

Gratitude in the Crunch

[Gratitude in the Crunch](#)

by [Robert Augustus Masters, PhD](#)

sourced from Robert Masters newsletter

January 15, 2024

The practice of gratitude is powerful fast-acting medicine, plugging us back into our essential nature, grounding us in reality-deepening perspectives, breathing more life into our capacity for compassion.

Central to the practice of gratitude is doing it when we least want to, as when we're tangled up in disillusionment, depression, disappointment, despair, shame.

This doesn't mean glossing over or bypassing the difficult stuff, but making heart-centered room in which to face it, gifting ourselves with a more-than- intellectual reminder of what truly matters.

Here, we stop turning our pain into suffering (meaning the dramatization of pain), facing it not just with head and guts but also with heart. We further fuel this by cultivating gratitude for the very capacity to feel and express gratitude in even the most difficult of circumstances.

Gratitude for being able to evolve, for having the capacity to work through trauma, for being able to move beyond dysfunctional ways of doing relationship.

Gratitude for being able to feel, for having the ability to become more emotionally literate and compassionate.

Gratitude for the time we have, short as that might be.
Gratitude for the arrival of our next breath.

Gratitude for simply being.

Gratitude for what beats our heart.

The practice of gratitude bends us without breaking us, stretching us in ways that deepen our dignity, integrity, and essential presence.

Gratitude for simply being alive, now and now and now, for simply being here, for having the capacity to awaken, to heal, to be empathetic, courageous, loving, present, vastly alive.

Gratitude for what we ordinarily take for granted.

Gratitude for incarnation, for this body, this mind, this exquisitely refined nervous system, this ability to outgrow our conditioning, bring our shadow out of the dark, recognize who and what we truly are.

And Hallelujah – Hallelujah! – right to our core, as we once again get back on track, scarred but not ruined, broken but not shattered, navigating the daily grind with a touch more grace and ease, grateful to still be here, surrendering what needs to be surrendered as we once again open to the raw Mystery of our existence.

The practice of gratitude asks only for a few focused minutes of your time here and there.

Do it when you don't want to do so, and you'll become more intimate with the you who is lost in entitlement, reactivity, fearfulness, self-doubt. Meeting that one up close – and with unconditional compassion – is an immensely worthwhile adventure, asking for and bringing forth the very best in us, step by step.

Remember to practice gratitude. Remember to remember. Don't rush through it. Keep your articulation of it clear and present, not letting the words you use slip into mechanical recitation.

The practice of gratitude is essentially sacred remembrance in the flesh, commonsense prayer, guiding us to the heart of whatever we find ourselves in, bit by bit. Trust it, use it, letting it restore and enrich you, again and again catalyzing in you a wondrously practical sense of your true nature.

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The Practical Practice of Gratitude

[Gratitude: A Deeply Practical Practice](#)

by [Robert Augustus Masters](#)

via Robert Augustus Masters' Newsletter

originally published March 17, 2020

The practice of gratitude is powerful medicine.

It quickly and effectively realigns us with our essential nature, grounding us in reality-unlocking perspectives, relieving us of our self-centered myopia. Call it a soul-centered homing device – unconditional thanksgiving in the heartfelt raw.

Central to the practice of gratitude is practicing it when we least want to, like when we're tangled up in disillusionment, depression, disappointment, despair, industrial strength shame.

This doesn't mean glossing over or bypassing the difficult stuff, but bringing heart and deep-cutting perspective to it, gifting ourselves with an instant, more-than-intellectual reminder of what truly matters.

Here, we stop turning our pain into suffering (the overdramatization of pain), facing it not just with head and guts, but also with heart. We further fuel this by cultivating gratitude for the very capacity to feel and express gratitude in even the most difficult of circumstances.

Imagine if we simply did not have the capacity to recognize and work with our shadow elements. Imagine if we could no more

than remain slaves to our conditioning, bound to our programming with no possibility of illuminating, uprooting, and outgrowing it. Imagine if we didn't have the equipment for practicing gratitude.

