

Putting Grace into Action

An investment executive reads at an orphanage during his lunch hour. A mother receives a gift of much-needed food and immediately shares it with another hungry family. An elderly man distributes sandwiches every evening to the homeless in his neighborhood park. A teen spends her vacation building houses for poor families rather than scuba-diving.

Unlike the headlines that shout out bad news and horrific happenings, goodness often reveals itself quietly. The people doing the good work, true everyday leaders, will likely tell you, "It's no big deal. I'm just doing my life."

And it's true. Those who practice grace are not saints, not perfect people. They come from all races, ages, genders, spiritual beliefs and lifestyles.

They are ordinary people doing acts of extraordinary importance.

What Kathleen A. Brehony discovered in writing her book, *Ordinary Grace*, is that for these people, acts of kindness lead to the kind of meaning and fulfillment that makes life worth living. In other words, we make a life by what we give.

"We all make decisions about what we will emphasize as we live our lives," Brehony says. "Whether we 'tune in' and open our hearts to ordinary grace or not is a personal choice."

The grace Brehony refers to encompasses compassion, altruism and empathy—in essence, all forms of loving-kindness, or, acting with the goal of benefiting another. These are values that most of us share. And in emergencies, such as the hurricanes in September, grace is usually more prevalent.

But many people fail to bring their everyday actions into accord with their beliefs and values. We have the best of

intentions, but are overwhelmed by the demands of everyday life.

What makes grace come alive and enrich the lives of both giver and receiver is action. Not just caring, but courageously *acting* based on that caring. Grace in action.

Grace is not just about doing good

work, but also about recognizing the inherent goodness in every human being. It's about understanding that despite

the outer trappings—the income level, social standings, education—we all want the same essential things: our basic survival needs met, dignity, a good life for our children and meaningful connection with other humans.

We all have hundreds of opportunities a day to either pass along a spark of grace or to pass up the opportunity, leaving the world a bit older and wearier. Brehony offers 13 steps to making a difference in your life and others' by living grace in action. Here are some of them.

Discover what you love. What's important in your life? What's missing?

Be prepared for pain as well as joy. It can hurt to care. But acting on that care, participating in transforming the suffering, is nurturing.

Simplify and scale down. Where in our lives is there time for grace to enter? Learn to say no to that which is not meaningful to you.

Put belief into action. Virtues such as kindness, generosity and thoughtfulness are not intended to be lofty ideals but rather modes of behavior.

Find grace in small things. Writer Alice Walker suggests, "We have to regain our belief in the power of what is small."

Model good behavior. Children learn mostly by what they see and hear. ■

"Unless our insights result in some practical action, they are not useful at all. With compassion, one needs to be engaged, involved." —Dalai Lama

10 Things to Be Grateful For

Yes, we're thankful for our health, our safety, our loved ones. But what else? What do we take for granted? What moves us? What would fill our hearts daily if we would just notice it?

1. The senses. Sight, sound, touch, taste and smell—daily miracles each of them.

2. The plant world. From the productivity of a late-summer tomato plant to the delicate unfurling of a fern, nature's exuberance and tenderness is something to behold.

3. Opportunity. Our steady companion, opportunity is always ready to take us down a path yet unknown. (Hint: We have to say "Yes!")

4. Beauty. What do your eyes feast on? What splendor makes your soul rejoice? It is all around us every day. How often do you stop to drink it in?

5. The ability to learn. There is no age limit on learning—period. When we stop learning, we really stop living.

6. Young children. They model for us innocence, faith, resilience, playfulness and unconditional love.

7. Music. What inspires you, lifts your mood? Rock & roll, African drumming, violin concertos, Turkish ud, gospel? A nightingale?

8. The ability to give. Every act of love benefits the giver as much as the receiver.

9. Color. Sunsets, Gauguin paintings, green peppers, blue eyes. Imagine a world without color.

10. Change. It's unavoidable; the only constant. Change can be unsettling or challenging. But the mystery of it and what lies beyond it can keep us young at heart. ■

A Letter From Yvonne Blockie M.A. MFT



While we may have little control over external events, such as hurricanes or earthquakes or pain, we have complete control over how we respond. We always have a choice of how to feel, how to think, how to act.

We can choose to reach out and act with courage and compassion and generosity, rather than allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by the demands of everyday life, as the page 1 feature article on “ordinary” grace discusses.

We can choose gratitude over pessimism or over taking things for granted, as the Top 10 points out. We can choose to open our eyes to the splendor of our world.

We can choose *how* we end relationships—even when the choice to end them isn’t ours. (Answer the quiz to learn more about this.)

