

Grace and the Autism Spectrum

**By Ann Memmott (who is in the middle of the autism spectrum)
A reflection**

My brain thinks in pictures. It is not easy to write this, but I hope that it makes sense.

Asked to talk at a gathering of Junior Church leaders, a question from the audience was one I was dreading: *“How would you teach an autistic child the meaning of the word Grace?”*

Even the finest minds have failed to fully explain that word to me. My brain, being designed differently, only sees pictures, and ‘grace’ is not something that can be drawn nor illustrated.

In the Old Testament, its meaning is I believe mostly from the word “Chen”, meaning gracefulness and beauty, as well as active and freely given favour or goodwill.

In the New Testament, the word “Charis” is used for Grace, again indicating loveliness, acceptability, agreeableness, as well as active and freely given favour or goodwill from God – the active communication of God’s love and care by the Holy Spirit (which is another thing my mind can’t really understand properly – try drawing the Holy Spirit!).

So, grace can mean someone or something graceful, beautiful, acceptable, agreeable, someone worthy of favour and goodwill?

Imagine asking people to consider autism as something graceful and beautiful. It’s not how people imagine it to be. If there is that grace, that freely given love and care, how can it be given to those whom too many still shun as ungraceful, unlovely, unacceptable, scary in some way? Surely grace is not for us?

How then to explain grace to a child with an autism spectrum condition? How to explain to people that their quest to understand and experience God’s grace is one that may be a struggle against all odds; odds of understanding of another’s mind; odds of struggling to be enabled to encounter *that which is God* amongst us; odds of seeing God’s grace seldom exemplified by the few who tell us that we are not even humans?

Where is grace in faces filled with pity or contempt, in hearts filled with prayer that we go speak to someone else – anyone but “us”. Where is grace in encountering the “we” that doesn’t want to be a part of any autistic person’s life, that will not invite us as a friend, that will not share with us, or that tells others that they will be mocked if they speak with us? Where is grace in the relentless bullying, the violence, the poverty, the joblessness, the loneliness,

the panic if we encounter a situation we don't understand, our struggle to access basic services that others take for granted? Yet there is grace aplenty in the way we see the world, in what we can offer the world, and in the hearts and minds of those who take those few extra minutes to get to know us.

Grace as friendship? People increasingly do want to be part of the life of those with an Autism Spectrum Condition ("ASC"), and very much so.

In the hearts and minds of my ASC friends, I find friendship, steadfast-love, honesty, integrity, justice, responsibility, caring on an equal level for all people.

In those whose balance is unsteady because of dyspraxia, I find the grace of spirit that transcends the challenges of their bodies.

In those whose recognition of their fellow friends is impaired, I find the grace of understanding that are all equal, all are to be respected and valued.

In those whose knowledge of the right thing to say is challenged by a brain that will not easily give up its information on this, I find persistence and courage in trying so very hard nonetheless: To give of ourselves in the only ways that we can, knowing in full measure that so often our gifts of friendship and love or skill or time are trodden into the dust or left to rot by those fearful of what we are. It takes courage to get up time after time after time, day after week after month after year after decade, and just keep trying. So much courage. Too often our courage fails through enduring so many years of nil return or negative outcomes. Can relentless hope and courage be an outworking of Grace?

Grace as love? I was asked by the wife of a man with an ASC the other day to explain about presents. She told me that she was close to divorcing her husband, because she never felt loved by him. He would buy her cards with lovely pictures on them, but said that he never looked at the words. He never knew what to get her for presents, he made the wrong choices. He didn't look her in the eye. She felt that this was all a sign that he didn't care for her at all, that their love was doomed. "How do you cope with presents and cards, Ann?", she asked, desperate. I said, "I do not know your husband, but I do know that my mind only sees pictures. When I buy a card for someone, it is the picture that has the meaning, not the words. I cannot 'see' all the words so I worry that they might be the wrong ones. But I can see the picture, and I know in my heart that this picture is a sign of my love. I cannot guess what people need as a gift, so I need them to be honest with me and guide me, so that I can show them the love and care that they need. It is not a sign of carelessness, but of the greatest care and love that I want to get it just right. And I fear that, left alone, I will fail." She had begun to understand. My prayers are with them in their marriage, as they start that long road of understanding of difference.

Grace as poise, beauty, skill? Every part of me seeks gracefulness, but what would it mean to seek those things and in turn see those who are lacking

those things as unworthy or unacceptable? As people needing only 'efficient, brisk care' by someone paid to do 'that sort of thing' to 'those sorts of people'?

I spent several years as a part time nursing assistant in a hospital, gently brushing the hair of those spending their days alone and afraid in their beds. Because of my sensory issues, I need to work quietly and slowly and carefully around people. I fed those who were struggling to do so and just being there, quietly. I smoothed the pillows of those struggling to get comfortable. Small things, but so often people would say "Bless you, you are so gentle with me when no-one else is – that makes such a difference". I cannot bear "efficient touch" – the sort of brisk, painful professional handling that dehumanises people. With my sensory system, it hurts. I won't do it to others. I spent several more years working part time in St John Ambulance, tending those with wounds minor and major, and holding the hands of those terrified that they were going to die. Just being there with them, doing our best for them. No great skill really, not when you're trained to know what to do. But to me each person was a person worthy of respect and love. My brain cannot think "I like you, I don't like you". It likes everyone. That makes for its own vulnerabilities to predators, of course.

Yet, just the words "I have a sort of autism" are enough to ensure so many doors are closed to us, so many people hoping very hard that we will go somewhere else and not be with them. The level of misunderstanding of autism is amazing. People have rarely moved on from the very false understanding of autism from 20, 30 years ago, where each of us was supposed to be male, without emotions, without empathy, without proper language, and of course with some incredible single skill like Rain Man had. Every one of those things has turned out to be false. So many of us seek to be social, even with the limited ability of our brains to process the social information fast enough. So many do empathise hugely with people's situations, but cannot correctly display what we feel through our use of body language or tone of voice.

We are all God's much loved and loving people. Those with a form of autism often display love very differently, but it does not mean that there is none.

So, what to tell a child living with an ASC about grace?

- For me? That it means God loves and cares for each one of us, and He always will.
- That we are all beautiful to God, all His friends, and always will be.
- That even if we cannot do the amazing things that others do, it is enough for God that we are there and that we love Him and try with all our heart to love and care for others around us too. Our love may be different to what they expect, but it is love, and a love that cannot easily be measured or contained or so easily thrown away. We have other gifts, other skills, other abilities. These are a precious gift to God, and

to the others around us, if only they would look for those things rather than seek only to measure our weaknesses.

- His grace is sufficient, we are told. His friendship is eternal. His love is never-ending. We can never match that, nor the easy love and gracefulness of those around us. But there is still love and friendship aplenty that we in turn try with all our heart to offer, no matter what our impairment.

It is enough.