

Called to the Dance of Grace

*An address given by John D. Whitney, S.J.
at the Jesuit Volunteer Corps: NW Annual Dinner*

*I know nothing except what everyone knows –
if there when Grace dances, I should dance.*

-W.H. Auden-

My journey to the Jesuit Volunteer Corps hardly seemed, at the time, like a journey of grace. Studying English at the University of Chicago and working as a bartender, I had spent a year slowly watching my life unravel.

As a graduate of Georgetown, I was – of course – convinced that I was among the *best and the brightest*, meant for success in whatever field I chose. I went to Chicago planning to earn a doctorate in English and become a university professor; and though I thought I could do great good as a teacher, the truth is that my primary thought was how good I would be at it, and how many gifts I had to offer. Oh lucky world, here I come!

I never imagined that a year of unrelenting boredom and obscurity, punctuated only by excessive drinking and depression would be the real gift of grad school at the University of Chicago. At Georgetown – though there had been plenty of boredom (and not a little drinking) – I had always thought of myself as working *for* something more than just the studies themselves. We were arrogant, and we were naïve, but somehow we also sensed that we were *called* to something – something I didn't understand and couldn't really even articulate.

But in Chicago, it was different: in a million ways my classmates and I were told that we were no good, that we didn't matter, that we needed to be broken down and remade in the image of the University of Chicago. The truth is, though, that they seemed to succeed only in the first part of that process.

It was in my first year in Chicago that I remembered a poster I had seen in the stairwell at Georgetown, a poster advertising JVC. It was one of those typical JVC posters – where three smiling young people were walking across a lawn together, directly into the camera (just like every JV community) – and I had managed to ignore it for most of my time as a student at Georgetown. But now, as I was falling apart in Chicago, it came back to me. And as I reflect upon it now, 27 years later, I really believe it came to me in answer to the only prayer I was still praying, “Help!” (Someone once said that the only two authentic prayers are “Help me!” and “Thank you!” – I think I can testify to that.)

But, at the time, I didn't think about where the idea came to me; I just thought of it as offering a way out of Chicago and a way to get some experience as a teacher. And so, as my best friend at the University headed into six years of intense therapy, I called JVC:NW and asked for an application.

I must confess, since I knew nothing about JVC at the time, I assumed I would be going to some school for poor children near Seattle. Apparently, though, teaching positions were less common than I thought, and though the Portland office forgot to notify me (I finally called and asked if I had been accepted for a placement, and the staff person

responded, “Oh, didn’t anybody call you?”), the next thing I knew I was landing in St. Mary’s, Alaska.

So often, I have confused grace with success or reward – God patting me on the head for something I had done right, or favoring me so that I can do something more. Grace – I’ve too often thought – is all about lightness and luck, about the good feelings I get from being part of God’s plan and God’s work.

But more and more, I see this vision of grace as a great illusion. These moments of good feeling, though they may be real, are the most fleeting signs of grace – they are its afterglow, not its essence.

The truth is, grace doesn’t come to pat us on the head or bring us success – it isn’t magic or reward, and it is almost *never* what we expect it to be! Most often, it comes as the presence of God appearing in the locked room of our fear and confusion; it comes as the fire of the Spirit blazing out in the midst of our naïveté; it comes as the strong wind that blows us into uncharted waters – when we foolishly think that we know exactly what we are doing and where we are bound! It comes, most often, as the answer to our most authentic prayers – to our cry for “Help!” – or as a hope hidden in the midst of our most desperate choices. Grace is that partner who pulls us onto the dance floor, even when we don’t know the music, even when we’re not sure how to dance.

Getting off that plane in St. Mary’s, and looking in every direction at hundreds of miles of nothing but hundreds of miles, I thought what maybe every JV has thought at some moment of his or her placement – and what maybe every person who has done anything important has thought: “*This is a terrible mistake! What am I doing here?*”

It is this question – “*What am I doing here?*” – when followed not by getting back on the plane or back in the car, but followed by surrender to the mystery of the moment, which is the heart and soul, the salvation and the promise of JVC. For to ask this question is to realize that something greater than our own plans or expectations is before us, something over which we will likely have no control and which – if we let it – is about to change us forever.

