

GRACE: THE UNMENTIONABLE



Its spiritual connotations often make the concept of ‘grace’ out of bounds in business conversations. What if you just thought of it as being open to the possibilities presented to you?

It was considered a coup to get movie star Paul Newman to do a live interview on TV. So Tonight Show guest host Jerry Lewis was agog on the night in 1968 when Newman came onstage. Of course, Newman had something to promote: his first stint as director of a movie, *Rachel, Rachel*, which would go on to win an Oscar nomination for his wife and star, Joanne Woodward. Lewis literally bounced in his chair as he gushed something like, “Oh, you’ve just directed a movie, and I love to direct, too. Isn’t it just the most wonderful thing? Why don’t you talk about your experience as a director, and then I’ll talk about mine.”

Newman sat still for a long moment and then, as we recall, said softly and slowly, “I think a man is granted few moments of grace in his life. And this was one of mine.”

The words acted like a pin, pricking Lewis’s bubble of excitement. Whatever he was thinking of saying whooshed away; his face became softer, and his whole body seemed to sink.

Perhaps it’s not surprising that Lewis didn’t have a facile response to Newman. Even today, 40 years and a rebirth of religious and spiritual consciousness later, “grace” isn’t a word that normally comes up in connection with work. Indeed, when we recently asked some of our colleagues to share their thoughts, we got some quelling responses.

“This is certainly an interesting topic,” said one – an engineer by training. “For me personally, it feels a bit like unicorn-hunting: I’d love to see it; I can imagine what it looks like, but I can’t produce much evidence of its existence.”

Added our Italian colleague, formerly CEO of a training company: “I think I know what you mean, and I think that the topic is very relevant. I must admit, however, that the word ‘grace’ triggers in me the same reaction that initially was created by the word, ‘wisdom:’ the way in which I was brought up, my perception is that these are not words that belong to the business environment.”

Which led another colleague – a Ph.D. psychologist – to muse: “Are people likely to be laughed at if they talk about grace in the business context? I think there are a lot of mean people willing to degrade and humiliate you for any reason if you appear different. So it’s an understandable fear.”

And yet, and yet... Perhaps the topic of grace at work need not remain unmentionable. Our friend the psychologist offers: “Most people think of grace as something extraordinary that is in the top percentile of human experience. But I

think of grace as the ordinary expression of the creative intelligence that makes life work.

“You can put a lot of qualities around grace and create special circumstances for it; you might want to define grace as a high level of consciousness where there’s deep caring that enables people to be productive and effective,” he adds. “But that just limits it. I see grace all the time, almost every minute. For example, I spent today with someone who has just been promoted to Senior Vice President of Human Resources. We were talking about a corporate bully who is one of her peers, and how she knows not to react negatively to what he says and does. That led us to talk about that creative intelligence that keeps our bodies and our minds functioning, and she had a big insight. When she saw where that insight came from – from someplace other than her own free will – she got really soft and present and started telling me all of the things that she does that anchor herself in that place. She’d never thought about it that way before. But it was grace.”

Yet another colleague led us to Eric de Nijs, a coach who encourages leaders to be “gracious.” He has built an offering around the acronym G.R.A.C.E., to which he assigns the following meaning:

- Goodwill. Assume positive intent; suspend judgment; look out for the other person’s best interest; give without condition; offer forgiveness; provide support and safety in times of risk and failure.
- Results: Base the tangible reason for the work relationship on anticipated results; create a shared sense of purpose and value “commensurate with the mutual investments of both parties.”
- Authenticity: Be honest with yourself and others as you choose how you wish to relate; declare what your stand is; hold yourself accountable for your actions; be open in communicating needs, desires, moods, attitudes, values, and feelings.
- Connectivity: Find ways to identify with, affirm, and encourage others; understand how they feel; identify what’s important to them; share assumptions and beliefs; identify and realize differences; communicate a genuine desire to relate.
- Empowerment: Help others see possibilities, overcome obstacles, and develop new skills; establish a safe environment; allow time for learning.

To be frank, one reason that we’re intrigued with the subject of grace at work is that we’ve devoted the lion’s share of our energy to our careers during the past 37+ years. So if we are not to find grace there, must our days be grace-less? Luckily, we have enjoyed moments on the job where things seemed to tilt in a kind of, “ahhh, yes....”

Betsy recalls, for example, the severe drought year of 1988. Throughout the Midwest, the ground strained and tightened and cracked. Crops showed up sparse and spindly. And still the rain did not come.

In August, the annual meeting of the Beef Industry Council – 300+ cattle ranchers and their wives, even some of their children – convened in Rapid City, SD. This part of the country is flat and brown in the best of times, a vast plain relieved by a line of hills transformed into an excuse to sell souvenirs: Mt. Rushmore.

One night, in a caravan of buses and cars, the cattlemen went for dinner to a barn that had been converted to a catering hall. Straw covered the floor; long plank tables and

benches quickly filled as we brought plates from buffet lines – ribs and burgers and steak, corn and beans and bread. While we were eating, we heard thunder. The sky opened; sheets of warm rain streamed down.

Someone pushed open the huge, sliding door at the back of the old barn. We clustered near the yawning doorway, gulping in the sweet scent and vibrating to the pulsation of rain. Children jumped among the puddles, splashing and laughing. We adults stood and watched, somewhat awkward at first, then more and more loose.

We were linked in simple relief and wonder. Connection shimmered silently but palpably among us – a bond of joy and gratitude and hope. Rain had come. Humbled, all we could do was to receive and be nourished. It was a moment of grace – here and shared, then gone...but never quite gone. After that night, Betsy never felt the same about her work.

So, we ask, is there grace at work? And we offer in response the perspective of Joe Wright, director of the 2005 film, *Pride and Prejudice*, to describe his job: plan; prepare; use your talent and expertise to coordinate every possible aspect of the project. Then, in the moment, be “alive to the possibilities of what is offered you.”

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