



Where Is God When It Hurts?/What's So Amazing About Grace?
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Where Is God When It Hurts?
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What's So Amazing About Grace?
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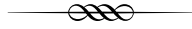
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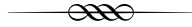
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WHERE^{IS} GOD
WHEN
IT HURTS?

PREFACE



There's a cardinal rule in book publishing that applies equally to brain surgery and auto mechanics: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." Since people are still buying the original *Where Is God When It Hurts?* I may be breaking that rule by attempting a major revision.

I wrote *Where Is God When It Hurts?* back in the mid-1970s, when I was in my mid-twenties. In the years that have passed since then, I have never ceased thinking about the subject. Like a dog on a fresh spoor I keep circling around the problem of pain, searching for clues. In that time I have also heard from hundreds of readers, many of whom wrote wrenching letters describing their own odysseys with pain. For these reasons I felt it necessary to go back to a work I had completed long ago and bring it up to date.

Many biblical scholars date the book of Job as the oldest in the Bible, and it amazes me that the questions Job voiced so eloquently have not faded away. They have grown even louder and shriller over the centuries. A recent novel, *The Only Problem*, gets its title from a phrase in a conversation about how a good God can allow suffering. "It's the only problem, in fact, worth discussing," concludes the main character.

Another thing amazes me. Books on the problem of pain divide neatly into two groupings. The older ones, by people like Aquinas, Bunyan, Donne, Luther, Calvin, and Augustine, ungrudgingly accept pain and suffering as God's useful agents. These authors do not question God's actions. They merely try to "justify the ways of God to man." The authors wrote with confidence, as if the sheer force of their reasoning could calm emotional responses to suffering.

Modern books on pain make a sharp contrast. Their authors assume that the amount of evil and suffering in the world cannot be matched with the traditional view of a good and loving God. God is thus bumped from a "friend of the court" position to the box reserved for the

defendant. “How can you possibly justify yourself, God?” these angry moderns seem to say. Many of them adjust their notion of God, either by redefining his love or by questioning his power to control evil.

When you read the two categories of books side by side, the change in tone is quite striking. It’s as if we in modern times think we have a corner on the suffering market. Do we forget that Luther and Calvin lived in a world without ether and penicillin, when life expectancy averaged thirty years, and that Bunyan and Donne wrote their greatest works, respectively, in a jail and a plague quarantine room? Ironically, the modern authors—who live in princely comfort, toil in climate-controlled offices, and hoard elixirs in their medicine cabinets—are the ones smoldering with rage.

After reading several shelffuls of such books I asked myself, “Does the world really need another book on the problem of pain?” As I spent time among suffering people, however, I had to conclude yes. I learned that many books on pain seem oddly irrelevant to suffering people. For them the problem of pain is not a theoretical problem, a theology game of lining up all the appropriate syllogisms. It is a problem of relationship. Many suffering people want to love God, but cannot see past their tears. They feel hurt and betrayed. Sadly, the church often responds with more confusion than comfort.

Fifteen years ago, at an age when I had no right to tackle the daunting problem of pain, I wrote *Where Is God When It Hurts?* for those people. Partly because I have heard from so many of them, I have now revised and expanded that book. In a sense, this new edition represents a dialogue with my readers, the next step in my own pilgrimage.

I have especially expanded the section “How Can We Cope with Pain?” because I believe God has given the church a mandate of representing his love to a suffering world. We usually think of the problem of pain as a question we ask of God, but it is also a question he asks of us. How do we respond to hurting people?

In this revision, I have drawn from several of my articles published in *Christianity Today* as well as the booklet *Helping the Hurting*, published by Multnomah Press. I am grateful to them for permission to incorporate that material.

CHAPTER 1

A PROBLEM
THAT WON'T GO AWAY



Meanwhile, where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing Him, if you turn to Him then with praise, you will be welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away.

