. The sisters were pleased to learn that an unexpected guest would join them: ninety-year-old Miss Loewenhielm would be escorted by her nephew, the cavalry officer who had courted Martine long ago, now a general serving in the royal palace.

Babette had somehow scrounged enough china and crystal, and had decorated the room with candles and evergreens. Her table looked lovely. When the meal began all the villagers remembered their agreement and sat mute, like turtles around a pond. Only the general remarked on the food and drink. “Amontillado!” he exclaimed when he raised the first glass. “And the finest Amontillado that I have ever tasted.” When he sipped the first spoonful of soup, the general could have sworn it was turtle soup, but how could such a thing be found on the coast of Jutland?

“Incredible!” said the general when he tasted the next course. “It is Blinis Demidoff!” All the other guests, their faces puckered with deep wrinkles, were eating the same rare delicacy without expression or comment. When the general rhapsodized about the champagne, a Veuve Cliquot 1860, Babette ordered her kitchen boy to keep the general’s glass filled at all times. He alone seemed to appreciate what was set before him.

Although no one else spoke of the food or drink, gradually the banquet worked a magical effect on the churlish villagers. Their blood warmed. Their tongues loosened. They spoke of
the old days when the Dean was alive and of Christmas the year the bay froze. The Brother who had cheated another on a business deal finally confessed, and the two women who had feuded found themselves conversing. A woman burped, and the Brother next to her said without thinking, “Hallelujah!”

The general, though, could speak of nothing but the meal. When the kitchen boy brought out the coup de grâce (that word, again), baby quail prepared en Sarcophage, the general exclaimed that he had seen such a dish in only one place in Europe, the famous Café Anglais in Paris, the restaurant once renowned for its woman chef.

Heady with wine, his senses sated, unable to contain himself, the general rose to make a speech. “Mercy and truth, my friends, have met together,” he began. “Righteousness and bliss shall kiss one another.” And then the general had to pause, “for he was in the habit of forming his speeches with care, conscious of his purpose, but here, in the midst of the Dean’s simple congregation, it was as if the whole figure of General Loewenhielm, his breast covered with decorations, were but a mouthpiece for a message which meant to be brought forth.” The general’s message was grace.

Although the Brothers and Sisters of the sect did not fully comprehend the general’s speech, at that moment “the vain illusions of this earth had dissolved before their eyes like smoke, and they had seen the universe as it really is.” The little company broke up and went outside into a town coated with glistening snow under a sky ablaze with stars.

“Babette’s Feast” ends with two scenes. Outside, the old-timers join hands around the fountain and lustily sing the old songs of faith. It is a communion scene: Babette’s feast opened the gate and grace stole in. They felt, adds Isak Dinesen, “as if they had indeed had their sins washed white as wool, and in this regained innocent attire were gamboling like little lambs.”
The final scene takes place inside, in the wreck of a kitchen piled high with unwashed dishes, greasy pots, shells, carapaces, gristly bones, broken crates, vegetable trimmings, and empty bottles. Babette sits amid the mess, looking as wasted as the night she arrived twelve years before. Suddenly the sisters realize that, in accordance with the vow, no one has spoken to Babette of the dinner.

“It was quite a nice dinner, Babette,” Martine says tentatively.

Babette seems far away. After a time she says to them, “I was once cook at the Café Anglais.”

“We will all remember this evening when you have gone back to Paris, Babette,” Martine adds, as if not hearing her.

Babette tells them that she will not be going back to Paris. All her friends and relatives there have been killed or imprisoned. And, of course, it would be expensive to return to Paris.

“But what about the ten thousand francs?” the sisters ask.

Then Babette drops the bombshell. She has spent her winnings, every last franc of the ten thousand she won, on the feast they have just devoured. Don’t be shocked, she tells them. That is what a proper dinner for twelve costs at the Café Anglais.

In the general’s speech, Isak Dinesen leaves no doubt that she wrote “Babette’s Feast” not simply as a story of a fine meal but as a parable of grace: a gift that costs everything for the giver and nothing for the recipient. This is what General Loewenhielm told the grim-faced parishioners gathered around him at Babette’s table:

We have all of us been told that grace is to be found in the universe. But in our human foolishness
and shortsightedness we imagine divine grace to be finite.... But the moment comes when our eyes are opened, and we see and realize that grace is infinite. Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude.