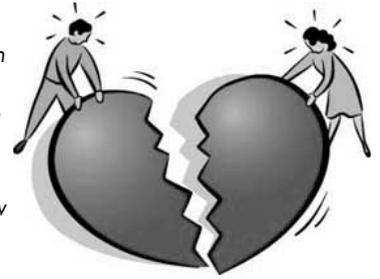
We can choose how we take feedback from others, at home or at work. The page 3 feature shows how we can go beyond the sting of criticism, and take the words as information, either about ourselves or about the other person.

When we live in choice, we simply cannot consider ourselves victims. Still, there are many ways every day that we can unconsciously slip into victimhood. The page 4 article helps us recognize these ways and consider alternatives.

As always, please call if there is anything about these or other topics that you would like to discuss. Have a beautiful Fall.

How Well Do You Part Ways?

Whether there are children involved or not, ending a marriage or partnership challenges us in ways that not much else does. The term “good divorce” seems contradictory. And yet, there are things we can do, practices we can bring into our lives that will help us navigate the big waves and the roiling waters. Take the *Thriving* quiz below to see how many of them you have employed and to gain ideas for how break-ups might go better.



True False

- 1. I don’t hesitate to *express* my feelings. I just don’t always *communicate* them to the other person. For example, if I’m angry, I might pound my bed or a pillow. Or I might journal or paint furious red canvases. By myself.
- 2. If I’m feeling hopeless or discouraged about this new phase, I seek support from a counselor, clergy member or friends.
- 3. I don’t encourage others to take sides against the person with whom I’m ending a relationship.
- 4. I minimize change, keeping as much of the routine and rhythm of life as possible, for myself and for my children. If I don’t have custody, I try to maintain as many old habits and rituals with them as I can. I don’t stop disciplining them or maintaining rules that have always been in force.
- 5. I build a team of people to help me make good choices and, hopefully, less adversarial choices.
- 6. I remember that a good outcome in a divorce is something both parties can live with, that it’s not about winning but being able to move on independently.
- 7. I use email, fax or mail to communicate when talking isn’t working. However, I respect that these communications don’t belong at work, and I remember that the goal is not to zing the other but to gain clarity. When kids are involved, the goal is always to foster their healthy development.
- 8. I avoid talking negatively about my former spouse in front of friends or my children. I know it has a negative impact on my children and their self-esteem and will polarize and alienate friends who want to remain in relationship with both my former spouse and me.
- 9. I make sure to attend to my physical and emotional needs, taking time for myself to rest and heal during this stressful period.
- 10. I don’t seek to physically, financially or emotionally hurt my spouse.
- 11. I don’t hesitate to involve a mediator in negotiating post-relationship arrangements, such as co-parenting or splitting belongings.
- 12. In front of children or mutual friends, I concentrate on my ex’s better qualities rather than on those that precipitated the divorce.
- 13. I spend time—maybe months—taking stock of the lessons I’ve learned from this relationship. I do this either on my own, in my journal, or with the help of a professional.
- 14. I remember the golden rule as I go about parting ways, treating my ex in the way I want to be treated.
- 15. I formally recognize the closing of this chapter of my life with a ritual or ceremony, if possible with my former partner; if not, then by myself.

Taking Feedback (to Heart)

A colleague who just heard your presentation at work is giving you some feedback that you were too quiet, didn't get to the point quickly enough and lacked a compelling example.

Your breathing goes shallow and your body stiffens, your heart speeds up, and you look around to see if anyone is in earshot of this conversation. You worked for days trying to perfect this presentation—*days!*

Faced with the often-difficult experience of feedback—in our work and personal lives—many of us respond in unproductive ways. But taking in feedback from others, both positive and negative, is imperative if we are to experience the satisfaction that comes with enhanced competence and improved relations.

It is possible—necessary!—to think positively about feedback.

Typical Reactions to Feedback

When given difficult feedback, most of us find that we do one or more of the following:

Pretend. We say little, disguise any hurt or humiliation, push the feelings way down and eventually act like it never happened. *Thank you so much for sharing that.*

Defend. We justify our actions, give explanations, point out reasons. *There was so much happening last week, I didn't end up*

with nearly the time I needed to prepare. Oh, and the microphone didn't seem to be working well today.

Deny. Denial automatically makes the other person wrong. *I didn't see a problem; I'm great at what I do.*

Interrogate. We ask for proof that there is any truth to the feedback. *Well, if you want me to understand what you're trying to get at, I'll need some specific examples.*

Lash out. Anger is the first reaction for some. *Get off my back, will you? How dare you criticize me, you of all people! I thought you were my friend.*

Criticize. We go on the offensive through blame, innuendo or other unsolicited comments. *I never believe anything those hotshots have to say. You know how it is in that department.*

Self-destruct. We turn all our negative reactions inward against ourselves. *I am such a loser. I'll never get it right. I'm never doing another presentation.*

All of these reactions serve to distract us from painful feelings of not being good enough, as well as the notion that we need to change in some way. But adapting to feedback is critical if we are to succeed in our jobs, our marriages, our family relationships. ■

Turn "Feedback" into "Food for Thought"

Taking the dread out of receiving feedback can happen with as little as a simple twist of words ("I wonder what's going to happen" instead of "I worry about what's going to happen") and a slight shift in beliefs ("All feedback is a gift"). Here are some guidelines that can help transform feedback into food for thought:

Track your own reactions. Recognize your emotions and responses. What body sensations, thoughts, emotions arise? Recognize that whatever arises in your mind is your own responsibility. You get to choose how you think and respond.