Gratitude for being able to evolve, for having the capacity to work through trauma, for being able to move beyond both codependent and co-independent ways of doing relationship.

Gratitude for being able to feel, for having the ability to become more emotionally literate and compassionate. Gratitude for being able to see through what's before us. Gratitude for the time we have, short as that might be. Gratitude for the arrival of our next breath. Gratitude for simply being.

The practice of gratitude bends us without breaking us, humbling but not humiliating us, leaving us seeking something more real than answers, bowing in ways that deepen our dignity, integrity, and core presence.

Gratitude for simply being alive, now and now and now, for simply being here, for having the capacity to awaken, to heal, to be empathetic, loving, present, vastly alive.

Gratitude for what we ordinarily take for granted.

Gratitude for incarnation, for this body, this mind, this exquisitely refined nervous system, this ability to outgrow our conditioning, bring our shadow out of the dark, and recognize who and what we truly are.

And Hallelujah – Hallelujah! – right to our core, as we once again get back on track, scarred but not ruined, opening to a deeper wholeness, navigating the daily grind with a touch more grace and ease, grateful to still be here, grateful even for death, surrendering what needs to be surrendered as we open, more and more fully, to the essential mystery of our existence.

The practice of gratitude asks only for a few focused minutes of your time here and there. Do it when you don't want to, and you'll become more intimate with the you who is lost in entitlement, exaggerated specialness, and walled-in or spiritualized egoity.

Meeting that one up close and with full-blooded compassion is a hugely worthwhile adventure, asking for and bringing forth the very best in us, step by step.

Remember to practice gratitude. Remember to remember. Don't rush through it. Keep your articulation of it clear and present, not letting the words you use slip into mechanical recitation.

The practice of gratitude is essentially holy remembrance in the flesh, commonsense prayer, guiding us to the heart of whatever we find ourselves in, bit by bit. Trust it, use it, letting it restore you, bringing you into an awakened innocence and wondrously practical, ever-deepening sense of who and what you truly are.

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Grief in the Raw

[Grief in the Raw](#)

by [Robert Augustus Masters, PhD](#)

sourced from [Robert Augustus Masters' newsletter](#).

Grief is heartbreak at its purest and messiest, imbued with existential vulnerability and at least some degree of agony.

Grief is the core-level, deeply felt response to loss and in-your-face impermanence. It includes sorrow, but is more than sorrow. It doesn't just weep, but wails, its sounds unmistakably expressing pain and devastation felt right to the marrow – and it also can be silent, thunderously and unspeakably silent. It may include wild mood swings, disorientation, spiritual revelations, and bouts of rage.

The emotionally bruised surfaces of grief may show to varying degrees, but the bulk of it all too often remains in our shadow. Frozen grief, muted grief, strangled grief – so much heart-hurt and ossified sorrow stored out of sight, so that it won't mess with our life. But what a price we pay for this!

Grief helps make us fully human, emotionally and spiritually grounding us in the raw reality of loss and the inevitability of endings, minus any buffers or distractions. There's pain in it, sometimes unbearable pain, but there's also an opening, however rough or ragged, to life at a fundamental level.

The gifts of grief include not only this reality-unlocking openness, but also a kind of broken-heartedness that has the power to greatly deepen our intimacy with each other and with life itself. Fully felt grief *connects* us all – grieving together attunes us to what really matters.

At first, it's "my" grief, intensely and understandably personal. We may go no further than this, or we may find ourselves shifting to a sense of "our" grief, as our heart breaks open to include the pain of others close to us. And we may then further shift to "the" grief, as we attune to collective suffering and allow the feeling of that to

penetrate and move us. This brings not just more grief, but more love and compassion and connection, as the circle of our being expands to include everyone who has grief.

When we're in touch only with *my* grief, *our* grief and *the* grief remain in our shadow; when we're in touch only with *my* and *our* grief, *the* grief is in our shadow. And when we're connected with all three, grief is completely out in the open. The move from personal to relational to collective grief is not a strategy or practice, but a natural outcome of surrendering to our own grief.

