

STUMBLE INTO GRACE

by Jennifer Rogers

Jennifer Rogers writes with apt and lyrical snippets from her perspective as a Montessori parent and from her long history as a primary guide. This short piece examines the word “grace” from multiple facets and serves as a meditation that uplifts and reminds us “that the life of a child is a gift.”

Grace: undeserved talent or blessing; unmerited joy

DANCE

One weekday morning, I sat beside our daughter on her bedroom floor. She was five years old then and was concentrating on the bottom drawer of her dresser, considering her socks. “Mom,” she said, holding up a pair of socks. “Do you think these socks would be good for dancing?” I didn’t respond quickly, because I didn’t understand her question. She knew I needed her help.

“I might want to dance at school today, Mom. Do you think these socks are good for dancing?” For me, her question was a hard stop, the type of comment that marks time. Before her question, I was wondering why it takes so long for a five-year-old to get ready for school. After her question, I understood the simple elegance of her morning routine. As she sat on her bedroom floor, patiently waiting

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for my answer, I also understood that for her, every day held the possibility of dance.

“Of course,” I said. “A person could definitely dance in those socks. Those socks are a good choice for your day.” To be clear, our daughter is not a tutu, ballerina-type person. She is growing up in Montessori classrooms, playing soccer in the backyard with her older brothers and their friends. She is fast and strong and often bruised. She loves to read but prefers math. Her wardrobe consists of leggings, cotton shirts, and tennis shoes. But when she looks forward to a typical day in her classroom, she sees herself dancing.

CASA DEI BAMBINI

It has always seemed exactly right that Maria Montessori opened her first home for children on the Feast of Epiphany. Her choice must have been deliberate. The day is spiritual in an ordinary way, an occasion to remember both that spiritual life should take a human form, and that faith is full of surprises.

Montessori believed that every child, regardless of his nationality, religion, or intelligence, possesses a spark of divinity. She named



this “vital force” the “horme” and said that it was the source of energy and joy in childhood (*The Absorbent Mind* 83). She considered the theology of incarnation to be the practical reality of childhood. Tending the horme was, she believed, our daily responsibility and our best hope for peace.

Montessori interrupted the routines of poverty, allowing grace to peek into the slums of Rome. That grace is still present and always will be. It is still surprising; it still inspires little girls to dance. On that day of celebration, Montessori read from the Catholic mass for Epiphany and expressed her hope that her first Casa would “bring light into education” (*The Secret of Childhood xi*). The public questioning and criticism in response to her speech in Rome did not interrupt the work with children that began on Feast of Epiphany in 1906. Whatever doubt she may have suffered did not affect her dedication to the flame that had inspired her work.

Grace is meaningless without attention. Observation is a human gesture, but it is also deeply spiritual. It allows grace to enter in, investing our lives with the radiant hope of childhood.

That flame continues to burn. There are still moments in Montessori classrooms when, inexplicably, peace descends. The hum of young people at work continues. Their joy still inspires. Grace for a Montessori teacher means a sudden awareness of the things we sometimes take for granted: children of mixed ages in one classroom making independent choices, materials and environments designed to meet the needs of a child at every phase of her development, and teachers who guide and encourage their students. It means small scissors and child-size chairs for young children, seminars and micro-economies for adolescents.

Primarily, outstandingly, it means that in every Montessori classroom peace is always a possibility and sometimes a reality. In those moments of stillness, when every young body is engaged in constructive work, every young mind dedicated to meaningful understanding, we fully understand that education remains “the cornerstone of peace” (*Education and Peace* 28).

ATTENTION

Our oldest son was not yet walking when we first took him to our neighborhood restaurant. At a table beside us, a young couple sat with their toddler. She was strapped into her highchair, sucking on a pacifier. Her parents alternately checked their phones and spoke to each other, never including her in their conversation.

Knowing my strong aversion to pacifiers, mobile phones at the dinner table, and highchairs, my husband was nervous. "Don't say anything," he whispered, "It's none of your business." Parents learn very early to build healthy mental blocks. It is neither wise nor appropriate to interfere in the decision-making of other parents. We learn not to notice, so that we may preserve our dignity and that of others. In an unconscious effort to shield ourselves from the injustices inflicted on the world's children, we close our eyes. Nonetheless, when we watch over the children entrusted to our care, our eyes should be wide open. The conscious, deliberate attention we give each day is a type of prayer, even for those who do not describe their lives in religious terms.

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THE KISS OF GOD

In the first hours of darkness, when our night-owl middle child finally falls asleep and the house settles into slumber, there is peace. Most nights, I do not notice. My mind is cluttered with delayed tasks. I rehash unfinished conversations, organize our calendar, and tidy our kitchen. I can create disharmony within myself even when our home is quiet.

Occasionally, in the accidental pause that follows forgetting what I am looking for, or what I thought I would do next, I notice the quiet. In that first fleeting moment of dumb silence, I rediscover the grand feeling of an imperfect, cluttered home at rest. Gratitude descends. I stumble into grace.

The twelfth century monk Bernard of Clairvaux referred to such moments as "the kiss of God." He was a poet and a mystic, a man



who compared grace to a kiss because he had experienced it as a passion. Those who have been kissed, he said, would persevere in their work, seeking that experience again (Cook 44-45).

For a parent, grace means realizing, suddenly, that the life of a child is a gift. Delight is too weak a term for the time we spend in the company of a child. When they are asleep and the house is quiet, it is easier to remember that the joy, challenge, insight, and awareness that children offer their parents is magnificent and fleeting. Too often, I am irritated by the awkward, inconvenient phases they pass through as they grow toward independence. Too often, I am so busy looking backward and forward in time, I fail to notice the moment that will soon pass.

My dreams for our children distract me from the simple joys of their ordinary presence. Parental responsibilities quickly accumulate. I wish I could reach back into the evening when grace appeared and grab it, hold it in the palm of my hand, and press it gently into my heart.

GRACE

The “I” of this writing is of course not me. It could be anyone. There has always been a community of people who work hard toward a vision of a brighter world. We fumble, stumble, get up and begin working again, often with a child beside us. We know it is not possible to sustain delight, or redefine grace using words that add permanence. Grace cannot be scheduled; we cannot make an appointment for joy.

The truth is, there will always be days littered with broken pitchers, spilled water, and bad attitudes because conflict and disruption are an ordinary part of human relationships. Nonetheless, the goodness of our structure remains strong and secure.



With the poet Mary Oliver, I suggest we listen and watch “convivially,” expectantly, noticing small wonders as they spring forth (Tippett). It’s a slight change for most, an achievable goal. Peace is a worthy and realistic ambition. Years may pass before most young people notice their good fortune, but they thrive nonetheless.

Grace surrounds us. Joy abounds, waiting for us to notice.

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