Twelve years before, Babette had landed among the graceless ones. Followers of Luther, they heard sermons on grace nearly every Sunday and the rest of the week tried to earn God's favor with their pieties and renunciations. Grace came to them in the form of a feast, Babette's feast, a meal of a lifetime lavished on those who had in no way earned it, who barely possessed the faculties to receive it. Grace came to Norre Vosburg as it always comes: free of charge, no strings attached, on the house.
O momentary grace of mortal men,
Which we more hunt for than the grace of God.

SHAKESPEARE, RICHARD III
A friend of mine riding a bus to work overheard a conversation between the young woman sitting next to him and her neighbor across the aisle. The woman was reading Scott Peck’s *The Road Less Traveled*, the book that has stayed on *The New York Times* Best-Sellers list longer than any other.

“What are you reading?” asked the neighbor.

“A book a friend gave me. She said it changed her life.”

“Oh, yeah? What’s it about?”

“I’m not sure. Some sort of guide to life. I haven’t got very far yet.”

She began flipping through the book. “Here are the chapter titles: ‘Discipline, Love, Grace, . . .’”

The man stopped her. “What’s grace?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t got to Grace yet.”

I think of that last line sometimes when I listen to reports on the evening news. A world marked by wars, violence, economic oppression, religious strife, lawsuits, and family breakdown clearly hasn’t got to grace yet. “Ah, what a thing is man devoid of grace,” sighed the poet George Herbert.

Unfortunately, I also think of that line from the bus conversation when I visit certain churches. Like fine wine poured into a jug of water, Jesus’ wondrous message of grace gets diluted in the vessel of the church. “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ,” wrote the apostle John. Christians have spent enormous energy over the years debating and decreeing truth; every church defends
its particular version. But what about grace? How rare to find a church competing to “out-grace” its rivals.

Grace is Christianity’s best gift to the world, a spiritual nova in our midst exerting a force stronger than vengeance, stronger than racism, stronger than hate. Sadly, to a world desperate for this grace the church sometimes presents one more form of ungrace. Too often we more resemble the grim folks who gather to eat boiled bread than those who have just partaken of Babette’s feast.

I grew up in a church that drew sharp lines between “the age of Law” and “the age of Grace.” While ignoring most moral prohibitions from the Old Testament, we had our own pecking order rivaling the Orthodox Jews’. At the top were smoking and drinking (this being the South, however, with its tobacco-dependent economy, some allowances were made for smoking). Movies ranked just below these vices, with many church members refusing even to attend The Sound of Music. Rock music, then in its infancy, was likewise regarded as an abomination, quite possibly demonic in origin.

Other proscriptions—wearing makeup and jewelry, reading the Sunday paper, playing or watching sports on Sunday, mixed swimming (curiously termed “mixed bathing”), skirt length for girls, hair length for boys—were heeded or not heeded depending on a person’s level of spirituality. I grew up with the strong impression that a person became spiritual by attending to these gray-area rules. For the life of me, I could not figure out much difference between the dispensations of Law and Grace.

My visits to other churches have convinced me that this ladder-like approach to spirituality is nearly universal. Catholics, Mennonites, Churches of Christ, Lutherans, and Southern Baptists all have their own custom agenda of legalism. You gain the church’s, and presumably God’s, approval by following the prescribed pattern.

Later, when I began writing about the problem of pain, I met another form of ungrace. Some readers objected to my sympathy toward those who suffer. People suffer because they deserve it, they told me. God
is punishing them. I have many such letters in my files, modern restatements of the “proverbs of ashes” from Job’s friends.

In his book Guilt and Grace, the Swiss doctor Paul Tournier, a man of deep personal faith, admits, “I cannot study this very serious problem of guilt with you without raising the very obvious and tragic fact that religion—my own as well as that of all believers—can crush instead of liberate.”

Tournier tells of patients who come to him: a man harboring guilt over an old sin, a woman who cannot put out of her mind an abortion that took place ten years before. What the patients truly seek, says Tournier, is grace. Yet in some churches they encounter shame, the threat of punishment, and a sense of judgment. In short, when they look in the church for grace, they often find ungrace.