Grief is not something to get over, but something to get into, fully. Its heartbreak is not a malady, but can be a portal into depth and communion, ripening into a grounded bareness of being that guides us into deeper, far more humane ways of living.

Unfortunately, contemporary culture is largely grief-phobic, especially regarding the uninhibited expression of grief. A few tears are usually deemed okay, so long as they're not too loud, not too messy. "Being strong" in the presence of grief is often held as more of a virtue than letting grief have its way with us – with "being strong" meaning keeping relatively stoic, holding things together, not letting our emotions "get the better of us." The unexpressed grief that permeates our culture – and is stored in our collective shadow – keeps us overly apart from each other.

And why? Because openly expressed grief empathetically links us, sooner or later, to everyone who has grief – and we all have grief. It comes with being human. To leave it unattended isolates us, caught up in exaggerated autonomy and separateness, out of touch with the interconnectedness of all that is. In cultures that are death-avoiding, openly expressed grief is a no-no, because it directly and deeply exposes us to death and our own mortality.

Signs that Grief May Be in Our Shadow:

- **A lack of empathy** when faced with others' heartbreak and crises. Especially others who are very different from us.
- **Turning away from our pain.** Overreliance on painkillers and tranquillizing agents, including electronic sedation.
- **Resisting being vulnerable.** The less vulnerable we are, the more difficult it is to access our grief.
- **Discomfort when in the presence of others' grief.**
- **Thinking of grief as something to get over.**
- **Feeling ashamed when we display any sorrow.** This happens when we associate sorrow with weakness, dysfunction, or a loss of power.
- **Emotional numbness and disconnection.**
- **Feeling depressed when things end or significantly change.** Where grief is the heart suffused with – and blown open by – loss-centered hurt, depression is the heart *flattened* so much that it cannot be felt.
- **Shifting to aggression when we feel rising sadness or shame.**
- **Denying that we have grief.** It's easy to project our grief onto others, thereby distancing ourselves from our own.

Opening to our grief, making room for it to breathe and flow and find fitting expression, might seem unproductive, out of keeping with our get-ahead intentions and motivations, but it actually is a profoundly productive undertaking, if only because of its capacity to deepen our shared humanity, our cross-cultural kinship.

Grief brings us into intimate contact with life's ever-arising losses and endings, providing not a solution to this, but rather the capacity and space to be fully present with it – emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually.

Grief de-numbs us, tenderizes and deepens us, rendering us more whole, more alive, more here. Choose, and keep choosing, to trust it; however rough the ride may be, it is worth taking, for the sake of one and all.

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Elderhood in the Raw

Elderhood in the Raw

by [Robert Augustus Masters, PhD](#)

sourced from [Robert Augustus Masters newsletter](#)

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Elderhood is far from common – it is not something that automatically happens when we reach a certain age. It is something that is honed, deepened, birthed through the ongoing labor of ceasing to be a slave to our conditioning, especially after we're no longer ascending the peak but are slowly, slowly sliding down the other side of it.

As such, it is more an undoing than a doing, an alignment with what doesn't decline as we decline – it doesn't depend on all our faculties operating at optimal levels, but does depend on deliberate, steady, disciplined alignment with what truly matters in the latter stages of an unabashedly human life.

Elders are not busy homesteading on the top rung, speaking

from on high; they are still evolving, knowing this inside and out, still curious amidst the creaking and complaining of bones and sinews, still reaching even as they rest, their journey one of endless discovery and deepening, with their mortality whispering to them more and more often. Elders are iconoclastic warriors of heart and guts and unsung knowings, even if they are hobbling or super-forgetful or cranky – you can count on them to be straight with you, to challenge your certainties, to care about what really matters.

They are unapologetically human, having done their time in the forges and chill waters and considerable tests of maturation, bearing scars seen and unseen, their bloodstream taking its time, their foot easing off the accelerator, belly and jaw soft. Do they get reactive, cranky, abrupt, edgy? Sure, but in palatable doses, with whatever cleanup is needed close at hand. Elders may be mellow some of the time, but are not stuck in being positive.

