

Glimmers of Grace – 23 December 2018 – Richard Fairley

For it is at the bottom that we find grace, for like water, grace seeks the lowest place and there it pools up.

I am blessed that I get to see a “Glimmer of Grace” every time I look at my daughter, whose name is Grace Catharine. When we found out that the odds were great that Grace would be born with Down syndrome, a colleague of mine said to me, “Rich, I hope that God gives you the grace to handle your child’s disability.” Almost immediately, we decided that since we already knew her gender, “Grace” would be the perfect name, and it has been. Grace was not put into our lives, and the lives of my two boys, for us to teach her, but for her to teach us. To teach unconditional love, patience, the opportunity to understand, in real terms, the largest part of the word disability is ability. The history of how our society has dealt with people with developmental disabilities is one that, until very recently, we would most likely not be proud of. Fortunately, to a significant degree, we have seen that change. We can go into many businesses and work places and see people with a developmental disability employed and living full, inclusive, meaningful lives.

Unfortunately, this is often not the case with folks who are struggling with with mental health and addiction issues. This is no less a disability, and very clearly, a disease. In reality, we perhaps are more tolerant and understanding of genetic disabilities such as Down syndrome. However the person suffering from mental illness often does so in silence, away from the glare of the community around them. Recently the World Health Organization came to this conclusion... “The single most important barrier to overcome in communities is the stigma and associated discrimination towards persons suffering from mental and behavioral disorders.” So it was against this backdrop of misinformation and stigmas that I began my journey into the second half of life.

Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. (2 Corinthians)

On September 1st 2016, I entered the grounds of the Caron Foundation treatment center outside Reading Pennsylvania. I didn’t go to as a good deed to visit a friend or relative, or as an educational endeavor either. I went to have myself admitted so as to be treated for alcoholism and depression. After a considerable period of sobriety, a number of life events had occurred that had made it abundantly clear that, in the words of Bill Wilson, I was powerless over alcohol and my life had become unmanageable. I had arrived at a place of powerlessness over alcohol and depression. I was not the person walking down the street with the brown paper bag, the person waiting for the liquor store to open. Instead, I was the member of the parish council,

Rotary, the city ethics committee, 4th degree Knight of Columbus. I may have taught or coached your children, and I had reached the peak of my professional life. But as I sat in the admissions office at Caron, I was that person with the brown paper bag. Because at that moment, I had to begin the process of letting my ego go and start to realize my powerlessness. This was a “Glimmer of Grace”, and my journey of true recovery was just beginning. What I didn’t realize was, I wasn’t at Caron to learn how not to drink, I was there to learn a new way of thinking, a new way of being. For what I found during the journey is that powerlessness is not weakness; rather, it is the wound that sets the journey into motion. In the words of Sr. Carol Bieleck, I was going to need to learn to “breathe under water”, to learn a new way of being.

A priest who is sharing this journey of recovery once told me that religion did not bring him into recovery, but recovery brought him to a much truer sense of spirituality and his religion. You move from the immature vision of God from your first half of life and develop a relationship with a God of your understanding. This is a journey without end.

And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. (1 Peter 5:10)

And so for me, and so many others, our journey of recovery involves a new approach to most areas of our lives. In the words of the Franciscan friar Richard Rohr, “all mature spirituality, in one sense or another, is about letting go and unlearning.” God gives me a daily reprieve, based on my spiritual condition. I am so grateful that I have been blessed with this Glimmer of Grace.

As I mentioned earlier, those of us in recovery are truly learning to breath underwater. That sentiment is made clear in the poem by the same name:

*I built my house by the sea.
Not on the sand, mind you; not on the shifting sand.
And I built of rock.
A strong house by a strong sea.
And we got well acquainted, the sea and I.
Good neighbors.
Not that we spoke much.
We met in silences.
Respectful, keeping our distance,
but looking our thoughts across the fence of sand.
Always, the fence of sand our barrier,
Always the sand between us.
And then one day, and still I don’t know how it happened,
the same came.
Without warning.
Without welcome, even
Not sudden and swift, but a shifting across*

*the sand like wine,
less like the flow of water than the flow of blood.
Slow but coming.
Slow, but flowing like an open wound.
And I thought of flight and I thought of
drowning and I thought of death.
And while I thought the sea crept higher,
till it reached my door.
And I knew, then, there was neither flight,
Nor death, nor drowning.
That when the sea comes calling,
you stop being neighbors,
well acquainted, friendly at a distance neighbors,
and you give up your house for a coral castle,
and you learn to breath underwater.*

We suffer to get well.

We surrender to win.

We die to live.

We give it away to keep it.

Each one of these is, for me, a precious "Glimmer of Grace".