A divorced woman recently told me of standing in the sanctuary of her church with her 15-year-old daughter when the pastor’s wife approached. “I hear you are divorcing. What I can’t understand is that if you love Jesus and he loves Jesus, why are you doing that?” The pastor’s wife had never really spoken to my friend before, and her brusque rebuke in the daughter’s presence stunned my friend. “The pain of it was that my husband and I both did love Jesus, but the marriage was broken beyond mending. If she had just put her arms around me and said, ’I’m so sorry...’”

Mark Twain used to talk about people who were “good in the worst sense of the word,” a phrase that, for many, captures the reputation of Christians today. Recently I have been asking a question of strangers—for example, seatmates on an airplane—when I strike up a conversation. “When I say the words ‘evangelical Christian’ what comes to mind?” In reply, mostly I hear political descriptions: of strident pro-life activists, or gay-rights opponents, or proposals for censoring the Internet. I hear references to the Moral Majority, an organization disbanded years ago. Not once—not once—have I heard a description redolent of grace. Apparently that is not the aroma Christians give off in the world.

H. L. Mencken described a Puritan as a person with a haunting fear that someone, somewhere is happy; today, many people would apply the
same caricature to evangelicals or fundamentalists. Where does this reputation of uptight joylessness come from? A column by humorist Erma Bombeck provides a clue:

In church the other Sunday I was intent on a small child who was turning around smiling at everyone. He wasn’t gurgling, spitting, humming, kicking, tearing the hymnals, or rummaging through his mother’s handbag. He was just smiling. Finally, his mother jerked him about and in a stage whisper that could be heard in a little theatre off Broadway said, “Stop that grinning! You’re in church!” With that, she gave him a belt and as the tears rolled down his cheeks added, “That’s better,” and returned to her prayers….

Suddenly I was angry. It occurred to me the entire world is in tears, and if you’re not, then you’d better get with it. I wanted to grab this child with the tear-stained face close to me and tell him about my God. The happy God. The smiling God. The God who had to have a sense of humor to have created the likes of us…. By tradition, one wears faith with the solemnity of a mourner, the gravity of a mask of tragedy, and the dedication of a Rotary badge.

What a fool, I thought. Here was a woman sitting next to the only light left in our civilization — the only hope, our only miracle — our only promise of infinity. If he couldn’t smile in church, where was there left to go?

These characterizations of Christians are surely incomplete, for I know many Christians who embody grace. Yet somehow throughout history the church has managed to gain a reputation for its ungrace. As a little English girl prayed, “O God, make the bad people good, and the good people nice.”

William James, perhaps the leading American philosopher of the last century, had a sympathetic view of the church, as expressed in his classic study, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Still, he struggled to understand the pettiness of Christians who persecuted Quakers for not tipping their hats and who vigorously debated the morality of dyeing clothes. He wrote of the asceticism of a French country priest who decided “that
he should never smell a flower, never drink when parched with thirst, never drive away a fly, never show disgust before a repugnant object, never complain of anything that had to do with his personal comfort, never sit down, never lean upon his elbows when he was kneeling.”

The renowned mystic St. John of the Cross advised believers to mortify all joy and hope, to turn “not to what most pleases, but to what disgusts,” and to “despise yourself, and wish that others should despise you.” St. Bernard habitually covered his eyes to avoid the beauty of Swiss lakes. Nowadays legalism has changed its focus. In a thoroughly secular culture, the church is more likely to show ungrace through a spirit of moral superiority or a fierce attitude toward opponents in the “culture wars.”

The church also communicates ungrace through its lack of unity. Mark Twain used to say he put a dog and cat in a cage together as an experiment, to see if they could get along. They did, so he put in a bird, pig, and goat. They, too, got along fine after a few adjustments. Then he put in a Baptist, Presbyterian, and Catholic; soon there was not a living thing left.

More seriously, the modern Jewish intellectual Anthony Hecht writes:

Over the years I not only grew to know it [my faith] better but became increasingly acquainted with the convictions of my Christian neighbors. Many of these were good people whom I admire, and from whom I learned goodness itself, among other things. And there was much in Christian doctrine that seemed appealing as well. But few things struck me with more force than the profound and unappeasable hostility of Protestants and Catholics toward one another.