C. S. LEWIS
A Grief Observed

I feel helpless around people in great pain. Helpless, and also guilty. I stand beside them, watching facial features contort and listening to the sighs and moans, deeply aware of the huge gulf between us. I cannot penetrate their suffering, I can only watch. Whatever I attempt to say seems weak and stiff, as if I'd memorized the lines for a school play.

One day I received a frantic plea for help from my close friends John and Claudia Claxton. Newlyweds in their early twenties, they were just beginning life together in the Midwest. I had watched in amazement as the experience of romantic love utterly transformed John Claxton. Two years of engagement to Claudia had melted his cynicism and softened his hard edges. He became an optimist, and now his letters to me were usually bubbly with enthusiasm about his young marriage.

But one letter from John alarmed me as soon as I opened it. Errors and scratches marred his usually neat handwriting. He explained, “Excuse my writing . . . I guess it shows how I’m fumbling for words. I don’t know what to say.” The Claxtons’ young marriage had run into a roadblock far bigger than both of them. Claudia had been diagnosed with Hodgkin’s disease, cancer of the lymph glands, and was given only a fifty percent chance to live.

Within a week surgeons had cut her from armpit to belly, removing every visible trace of the disease. She was left stunned and weak, lying in a hospital bed.

At the time, ironically, John was working as a chaplain’s assistant in a local hospital. His compassion for other patients dipped dangerously. “In some ways,” he told me, “I could understand better what other patients were undergoing. But I didn’t care any more. I only cared about Claudia. I wanted to yell at them, ‘Stop that sniveling, you idiots! You think you’ve got problems—my wife may be dying right now!’”

Though both John and Claudia were strong Christians, an unexpected anger against God surged up—anger against a beloved partner who had betrayed them. “God, why us?” they cried. “Have you teasingly doled out one happy year of marriage to set us up for this?”

Cobalt treatments took their toll on Claudia’s body. Beauty fled her almost overnight. She felt and looked weary, her skin darkened, her hair fell out. Her throat was raw, and she regurgitated nearly everything she ate. Doctors had to suspend treatment for a time when her swollen throat could no longer make swallowing motions.

When the radiation treatments resumed, she was periodically laid out flat on a table, naked. She could do nothing but lie still and listen to the whir and click of the machinery as it bombarded her with invisible particles, each dose aging her body by months. As she lay in that chill steel room, Claudia would think about God and about her suffering.

Claudia’s Visitors

Claudia had hoped that Christian visitors would comfort her by bringing some perspective on what she was going through. But their voices proved confusing, not consoling.

1. A PROBLEM THAT WON'T GO AWAY

A deacon from her church solemnly advised her to reflect on what God was trying to teach her. "Surely something in your life must displease God," he said. "Somewhere, you must have stepped out of his will. These things don't just *happen*. God uses circumstances to warn us, and to punish us. What is he telling you?"

A few days later Claudia was surprised to see a woman from church whom she barely knew. Evidently, this plump, scatterbrained widow had adopted the role of professional cheerleader to the sick. She brought flowers, sang hymns, and stayed long enough to read some happy psalms about brooks running and mountains clapping their hands. Whenever Claudia tried to talk about her illness or prognosis, the woman quickly changed the subject, trying to combat the suffering with cheer and goodwill. But she only visited once, and after a while the flowers faded, the hymns seemed dissonant, and Claudia was left to face a new day of pain.

Another woman dropped by, a faithful follower of television faith healers. Exuding confidence, she assured Claudia that healing was her only escape. When Claudia told her about the deacon's advice, this woman nearly exploded. "Sickness is never God's will!" she exclaimed. "Haven't you read the Bible? The Devil stalks us like a roaring lion, but God will deliver you if you can muster up enough faith to believe you'll be healed. Remember, Claudia, faith can move mountains, and that includes Hodgkin's disease. Simply name your promise, in faith, and then claim the victory."

