

By Claire Marsh
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GRACE & YES

Michael asked me to speak about how I have "mothered" my spiritual journey. The answer is that I have not mothered it; but Grace, Our Divine Mother, has mothered it. It is Grace that we can gather here together in this wonderful sanctuary. It is Grace that we can walk and talk in here, that we can see each other and hear each other - or read each other's lips. At the university, I sometimes work with students who have not been Graced to do those things. They remind me of our Grace. And it is Grace that we will be able to go back from here to our homes where we will be safe & warm. The news daily tells us of those who do not share these blessings. Each breath is Grace. St. Teresa of Avila said, "I found completeness when each breath began to silently say the name of my Lord." And Abu Hashim Madani said, "The only sin is a breath taken without the thought of God." So every moment brings us an opportunity to experience Grace. And that's what my whole spiritual journey has been the Grace of wonderful blessings, and the Guidance of the Holy Spirit to answer "yes" to those blessings. Grace & Yes.

It was Grace that I was born - in 1945 to Jewish parents. If my grandparents had not left Latvia & Poland, they all would have been killed in the concentration camps, and I would have never been born.

It was Grace that when I was young, we had Lottie, an amazing everyday saint, to come clean our house. I used to beg my mother to be able to go to Lottie's house before Christmas because she was Catholic. And we would decorate her tree & put up the manger scene & the lights & the Christmas cards. And if it was Hanukkah, she would have me bring my menorah, and we would sing Hanukkah songs & Christmas carols as we baked cookies to deliver to her friends.

It was Grace the first time that I met the Episcopalians. Bloody Sunday had just happened in Selma. The Episcopal campus minister at Washington U. in St. Louis, where I was an undergrad, arranged for a bus to take some of us down to Montgomery to work in the SNCC office to prepare for the next March from Selma. What Grace to travel around to the black churches, singing those incredible songs of freedom - songs I still sing today when I need strength & courage. What Grace to hear those everyday saints tell their stories of walking 10 miles each way to clean white folk's houses during the Montgomery bus boycott & then coming home to take care of their own homes & families. What inspiration.

It was Grace to live in community with peace activists during the Vietnam War - working with Quakers who helped people become conscientious objectors & Catholics who participated in draft file actions - some who even went to prison for peace.

It was Grace when I saw a poster about a Sufi workshop & heard the words "do that!" And the Holy Spirit in me answered yes. That was the beginning of meeting incredible spiritual teachers, living in community with people - some of whom are still my soul brothers & sisters, and doing daily spiritual practice & study. It was Grace to travel to Turkey to experience the incredible hospitality in Konya, the hometown of Rumi. And it

was Grace to go to the Holy Land to do a camp in the desert of No Man's Land - a camp to bring Jews, Christians & Muslims together for peace. We sang & danced & prayed & ate & visited Holy sites together.

It was Grace when I did the Spiritual Guidance Training, and we would be reminded that the soul knows the way even when the ego doesn't.

It was Grace when we moved to Asheville & I was baptized as an Episcopalian at All Soul's Cathedral. And Grace when we moved to this glorious county to live in God's astounding beauty here & when we first came to this wonderful place - St. David's. It's been Grace for you to be so patient & welcoming of my comings & goings over these last few decades.

Eucharist, Centering Prayer, Retreats, study groups, wonderful friends - there is no way to tell 60 years of Grace in 10 minutes; my life has been so full of blessings.

This is not to say that my life was always easy. At my birth my family & our Jewish community was in shock about the holocaust & all those lost back in the old country. From this I somehow realized at an early age that I wanted something that no Nazi could ever take from me. I heard stories about people who had worked so hard all their lives for education, position, wealth, possessions, prestige, power, & family, and all of those were taken away from them in a moment. I knew that I was looking for That Which no one could take away. And I encountered numerous difficulties growing up including my mother dying when I was 15. But the biggest challenge in my adult life came after going with some friends to see "Brother Sun, Sister Moon" - that idealized movie about St. Francis & St. Clare. I didn't sleep much that night & kept hearing that I was supposed to move to the country & take in homeless children. I grew up an only child; I was well behaved & made straight A's. I knew nothing about raising kids. But as a girl, I had read the book "Cheaper by the Dozen" and really enjoyed it. So I thought I would take in a dozen homeless children. Really! I did. Oh my ignorance! I never made it to a dozen, of course. I never made it past the first two children that the DSS foster care worker left at my house. Those of you who were here in the 80's remember John & Michael. They were hard to miss - two children who had been seriously abused & neglected & who eventually collected a long string of diagnoses. There were days where I thought I was losing my mind & I acted like I had. We were all in really bad shape.

The Persian poet Hafiz puts it this way:

We should make all spiritual talk simple today:

God is trying to sell you something, but you don't want to buy.

That is what your suffering is:

Your fantastic haggling, you manic screaming over the price! *

I didn't want to pay the price. And, unfortunately, we were all doing some literal manic screaming in those days. Part of me had enough consciousness to say to my friends, "I had to be sent spiritual teachers whom I could not escape because I'm so lazy that I would have walked away from anyone else if they tried to put me through this." Fr. Keating laughingly puts it this way: It's like God says, 'this person really seems interested in the spiritual path, let's turn up the voltage.' So I was sent two live wires. I can see now that I was so stubborn that I would not have learned anything about humility or surrender or

service any other way. I think of it now like a geode. The hard outer rock has to be cracked in order to find the Divine Beauty within. I was such a hard rock, that I had to be sent two full-time nut crackers who could team tag me 24-7 in order to break through that incredibly hard shell of my ego. Carl Jung says, "The wound is the opening through which the Light comes." I learned so much from my sons that I couldn't have learned any other way. But I sure struggled with it. The Jungians call that the "gold in the shadow." When I had my wits about me enough to remember to do spiritual practice, it helped so much. The problem was in those days, I kept forgetting. I don't know how people make it through life without spiritual practice. Life is always so much harder when I forget.

Father Keating says that only 3 things are necessary for the spiritual journey: perseverance, trust in God, and continual prayer. For myself I translate the word God to refer to The Ineffable Mystery which is our Source, Guide, and Goal. I pray that I will continue to persevere & to trust. And hopefully some day I'll be blessed to "pray without ceasing." But for now if I sit down for my second period of Centering Prayer, and I realize that I haven't prayed once since my last prayer period, I can be comforted by these words from Hafiz:

You have not danced so badly, my dear, trying to hold hands with the Beautiful One.
You have waltzed with great style, my sweet crushed angel, to have ever neared God's Heart at all.
Our Partner is notoriously difficult to follow, and even His best musicians are not always easy to hear.
So what if the music has stopped for a while.
So what if the price of admission to the Divine is out of reach tonight.
So what, my dear, if you do not have the ante to gamble for Real Love.
The mind and the body are famous for holding the heart ransom, but Hafiz knows the Beloved's eternal habits.
Have patience, for He will not be able to resist your longing for long.
You have not danced so badly, my dear, trying to kiss the Beautiful One.
You have actually waltzed with tremendous style, O my sweet, O my sweet, crushed angel. *

On this longest night of the year, I pray to remember the Grace in the fertile darkness and to say Yes to the Light & Life that is waiting to be reborn from the Eternal Flame which lives forever within us.
Grace & Yes.

* I Heard God Laughing Renderings of Hafiz, by Daniel Ladinsky