I have been picking on Christians because I am one, and see no reason to pretend we are better than we are. I fight the tentacular grip of ungrace in my own life. Although I may not perpetuate the strictness of my upbringing, I battle daily against pride, judgmentalism, and a feeling that I must somehow earn God’s approval. In the words of Helmut
Thielicke, “. . . the devil succeeds in laying his cuckoo eggs in a pious nest. . . . The sulphurous stench of hell is as nothing compared with the evil odor emitted by divine grace gone putrid.”

In truth, though, a virulent strain of ungrace shows up in all religions. I have heard eyewitness accounts of the recently revived Sun Dance ritual, in which young Lakota warriors fasten eagle claws to their nipples and, straining against a rope attached to a sacred pole, fling themselves outward until the claws rip through their flesh. Then they enter a sweat lodge and pile high red-hot rocks until the temperature becomes unbearable, all in an attempt to atone for sins.

I have watched devout peasants crawl on bloody knees across cobblestone streets in Costa Rica and Hindu peasants offer sacrifices to the gods of smallpox and poisonous snakes in India. I have visited Islamic countries where “morals police” patrol the sidewalks with clubs, looking for women whose clothing offends them or who dare to drive a car.

In a dark irony, the humanists who rebel against religion often manage to invent worse forms of ungrace. At modern universities, activists for “liberal” causes—feminism, the environment, multiculturalism—may demonstrate a harsh spirit of ungrace. I know of no legalism more all-encompassing than that of Soviet communism, which set up a web of spies to report any false thinking, misuse of words, or disrespect for communist ideals. Solzhenitsyn, for example, spent his years in the Gulag as punishment for a careless remark he made about Stalin in a personal letter. And I know of no Inquisition more severe than that carried out by the Red Guards in China, complete with dunce caps and staged displays of public contrition.

Even the best humanists devise systems of ungrace to replace those rejected in religion. Benjamin Franklin settled on thirteen virtues, including Silence (“Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself; avoid trifling conversation”), Frugality (“Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself; that is, waste nothing”), Industry (“Lose no time; be always employed in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions”), and Tranquillity (“Be not disturbed at trifles or at accidents common or unavoidable”). He set up a book with a page for each virtue,
lining a column in which to record “defects.” Choosing a different virtue to work on each week, he daily noted every mistake, starting over every thirteen weeks in order to cycle through the list four times a year. For many decades Franklin carried his little book with him, striving for a clean thirteen-week cycle. As he made progress, he found himself struggling with yet another defect:

There is perhaps no one of natural passions so hard to subdue as pride. Disguise it. Struggle with it. Stifle it. Mortify it as much as one pleases. It is still alive, and will every now and then peep out and show itself. . . . Even if I could conceive that I had completely overcome it, I should probably be proud of my humility.

Could such vigorous efforts, in all its forms, betray a deep longing for grace? We live in an atmosphere choked with the fumes of ungrace. Grace comes from outside, as a gift and not an achievement. How easily it vanishes from our dog-eat-dog, survival-of-the-fittest, look-out-for-number-one world.

Guilt exposes a longing for grace. An organization in Los Angeles operates the Apology Sound-Off Line, a telephone service that gives callers an opportunity to confess their wrongs for the price of a phone call. People who no longer believe in priests now trust their sins to an answering machine. Two hundred anonymous callers contact the service each day, leaving sixty-second messages. Adultery is a common confession. Some callers confess to criminal acts: rape, child sexual abuse, and even murder. A recovering alcoholic left the message, “I would like to apologize to all the people I hurt in my eighteen years as an addict.” The phone rings on. “I just want to say I’m sorry,” sobs a young woman. She says she just caused an automobile accident in which five people died. “I wish I could bring them back.”

A colleague once caught the agnostic actor W. C. Fields in his dressing room reading a Bible. Embarrassed, Fields snapped the book shut and explained, “Just looking for loopholes.” Probably, he was looking for grace.
Lewis Smedes, a professor in psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary, wrote an entire book drawing connections between shame and grace (titled, appropriately, *Shame and Grace*). For him, “Guilt was not my problem as I felt it. What I felt most was a glob of unworthiness that I could not tie down to any concrete sins I was guilty of. What I needed more than pardon was a sense that God accepted me, owned me, held me, affirmed me, and would never let go of me even if he was not too much impressed with what he had on his hands.”

