



AMAZING GRACE

'Grace' may not be a word we hear very often these days, but showing kindness, forgiveness and generosity to those who may not appear to deserve it, can be life-changing to those in need. In a world where hastily formed opinions and 'cancel culture' dominate, are we perhaps more in need of 'grace' than ever?

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A crucial turning point in the epic tale of *Les Misérables* is when the kind Bishop Myriel harbours Jean Valjean, a recently released prisoner. After reverting to his criminal ways, Valjean steals the bishop's silverware and escapes. When he is caught, rather than reprimanding him, Bishop Myriel lies and tells the authorities that he gave Valjean the silver but forgot to take the silver candlesticks.

"Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil but to good. It is your soul that I buy from you; I withdraw it from black thoughts and the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God," the bishop says.

MEANINGS OF 'GRACE'

His actions epitomises grace, a nebulous word hovering between kindness, generosity, and forgiveness. And it turns out we're in

desperate need of it. The word 'grace' comes from the Latin 'gratus' meaning 'pleasing or thankful.' A beautiful woman might have once been called a 'picture of grace'. Or you might say grace before dinner. It is a word deeply entrenched in religious traditions such as Christianity. The Christian faith distinguishes between two types of grace: 'common grace', which is the gift of laughter, sunshine, family and human kindness, while

'special grace' is understood as God's 'undeserved divine favour', or even God's kindness in the face of being largely rejected by humanity.

It is not a word we are used to hearing, although Google N-Gram shows that while the word has been steadily declining over the last 200 years, there has been a gradual uptick since the 1990s. But what is this elusive quality, and why should it matter today when it's relegated to the history books of silver-screen movie stars and religious proclamations? How and why should we act gracefully, and what are its effects on ourselves and others?

In her new book, *Bright Shining: How Grace Changes Everything*, Julia Baird describes the need for grace in an era where it's becoming an "increasingly rare currency". She goes on to diagnose the present day: "The silos in which we consume information dot the media landscape like skyscrapers, and the growing distrust of the press, politicians and public figures has in some ways choked our ability to cut each other slack, to allow each other to stumble, to forgive one another."

In their study to understand the impact of grace on psychological and social functioning, Rodger Bufford, Timothy Sisemore and Amanda Blackburn define grace as "an act of showing kindness, generosity, or mercy to someone who is undeserving and potentially incapable of returning the kindness shown". The difference between grace and mercy is that, while mercy may withhold due punishment for a crime, grace may include mercy and an undeserved gift, like Bishop Myriel giving Jean Valjean the silver candlesticks on top of not pressing charges.

A RARE CURRENCY

Grace, like its cousins kindness and forgiveness, is something you recognise when given it. It feels like steady rainfall on a farmer's dry, cracked ground or a gentle word spoken in the face of anger. As Baird says, it's become a rare currency in a culture much quicker to point out someone's shortcomings. Bufford, Sisemore and Blackburn say that grace has garnered little attention among psychologists, even in the Positive Psychology movement, which they found surprising.

My husband and I asked a friend to play *Amazing Grace* on the bagpipes at our wedding. The distinct sound filled the room, and friends told us they were moved to tears. It was a sacred moment and more powerful than any other words spoken during the service – a song echoing through the centuries and still as potent as ever. John Newton, who wrote it in 1772, was a former slave trader who fought to end the slave trade. "The starting point of the hymn is that we are all wretched. The end is that we are

standing in the light," Baird writes of the song for which her book is named (the lyrics in the final verse, "When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun.") Newton's story is one of being completely humbled, coming face to face with the darkness in his own heart, but experiencing forgiveness and transformation, which empowered him to fight against that of which he was once part.

The 1987 film *Babette's Feast* is an unusual but striking depiction of grace. In the 1800s, a refugee of the counter-revolutionary unrest in Paris, Babette, arrives on the doorstep of an ageing Danish family who preside over a small but extremely pious community of Lutherans. She asks for work as their housekeeper, and when they tell her they can't afford it, she

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begs to stay and work for free. The community believes sensual pleasure, including sumptuous food and drink, must be sinful. One day, Babette is told that she's won 10,000 francs from the lottery in Paris. Rather than take the money to create a new life for herself, Babette creates a feast for the small community in gratitude for their taking her in. She brings in strange and exotic food and champagne, and the generous gift starts to break down some of the discord within the community.

"Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude. Grace, brothers, makes no conditions and singles out none of us in particular; grace takes us all to its bosom and proclaims general amnesty," General Lorens Löwenhielm, one of the guests, says.

When asked why she would spend all her money on one meal and remain poor, Babette responds: "A great artist, Mesdames, is never poor. We have something, Mesdames, of which other people know nothing."

For Steve Brown, program manager of Foundation 61, a rehabilitation centre for men struggling with addictions, grace is at the heart of their approach, and he has seen firsthand how it can transform a person's life.

The centre was started by Rob Lytzki, who last year was nominated for Senior Australian of the Year. He's had personal experience with the power of grace to overcome addictions.

"Grace requires connection, and we know that the antidote to addiction is connection," Steve says. At 'Foundo' (as it's affectionately known), they often say, "Love looks like grace, truth, and boundaries". You cannot have one without the other, but they begin with grace, which, for Steve, is about affirming someone's identity or the potential of who they could be. They may have done terrible things for which they've spent time in prison, but grace empowers them to change. "Shaming someone, like cancel culture, doesn't help anything," he says.

SEEING THE GOOD

A magistrate recently overturned a warranted prison sentence for someone who had been through Foundation 61 because they thought the guilty man had changed his life so drastically over the previous few years that sending him to prison would not help his continued development. "Grace breaks the cycle," Steve says. "We're not going to hold onto the worst of what you've done."

"I am learning that I am important and that I am worthy of a decent, normal life," a former participant in the program says on their website. "Thank you for giving me back my self-worth, hope and confidence," another says. Grace burns brightly in the darkness, and Foundation 61 shows that it is the key to unlocking someone's transformation more powerfully than shame.

The reality is that grace costs us something to give. Like forgiveness, it can be hard to give because it's undeserved. Baird delves into the nuances of forgiveness and the times it's been used to wield power over victims in the face of an unrepentant aggressor. "What we need is an understanding of forgiveness that is not divorced from social context, and not crudely imposed on wounded people," Baird writes.

We know that the world needs healing and that we could all be a little kinder and gentler to one another. Grace is about recognising the humanity in even the most troubled people because we are all capable of good and all capable of harm. In offering the gift of grace to others, this generosity of spirit has transformative power, not only for the people around us but within ourselves.

As Petrarch, the 14th-century writer, said, "Love is the crowning grace of humanity, the holiest right of the soul, the golden link which binds us to duty and truth, the redeeming principle that chiefly reconciles the heart to life, and is prophetic of eternal good."

In pursuing the quality of grace, we will be closer to the better side of our nature, and the world around us that much brighter.