The next few mornings, as Claudia lay in the sterile cobalt treatment room, she tried to "muster up" faith. She wondered if she even understood the procedure. She did not question God's supernatural power, but how to go about convincing God of her sincerity? Faith wasn't like a muscle that could be enlarged through rehabilitation exercises. It was slippery, intangible, impossible to grasp. The whole notion of mustering up faith seemed awfully exhausting, and she could never decide what it really meant.

Perhaps the most "spiritual" woman in Claudia's church brought along some books about praising God for everything that happens. "Claudia, you need to come to the place where you can say, 'God, I *love* you for making me suffer like this. It is your will, and you know

WHERE IS GOD WHEN IT HURTS?

what's best for me. And I praise you for loving me enough to allow me to experience this. In all things, including this, I give thanks.'"

As Claudia pondered the words, her mind filled with rather grotesque images of God. She envisioned a figure in the shape of a troll, big as the universe, who took delight in squeezing helpless humans between his fingernails, pulverizing them with his fists, dashing them against sharp stones. The figure would torture these humans until they cried out, "God, I love you for doing this to me!" The idea repulsed Claudia, and she decided she could not worship or love such a God.

Yet another visitor, Claudia's pastor, made her feel she was on a select mission. He said, "Claudia, you have been appointed to suffer for Christ, and he will reward you. God chose you because of your great strength and integrity, just as he chose Job, and he is using you as an example to others. Their faith may increase because of your response. You should feel privileged, not bitter. What we see as adversity, God sees as opportunity." He told her to think of herself as a track star, and to view adversity as the series of hurdles she would need to leap over on the way to the victory circle.

Sometimes the notion of being a privileged martyr appealed to Claudia, in a self-pitying sort of way. Other times, when the pain crescendoed, when she vomited up food, when her facial features aged, Claudia would call out, "God, why me? There are millions of Christians stronger and more honorable than I—couldn't you choose one of them instead?" She didn't feel like a track star at all, and she wondered why God would deliberately place hurdles in the path of someone he loved.

I, too, visited Claudia, and found her desperately confused by all these contradictory words. She repeated for me the advice given her by well-meaning Christians, and I listened to her bewildered response. Which of these lessons was she supposed to be learning? How could she have more faith? Who should she listen to? In the midst of much confusion, Claudia had one certainty: her happy world with John was disintegrating. Above all, she didn't want that to end.

I had little advice for Claudia that day. In fact, I came away with even more questions. Why was she lying in a hospital bed while I

stood beside her, healthy? Something inside me recoiled as I heard her repeat the clichéd comments from her visitors. Is Christianity supposed to make a sufferer feel even worse?

At the time I visited Claudia, I was working for *Campus Life* magazine while also moonlighting as a free-lance journalist. In a short span I wrote six “Drama in Real Life” stories for *Reader's Digest*. I interviewed a young Canadian couple who had been mauled by a grizzly bear. Although both survived, the young man lost one eye, and no amount of plastic surgery could hide the scars across his face. In another city, two young adults told me the story of a childhood camping trip taken with their father up Mount Rainier. Caught in a blizzard, they frantically dug a snow cave. Their father, lying protectively across the face of the cave, froze to death overnight.

All these people repeated their own versions of the cacophony of voices from Christian “comforters.” One amputee told me, “My religious friends were the most depressing, irritating part of the entire experience.” That pattern disturbed me greatly. Something was wrong. A faith founded on the Great Physician should bring peace, not confusion, at a time of crisis.

Why do people have to suffer so? What does the Bible really say? Because of the questions that arose from my contacts with Claudia* and others like her, I began a quest that culminated in this book. I have looked for a message we Christians can give to people who are suffering. At the same time, I've hunted for a message that can strengthen my own faith when I suffer. Where is God when it hurts? Is he trying to tell us something through our pain?

A Personal Approach

After an extensive tour of the United States, the well-known German pastor and theologian Helmut Thielicke was asked what he had observed as the greatest deficiency among American Christians. He replied, “They have an inadequate view of suffering.” I have come to agree with him.

*Claudia's dilemma was eventually resolved when the cobalt treatments effectively destroyed the cancer cells. She's had no recurrence of the disease.