Smedes goes on to say that he has identified three common sources of crippling shame: secular culture, graceless religion, and unaccepting parents. Secular culture tells us a person must look good, feel good, and make good. Graceless religion tells us we must follow the letter of the rules, and failure will bring eternal rejection. Unaccepting parents— “Aren’t you ashamed of yourself?” — convince us we will never meet their approval.

Like city-dwellers who no longer notice the polluted air, we breathe in the atmosphere of ungrace unawares. As early as preschool and kindergarten we are tested and evaluated before being slotted into an “advanced,” “normal,” or “slow” track. From then on we receive grades denoting performance in math, science, reading, and even “social skills” and “citizenship.” Test papers come back with errors — not correct answers — highlighted. All this helps prepare us for the real world with its relentless ranking, a grown-up version of the playground game “king of the hill.”

The military practices ungrace in its purest form. Assigned a title, uniform, salary, and code of behavior, every soldier knows exactly where he or she stands in relation to every other: you salute and obey superiors, you give orders to inferiors. Corporations are more subtle — barely. Ford grades employees on a scale of 1 (clerks and secretaries) to 27 (chairman of the board). You must reach at least Grade 9 to qualify for an outside parking place; Grade 13 brings with it such perks as a window, plants, and an intercom system; Grade 16 offices come equipped with private bathrooms.

Every institution, it seems, runs on ungrace and its insistence that we *earn* our way. Justice departments, airline frequent-flyer programs, and mortgage companies cannot operate by grace. Government hardly
knows the word. A sports franchise rewards those who complete passes, throw strikes, or make baskets, and has no place for those who fail. *Fortune* magazine annually lists the five hundred richest people; no one knows the names of the five hundred poorest.

The disease anorexia is a direct product of ungrace: hold up the ideal of beautiful, skinny models, and teenage girls will starve themselves to death in an attempt to reach that ideal. A peculiar offshoot of modern Western civilization, anorexia has no known history and rarely occurs in places like modern Africa (where plumpness, not thinness, is admired).

All this takes place in the United States, a supposedly egalitarian society. Other societies have refined the art of ungrace through rigid social systems based on class, race, or caste. South Africa used to assign every citizen to one of four racial categories: white, black, colored, and Asian (when Japanese investors objected, the government invented a new category, “honorary white people”). India’s caste system was so labyrinthine that in the 1930s the British discovered a new caste they had not encountered in three centuries of presence there: assigned the role of washing clothes for the Untouchables, these poor creatures believed they would contaminate higher castes by sight, so they emerged only at night and avoided all contact with other people.

*The New York Times* recently ran a series on crime in modern Japan. Why is it, they asked, that for every 100,000 citizens the United States imprisons 519 whereas Japan only imprisons 37? In search of answers, the *Times* reporter interviewed a Japanese man who had just served a sentence for murder. In the fifteen years he spent in prison, he did not receive a single visitor. After his release, his wife and son met with him, only to tell him never to return to their village. His three daughters, now married, refuse to see him. “I have four grandchildren, I think,” the man said sadly; he has never even seen pictures of them. Japanese society has found a way to harness the power of ungrace. A culture that values “saving face” has no room for those who bring disgrace.

Even families, which link individuals by the accident of birth, not performance, breathe in the polluted fumes of ungrace. A story by Ernest Hemingway reveals this truth. A Spanish father decides to reconcile with
his son who had run away to Madrid. Now remorseful, the father takes out this ad in the *El Liberal* newspaper: “PACO MEET ME AT HOTEL MONTANA NOON TUESDAY ALL IS FORGIVEN PAPA.” Paco is a common name in Spain, and when the father goes to the square he finds eight hundred young men named Paco waiting for their fathers.