For St. Mary’s Mission was a place of impossibility and insanity – where we taught Shakespeare and grammar to people whose homes likely had no plumbing and whose suffering was more than we could imagine. Far more than giving me experience as a teacher, what being at St. Mary’s did was shatter my vision of teaching and learning; it broke me down – but not in the way I had been broken down in Chicago, to be remade in their image. Rather, it broke down all the parts of me that being the *best and the brightest* had built up; it broke me down and allowed me to find the image and likeness that was already there, the grace that had been planted in me before I was born, the grace that let my heart break for love of these people whom I served and with whom I lived, the grace that gave me the simplicity to hold it all together: the pain and the promise, the injustice and the kindness, the need and the abundance, all the contradictions that are part of a complete life. It broke me down and connected me to a community of hope and pain and promise. This grace, which is at the heart of JVC, doesn’t reduce the dance of life to a few steps, easily learned, but invites each JV – each of us – to find our own dance, to step out onto the floor of the world with grace as our

partner, and be the dancer we are – not quite knowing where to step next, but trusting in the lead of grace and in the music that the world provides.

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The experience that JVC offers, the experience that draws so many of us here tonight, is that gift of being “*there when grace dances.*”

It is that gift of being at Nativity House in Tacoma, in the days when Gary Smith would banter with the guys off the street and we would make new coffee from old coffee grounds (not quite as miraculous as wine from water, but it got us through).

It is that gift of being on retreat in Sitka, sitting in a lighthouse as the wind blows snow across the sound and the waves crash, wondering if the lighthouse will be there in the morning.

It is the gift of being at mass with the L’Arche community, when one of the core members starts sobbing during the prayers of the faithful, or when a plate of spaghetti earns gales of laughter.

It is the gift of unclogging toilets at Martin de Porres in Seattle or sitting with a young prostitute as she shakes with M.S. and cries uncontrollably while speaking of the child that she lost.

Each of these moments – the great and the small, the joyous and the sad, the ones that test our skills, and especially the ones that totally outstrip what skill we have – each is part of the dance to which JV’s have always been called. From Copper Valley to Omak, from Bethel to Hays, from Cherry Abbey to Morris House, we have stepped into the dance, and it has mystified us and changed us, and connected us to one another and to all the dancers across time and across the world. And it is doing the same to people today, who dance new steps, unknown by us and unfolding for them even now.

Yet, if this dance is constantly renewing the life of JVC, we must ask ourselves if we are always as attentive to it as we once were. For though we claim to be “*ruined for life,*” I must admit to times when I feel less ruined than I ought to be. I seek not so much to dance with grace as to sit one out and regain my strength. The problems of my life – the pressing need for decisions or planning, for paying the bills or doing the laundry – seem more about me than about grace. The music fades in my ears, not from lack of desire but from lack of attention.

We miss grace so often, not because it is not there, but because – in all but our most desperate or desperately naïve moments – we are (most of us) terribly preoccupied with ourselves: with how look and how we stand, with what we have done in the past and what we will do in the future, with our roles and our duties and all our many needs.

And looking at ourselves, we miss the dancer in our midst, miss that moment of grace which calls us to get off our chairs and dance, to do what everyone knows should be done: to dance our dance with grace – awkwardly, tirelessly, without embarrassment or restraint. Dance!

When was the last time you had that grace you had in your youth? The grace you had as a JV?

When was the last time you saw something so beautiful that you let it wrench you out of your day and connect you to something beyond yourself?

When was the last time you felt absolutely powerless by the magnitude of the world, and yet hung on anyway and gave yourself to it?

When was the last time you felt outrage – not the intellectual outrage of the adult, but the self-emptying and passionate outrage that gets you out of your place of comfort and drives you out into the street, the way Jesus was driven out into the desert by the Spirit, to declare that this war must stop, the poor must be housed, the immigrant and the stranger must be embraced?

When was the last time you acted in a way that showed absolute belief in the ability of other people to change their lives, instead of moderating your actions by your lowered expectations of human nature?

When was the last time you wept at poverty? Or loss? Or injustice? Or even at beauty or love?

When was the last time you invited the poor to share your table, or the last time you shared theirs?

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When was the last time you *danced* – not because you were good at it, not because it was appropriate or expected of you, not because it gave you some advantage or made sense, but just because grace was dancing with you?

Let's confess what we know; let's allow ourselves the grace we long for to be changed and challenged:

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This is what connects us. This is what confounds the powers of darkness and death that threaten our world. We are *there*, and grace is calling us to the floor. Let us dance to shake the rafters. Let us dance as people of joy and hope. Let us dance until the whole world is on its feet and grace is all we know and all we hear. Let us dance for the life of the world.

Thank you.