


Grace Notes

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Introduction

The book you hold in your hands is the result of countless cups of coffee, numerous prayers, a few tears, and many chocolates.

I named it *Grace Notes* because Grace is a family name that I share with my mom, who was Grace Mary Bibbo, and my niece, Jennifer Grace, and because the essays record many little revelations of God's love in my everyday life.

In music, grace notes are short, delicate touches embellishing the more prominent notes of a melody. Grace notes suggest lightness, sweetness, gentleness, and often playfulness—but they also decorate music with a melancholy edge.

This description seems to sum up my life thus far. Plenty of sweet and gentle moments, plenty of playfulness—and plenty of sadness.

In February of 1999, I quit a life-sapping job in university publications to become a free-lance writer. The months since then have been the happiest—and saddest—of my life.

God has generously blessed my efforts to become a writer. I have to pinch myself to be sure I'm awake when I see my byline in the "Faith and Values" section of *The Atlanta-Journal Constitution*. Another pinch when I see my mug shot in the national magazine *America*. And a really big pinch when I see my articles on the web site of the American Cancer Society.

I feel as though I'm split into two distinct people. One is the confident and serene lady who writes about spiritual issues, the lady who seems graced with a deep faith.

But I'm all too familiar with the other lady. She is a very ordinary, high-anxiety person who slouches around the house in

her cow-pattern pajamas. She's the one who quakes in fear over the prospect of getting a mammogram. She is a connoisseur of worrying.

When I told a priest about my "two-lady" theory, he suggested that I go back and re-read the many articles I'd written over the years.

"God is sending you grace through your writing to help you face the difficulties in your life," he said.

As I was following his advice, I received a letter from Emilie Cerar at Resurrection Press. She had seen my articles in *America* and wondered if I might be interested in writing a book.

Had I received Emilie's letter only a few months earlier, I would have danced around the house with glee. Ever since my days as a little chubby child growing up in Miami, I had dreamed of writing a book. However, on the day her letter arrived, I was exhausted and depressed. I threw the letter on my desk without emitting even one chirp of joy.

I was in the middle of seven weeks of daily radiation-therapy treatments for breast cancer, which had been diagnosed in May of 2000. My two ladies had very different reactions to the prospect of writing a book. One was excited about having a lifelong dream come true. But the other lady, weary and dejected, had a stronger voice. And so I didn't look at the letter for another month.

When I finally began to emerge from the "Oh, no, this can't be happening to me!" stage of my illness, I called Emilie. Her first remark was, "I was just thinking about you. I'm sitting here reading one of your articles in *America*!" The timing of that phone call

chased away any initial doubts I might have had about starting the project.

Still, there were times when I doubted myself. Times when I wondered if I had the necessary drive to tackle such a huge project. Gradually, however, as the months have passed, I've come to believe this book is part of God's big mysterious plan for my life, just like my illness is.

The book has eleven sections, which are the little sign-posts of my faith journey. The categories—believing, trusting, praying, suffering, forgiving, simplifying, resurrection, serving, denying, grace, and loving—are not rigid and they are not arranged chronologically. Praying and trusting often overlap, as do believing and serving. Denying God seems to happen over and over, even in the midst of loving Him.

The essays were born of my desire to know Christ in a more heartfelt way. I longed to dance with Him at a wedding and weep with Him in the garden. I wanted to know the gentle man who loved fishing, eating with His friends, and praying in the desert. I wanted to know the man who invited His friends to a feast He prepared by shouting: "Come and have breakfast . . ." (John 21:12).

And I yearned to explore a question that had hounded me for years. Why did Christ come to Earth? Why did He show up in our broken world?

When I was a child, the nuns told me He came to die for our sins. He came to open the gates of heaven. I realize this answer is one thread in the complex tapestry of standard Christian theolo-

gy, but maybe I'm just too dumb to get it. When I try to mesh the concepts of original sin, the opening of the heavenly gates, and Jesus' death on the cross, I come face to face with a bloodthirsty God demanding that His beloved son die the most horrible, agonizing death imaginable.

Maybe the whole thing is much more simple.

I think Christ came to teach us the hard lessons about loving and living—and about dying.

Christ fully immersed himself in our broken world. He loved people who were flawed. They were harlots, tax collectors, and thieves. He loved people that others feared, the lepers and the demon-possessed. Instead of shooing away little kids, He hugged them. Instead of condemning His torturers, He forgave them. His love didn't entail big emotional outbursts or passionate proclamations. He loved by serving, by washing His friends' feet and by healing those who were desperate and abandoned.

In the 33 years He walked among us, Christ turned the whole world upside down. He told us the poor are rich, the last are first, the meek are blessed, and the dead are alive. Trying to follow His path can seem frustrating—and impossible at times—especially when we feel like we're tripping over every pebble—and boulder—on the way. But, even when we fall into a pit of doubt and sin, He reaches out a hand and lifts us back up.

To grasp His insights about dying, we must first acknowledge what seems impossible: the bitter fact of our own mortality. Whether we live to be 20, 60, or 100, we all eventually will have to “check out” of this big earthly hotel. When we are 20, we imagine ourselves calmly accepting death at age 60. But when we are

60, we long to be 70, and when we are 80, we are still not ready to pack our bags and exit gracefully.