Hemingway knew about the ungrace of families. His devout parents—Hemingway’s grandparents had attended evangelical Wheaton College—detested Hemingway’s libertine life, and after a time his mother refused to allow him in her presence. One year for his birthday, she mailed him a cake along with the gun his father had used to kill himself. Another year she wrote him a letter explaining that a mother’s life is like a bank. “Every child that is born to her enters the world with a large and prosperous bank account, seemingly inexhaustible.” The child, she continued, makes withdrawals but no deposits during all the early years. Later, when the child grows up, it is his responsibility to replenish the supply he has drawn down. Hemingway’s mother then proceeded to spell out all the specific ways in which Ernest should be making “deposits to keep the account in good standing”: flowers, fruit or candy, a surreptitious paying of Mother’s bills, and above all a determination to stop “neglecting your duties to God and your Saviour, Jesus Christ.” Hemingway never got over his hatred for his mother or for her Saviour.

Occasionally a grace note sounds, high, lilting, ethereal, to interrupt the monotonous background growl of ungrace.

One day I stuck my hand in a pants pocket at a factory-outlet store and found a twenty-dollar bill. I had no way to trace the original owner, and the store manager said I should keep it. For the first time ever I purchased a pair of pants (thirteen dollars) and walked out with a net profit. I relive the experience every time I put on the pants, and tell it to my friends whenever the subject of bargains comes up.

Another day, I climbed a fourteen-thousand-foot mountain, the first one I had ever attempted. It was a brutal and exhausting hike, and when I finally descended to flat ground I felt I had earned the right to a steak
dinner and a week’s pass from aerobic activities. As my car rounded a bend on the way back to town, I came upon a pristine Alpine lake guarded by bright-green aspen trees behind which arced the most vivid rainbow I had ever seen. I pulled to the side of the road and stared a long time, in silence.

On a trip to Rome, my wife and I followed a friend’s advice to visit St. Peter’s early in the morning. “Take a bus before dawn to the bridge adorned with all the Bernini statues,” the friend instructed. “Wait there for sunrise, then dash to St. Peter’s a few blocks away. Early in the morning, you’ll find only nuns, pilgrims, and priests there.” The sun rose in a clear sky that morning, tinting the Tiber red and casting rays the color of marmalade on Bernini’s exquisite angel statues. Following orders, we tore ourselves from the scene and power-walked to St. Peter’s. Rome was just beginning to wake up. Sure enough, we were the only tourists; our footsteps on the marble floor echoed loudly in the basilica. We admired the Pietà, the altar, and the various monuments, then climbed an outside stairway to reach a balcony at the base of the huge dome designed by Michelangelo. Just then I noticed a line of two hundred people stretched across the square. “Perfect timing,” I said to my wife, thinking them tourists. They were not tourists, however, but a choir of pilgrims from Germany. They filed in, gathered in a semicircle directly beneath us, and began singing hymns. As their voices rose, reverberating around the dome and blending together in multi-part harmony, Michelangelo’s half-sphere became not just a work of architectural grandeur but a temple of celestial music. The sound set our cells vibrating. It took on substance, as if we could lean on it, or swim in it, as if the hymns and not the balcony were supporting us.

Surely it has theological significance that unearned gifts and unexpected pleasures bring the most joy. Grace billows up. Or, as the bumper sticker says, “Grace Happens.”

For many, romantic love is the closest experience of pure grace. Someone at last feels that I—I!—am the most desirable, attractive, companionable creature on the planet. Someone lies awake at night thinking of me. Someone forgives me before I ask, thinks of me when she gets
dressed, orders her life around mine. Someone loves me just the way I am. For this reason, I think, modern writers like John Updike and Walker Percy, who have strong Christian sensibilities, may choose a sexual affair as a symbol of grace in their novels. They are speaking the language our culture understands: grace as a rumor, not a doctrine.

And then along comes a movie like *Forrest Gump*, about a kid with a low IQ who speaks in platitudes handed down from his mother. This dim-wit rescues his buddies in Vietnam, remains faithful to his girl Jenny despite her infidelity, stays true to himself and his child, and lives as though he genuinely does not know he is the butt of every joke. A magical scene of a feather opens and ends the movie—a note of grace so light no one knows where it might land. *Forrest Gump* was to recent times what *The Idiot* was to Dostoevsky’s era, and it provoked similar reactions. Many thought it naive, ridiculous, manipulative. Others, however, saw in it a rumor of grace that made a sharp relief against the violent ungrace of *Pulp Fiction* and *Natural Born Killers*. As a result, *Forrest Gump* became the most successful movie of its time. The world starves for grace.