Get support. Ask trusted friends or a professional to listen, encourage and offer suggestions. Even in settings in which people are expected to be self-reliant (such as many jobs), it's nearly impossible to make significant change without support.

Listen with an open mind and heart. Without affirming or negating the perception of the person giving feedback, simply listen and take in what he or she has to say.

Change defensiveness to curiosity. Don't explain or defend yourself. It may be appropriate to bring the subject up later, if explanations are appropriate. For now, though, say the three magic words: "Tell me more!" Don't assume you know what the other person means; ask questions to clarify your understanding.

Regard all feedback as an act of generosity. Feedback can help you recognize habits that may need to change. It can prompt you to re-examine how you are living your life. It is a wonderful gift. Consider offering sincere appreciation for to the bearer of feedback, even acknowledging how difficult it may have been to deliver the news.

Focus on the message not the packaging.

Feedback may be given harshly or by someone with whom we struggle. Perhaps there is a mixture of truth and personal distortion in what we are told. Forget about what package the message comes in; what is the message? What can you learn? Contemplation is a critical step to integrate the message.

Reframe the feedback. When we put feedback in a positive light, negative emotions and responses lose their grip. For example, the feedback on your presentation could help you improve your chances of promotion. Or, the feedback may point you to greater personal success in a position that does not require presentation skills.

The bottom line: Taking feedback to heart puts you in control and takes you out of helplessness. It may require ruthless self-honesty and a little detective work, but the payoff is high. ■



Recognizing Victimhood

Samantha doesn't realize it, but there's a victim lurking inside her. Though she wears a sunny disposition outside, inside, the perky 42-year-old mother is resigned to three ideas:

1. It's too late in her life to go back to college like she always wanted to. She'd look ridiculous, and who has the time, anyway?
2. Her ex-husband is to blame for her financial problems and for her children's disrespectful behavior.
3. No matter what she does—no matter how many self-help workshops she attends or how much inner work she does with herself—things are not really ever going to change for her.

Quite a life sentence she's given herself: hopelessness and helplessness, twin offspring of the same poisonous parent known as "Victimhood."

When we operate from a victim mentality, we give the power to create our own life to someone else, and then we moan about how controlling the other is. To avoid taking responsibility, we create (and protect at all costs!) the dangerous illusion that we are always right. We blame others for our circumstances and remain stuck in a silent "poor me" that keeps us small.



This is not to say that we can always control what happens to us. Some people's behavior is abusive. Hurricanes or other natural disasters occur. The company downsizes.

We can, however, always control how we respond. We can refuse to accept abusive behavior, leaving a relationship, if necessary. We can recognize that others can only have control if we let them. We can see the banquet of choices before us and choose what appeals to us, even if that means going back to college at age 42.

Here are some clues to help you recognize when you're carrying around a victim mentality and robbing yourself of your personal power:

- Your first response to a setback is to

blame someone else for what has happened.

- You often find yourself beginning thoughts with phrases such as: "I can't..." or "I'm no good at..." or "I've never been able to." You believe that nothing you do ever works out.
- Conversations with friends and family are often about how hard your life is.
- When friends offer advice, you usually counter it with a "Yes, but..." since they can't know how difficult your situation really is.
- You're always so busy with work and the things you need to do to survive that you just don't have time to do things you want to do for yourself.
- You think that other people usually cause you to feel the way you do, that you'd be more centered if it weren't for them.
- You're convinced that if you weren't tied down to all these obligations, or if only you had more support, you could really do some of the things you always think about doing.
- When angry, you usually begin sentences with "You" instead of "I."

You choose: small and powerless and perfect, or stepping up to meet your biggest self—warts and all—and live the life you want. Which will it be? ■

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Yvonne Blockie, MA, MFT, is dedicated to helping you grow in ways that you desire, achieve the goals you want and develop your unique talents.

Yvonne has an MA in Counseling/Psychology from Santa Clara University and a BS in Business from San Jose State University. Her professional experience includes managerial positions in a high-tech company and career consultant inside a Fortune 100 company. Yvonne has been a Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist for 10 years and a National Certified Career Counselor for 9 years. She combines her industry, management and consulting experience to work with you to improve your life.