Christ didn't walk to His death in a calm, resigned manner. He prayed and wept, and pleaded with God on the night before the crucifixion. He begged His friends to pray with Him. He described His emotional state in dramatic terms: "sorrowful until death."

If Christ's story had ended on the cross, it would have been tragic indeed. But we know the final chapter of Christ's mission was the resurrection. Agony gave way to bliss, and groans became laughter.

A lovely prayer by Cardinal Newman in *The Catholic Prayer Book* eloquently captures the idea that, like Jesus, we all have a mission to complete:

May the Lord support us all the day long, until the shades lengthen and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then in His mercy may He grant us safe lodging, a holy rest, and peace at last.

This book is my effort to do the work the Lord has given me. It is my attempt to convey the small illuminations that reveal His presence in my everyday life. Whether I'm volunteering in a nursing home, playing with my goddaughter, anguishing over my illness, or clipping roses in my garden, it seems I encounter Christ everywhere.

I pray this book will give you insights into the ordinary moments that reveal Christ's grace in your life. I pray that it will sustain you in bitter moments of sorrow and pain.

And I pray this book will help you encounter God everywhere. In the garden, in the kitchen, in the chapel, in the cradle, on the road. In the face of your beloved, and in your very own heart. Over and over. Everywhere.

I

Believing



As a little child, my faith in God, in Christ, in the Catholic Church, arose in my heart as naturally and easily as my certainty that the sun would rise the next day. Faith was in the water I drank, in the cereal I ate. I buttered my bread with faith. I sipped its sweetness in cups of hot chocolate.

I felt faith in my fingertips as they slid over the crystal rosary beads that draped from my hands in church. I inhaled the spicy scent of faith in the incense that burned at Mass. I tasted faith on my tongue, when I opened my mouth to receive the body of Christ, a substance so sacred that even grazing it with the teeth was sacrilegious.

In my eyes, the whole world was Catholic. I was born in Yonkers, N.Y., into a family that traced its Catholic roots back in time for many generations. Although my parents were native New Yorkers, their parents hailed from Sicily and Naples.

I thought everyone ate fish on Friday, went to confession on Saturday and Mass on Sunday. I thought everyone recognized the different landscapes of venial and mortal sins. I thought everyone's life was encircled by the same boundaries.

When I was seven, my family migrated to Miami. There, we lived in a little turquoise house, with a yard embroidered with palm

trees and gaudy tropical flowers. In the heavy summer heat, the towering trees sagged under the weight of coconuts, banana trees grew pregnant with tiny green fingers, and little shy lizards with crimson throats zipped across our patio.

When I went to church and knelt to pray in front of the tabernacle, I took comfort in remembering what the nuns had told me. God was hidden there, disguised as bread. I took comfort in the ritual of the Mass, which was as predictable as hibiscus buds exploding into bloom or mangos turning from green to tawny yellow.

I tiptoed close to the mystery that was God when I repeated the ponderous Latin phrases that I'd learned in catechism class.

"Dominus vobiscum," the priest intoned at the start of Mass, and our reply was always the same: *"Et cum spiritu tuo."*

I didn't understand why we spoke Latin at Mass. I didn't understand how the bread and wine became Christ's flesh and blood. Nor did I understand how birds sang or how lizards changed colors. Accepting the existence of a hidden realm beyond my grasp, I felt life bristled with things I would never understand. But God was the blood that surged through the veins of the universe. He had everything under control. That was my faith.

In high school religion class, the nuns told us about people who were "fallen away" Catholics, but I never met one until I went to college and became one myself. When I "fell away" from the faith, however, I didn't experience any immediate bruises. Instead, I felt very free as I proudly turned my back on years of religious training and the church's seemingly endless list of rules.

In philosophy class, I pored over books by atheists like Karl Marx and Jean-Paul Sartre. Stunned by their brilliance, I bowed to their conclusions about the world and embraced atheism with the fervor I'd once showered on the saints. As I revised the boundaries of my life, venial and mortal sins became dusty relics of my past. I felt it didn't matter whether I drank too much or partied too wildly. The rules could always be adjusted to suit my inclinations. Everything was relative.

Returning to Catholicism many years later, I discovered something about faith that my childhood catechism hadn't mentioned. Paradoxically enough, the long dry spell of disbelief had produced a robust harvest. I was able to observe the rituals of my religion with fresh eyes and hear the words of scripture with fresh ears.

I was especially thrilled by the story of the Good Shepherd, who was restless and disheartened when even one of His lambs was missing. I pictured myself as a lamb that had wandered far away from Christ for many years and envisioned Christ gently coaxing me to His side. I saw myself nestled against Him as He carried me back to a safe enclosure.

I felt lifted up. I felt rescued. I felt I was reclaiming the place of my childhood faith. And in coming full circle, I believe I've come to terms with my childhood's boundaries. I see now that the boundaries were, all along, not restricting me but protecting me.

Today, in a mysterious way, they also embrace me. This makes perfect sense, given what else I've discovered. The boundaries are, in the end, nothing less than the loving arms of Jesus Christ.

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