Peter Greave wrote a memoir of his life with leprosy, a disease he contracted while stationed in India. He returned to England, half-blind and partially paralyzed, to live on a compound run by a group of Anglican sisters. Unable to work, an outcast from society, he turned bitter. He thought of suicide. He made elaborate plans to escape the compound, but always backed out because he had nowhere to go. One morning, uncharacteristically, he got up very early and strolled the grounds. Hearing a buzzing noise, he followed it to the chapel, where sisters were praying for the patients whose names were written on its walls. Among the names, he found his own. Somehow that experience of connection, of linking, changed the course of his life. He felt wanted. He felt graced.

Religious faith—for all its problems, despite its maddening tendency to replicate ungrace—lives on because we sense the numinous beauty of a gift undeserved that comes at unexpected moments from Outside. Refusing to believe that our lives of guilt and shame lead to nothing but annihilation, we hope against hope for another place run by different
rules. We grow up hungry for love, and in ways so deep as to remain unexpressed we long for our Maker to love us.

Grace did not come to me initially in the forms or the words of faith. I grew up in a church that often used the word but meant something else. Grace, like many religious words, had been leached of meaning so that I could no longer trust it.

I first experienced grace through music. At the Bible college I was attending, I was viewed as a deviant. People would publicly pray for me and ask me if I needed exorcism. I felt harassed, disordered, confused. Doors to the dormitory were locked at night, but fortunately I lived on the first floor. I would climb out the window of my room and sneak into the chapel, which contained a nine-foot Steinway grand piano. In a chapel dark but for a small light by which to read music, I would sit for an hour or so each night and play Beethoven’s sonatas, Chopin’s preludes, and Schubert’s impromptus. My own fingers pressed a kind of tactile order onto the world. My mind was confused, my body was confused, the world was confused — but here I sensed a hidden world of beauty, grace, and wonder light as a cloud and startling as a butterfly wing.

Something similar happened in the world of nature. To get away from the crush of ideas and people, I would take long walks in the pine forests splashed with dogwood. I followed the zigzag paths of dragonflies along the river, watched flocks of birds wheeling overhead, and picked apart logs to find the iridescent beetles inside. I liked the sure, inevitable way of nature giving form and place to all living things. I saw evidence that the world contains grandeur, great goodness, and, yes, traces of joy.

About the same time, I fell in love. It felt exactly like a fall, a head-over-heels tumble into a state of unbearable lightness. The earth tilted on its axis. I did not believe in romantic love at the time, thinking it a human construct, an invention of fourteenth-century Italian poets. I was as unprepared for love as I had been for goodness and beauty. Suddenly, my heart seemed swollen, too large for my chest.

I was experiencing “common grace,” to use the theologians’ term. It is a terrible thing, I found, to be grateful and have no one to thank, to be awed and have no one to worship. Gradually, very gradually, I came
back to the cast-off faith of my childhood. I had experienced the “drippings of grace,” C. S. Lewis’s term for what awakens deep longing for “a scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.”

Grace is everywhere, like lenses that go unnoticed because you are looking through them. Eventually God gave me eyes to notice the grace around me. I became a writer, I feel certain, in an attempt to reclaim words that had been tarnished by graceless Christians. In my first job, with a Christian magazine, I worked for a kind and wise employer, Harold Myra, who let me work out my faith at my own speed, with no pretense.

For some of my first books I teamed with Dr. Paul Brand, who had spent much of his life in a hot, arid region of South India serving leprosy patients, many of whom belonged to the Untouchable caste. In this most unlikely soil, Brand experienced and conveyed the grace of God. From people such as him, I learned grace by being graced.

I had one last skin to molt on my way toward growth in grace. I came to see that the image of God I had been raised with was woefully incomplete. I came to know a God who is, in the words of the psalmist, “a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.”

Grace comes free of charge to people who do not deserve it and I am one of those people. I think back to who I was—resentful, wound tight with anger, a single hardened link in a long chain of ungrace learned from family and church. Now I am trying in my own small way to pipe the tune of grace. I do so because I know, more surely than I know anything, that any pang of healing or forgiveness or goodness I have ever felt comes solely from the grace of God. I yearn for the church to become a nourishing culture of that grace.