That deficiency stands out as a huge blemish to the non-Christian world. I've asked college students what they have against Christianity, and most of them echo variations on the theme of suffering: "I can't believe in a God who would allow Auschwitz and Cambodia"; "My teenage sister died of leukemia despite all the Christians' prayers"; "One-third of the world went to bed hungry last night—how can you reconcile that with Christian love?"

No other human experience provokes such an urgent response. No one sits in smoky coffeehouses late into the night debating the cosmic implications of the sense of smell or taste. *Smell! Why this strange sensation? What did God intend? Why was scent apportioned so capriciously, lavished on roses but not on oxygen? And why must humankind get by with one-eighth the sensory ability of the dog?* Oddly, I hear no one debating "the problem of pleasure"; why do we take for granted sensations of pleasure but react so violently against pain?

As I did library research on the problem of pain, I discovered that many great philosophers, otherwise sympathetic to Christian principles and ethics, have stumbled over this problem of pain and suffering, ultimately rejecting Christianity because of it. C. E. M. Joad wrote, "What, then, are the arguments which for me have told so strongly against the religious view of the universe? . . . First, there was the difficulty presented by the facts of pain and evil."¹ Other philosophers, such as Bertrand Russell and Voltaire, share Joad's complaint.

The messy problem of pain and suffering keeps popping up despite erudite attempts to explain it away. The great British writer C. S. Lewis offered perhaps the most articulate treatment of the subject in this century with *The Problem of Pain*, written at the height of his intellectual powers. But years later, after his own wife died of bone cancer, Lewis wrote another book, *A Grief Observed*, which he published under a pseudonym. It covers the same topic, but in a very different way. As the quote at the beginning of this chapter reveals, Lewis's confidence had been shattered, his emotions stretched to the breaking point—stretched beyond the breaking point. "You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you," he said.

As in Hercules's battle against the Hydra, all our attempts to chop

through agnostic arguments are met with writhing new examples of suffering. Novelist Peter De Vries has called the problem of pain “the question mark turned like a fishhook in the human heart.” And too often the Christian defense sounds like a red-faced, foot-shuffling, lowered-head apology.

“The problem of pain” represents a profound riddle, and the philosophers’ approach to the subject sometimes takes the form of abstract reasoning, such as you might find in a textbook on pure mathematics. I will not attempt to address philosophers with this book; others with far more training have done that. Rather, I have tried to keep before me the scene of my friend Claudia Claxton lying on a hospital bed. Most of our problems with pain are not exercises in mental gymnastics. They are problems like Claudia’s: the loss of youth, an ulcerous throat, the prospect of a new marriage gouged by death, the paralyzing fear of the unknown. Claudia heard much conflicting advice about these problems from fellow Christians. What can we believe with confidence?

To prepare for this book, I talked to Christians who suffer at a level far worse than most of us will ever experience. For some of them, pain nearly defines life. It is the first sensation to greet them in the morning and the last they feel before drifting off to sleep, if they are lucky enough to fall asleep despite it. Ironically, I also spent time among people with leprosy, who feel no pain physiologically but desperately wish they could. With such people as my guides, I have entered the world of the sufferer to find out what difference it makes to be a Christian there.

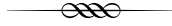
First, I will examine pain biologically—through the microscope, you might say—to see what role it plays in life. Then, stepping back, I will look at our planet as a whole, asking what God is up to. Is suffering God’s one great goof? And, finally, I will ask what response we can give when suffering strikes, and how we can also reach out to others.

Perhaps the next time I’m sick, when the flu hits and I toss in bed, fighting off waves of nausea, perhaps then my conclusions about pain will offer no solace. But as a Christian trying to fathom what God is up to in this world, I have learned a great deal. And as I’ve come to better understand the suffering of this world, my attitude toward God has changed dramatically.

WHAT'S SO
AMAZING
ABOUT GRACE?

ONE

THE LAST BEST WORD



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

speak. 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.