Elders have the capacity to die into Life, to die into a deeper death – as do some who are much more youthful – but they bring to this a gravitas, a getting-it-in-the-bones that is far less accessible for the younger. The decline of the body, however fit or trim or young-looking, gives fledgling elderhood the grounding, deep-rooted sobriety it needs.

Elders are clear, idiosyncratic channels for muddy waters, not caring much if they get dirty in the process. Etiquette may not be their strong suit. Their bodies may not be doing so well, but they honor their somatic reality, taking care of it without taking too much care of it. They do not bewail their physical and mental decline; it's a slow downhill dance that is free of wallflowers and the need for an audience.

Elderhood is a robustly wrinkled ripeness, harvested for those who make their way toward it. In the buzz and hustle of contemporary culture, elders may seem like anachronisms, souvenirs from decimated cultures, with initiation rituals in

one pocket and wheeze-reducing herbs in the other – but they are at the leading edge of our times, however small their numbers, doing what they can to help root us in our deep humanity even as we stretch for better skies.

Turn toward them. Honor them. Use them. Elders aren't just taking a bedrock-strong stand, but are servants of that stand, stewards of the deeply relevant. They do this without hope, but with a stubbornly unshakable faith, their bodies bent but aglow with what this asks of them. Let us lean together into this, both bowing to it and embodying it, no matter how broken or aged our step may be.

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Remembering to Remember

by [Robert Augustus Masters](#)

February 2019

[Source](#)

There's an awakening that outshines our spiritual ambitions, revealing dimensions out of imagination's reach but as organically familiar as the supportive feel of our pillow as we slide into deep sleep.

The knocking on the door is ever there, infiltrating the clutter that populates our everyday mind. The message is simple: Remember to remember.

But remember what? What essentially matters, and what makes that matter.

This becomes clearer as you attune to what is out of sight, out of comprehension, out of hearing, out of the reach of the familiar. Give more of yourself to such fine-tuning, allowing more stretching of your spiritual radar.

Look inside your looking. And continue listening with your totality to the presence of silence.

It's as if you've just begun to awaken from a cozy nap, your room pierced with slats of sunlight, and you, caught mid-yawn, have no idea whatsoever where you are or what you are, but there nevertheless is a vividly unsettling knowingness surging through you, leaving you too unveiled to pull things together, hyperaware of the absence of familiarity – suddenly you are acutely alive, adrift in the sheer enormity and revelatory implications of it all.

You could be sinking in an unknown sea, or crouching in a thunderously wet midnight jungle, or lying broken on a frozen battlefield or lonely bed or silvery emptiness, even as you start to recognize where you are physically located.

And so with relief you let the familiar invade you, reoccupy and compartmentalize you, not noticing how surreal this is, how consolingly encapsulating. The enterprise of reassembling your sense of self once again clicks into place, and in a very short time you are now a seemingly solid somebody, no matter how often you lose your ID in your dreams.

Still, something hugely other is palpably afoot, still with you, hovering in the back of the background, something that you know, in your secret heart, can at any moment become foreground, making of you an expressive zone for What is ever showing up as you – and everything else.

There is comfort and plenty of undeniable utility in being

colonized by the familiar, even as it muffles the knocking at the door, distracting us from the awakening that tugs at our hidden bedcovers.

This awakening establishes itself as we let go of our bearings to enough of a degree to find deeper bearings, remembering that we actually know the way by heart, even when we cannot see or hear or move.

Ours is then a geography of resurfacing continents, wild green uprisings, cascading lava, alien skies, barely remembered faces and embraces that pull, pull, and pull some more at us with a depth of aching that links us up with a sense of significance before which all else pales.

We then look up as if for the first time, even as we look down at our disappearing ground, starlight our witness and crumbling foothold, gravity and vast luminosity making us up over and over and over, leaving us more and more at home with the whole irreducible mystery of it all.

Here, nothing is familiar and everything is recognized.

It is to this that we are ever invited. Remember to remember it.

Meeting Your Edge

by [Robert Augustus Masters](#)

If you're not afraid, it's not your edge. If you're not resistant, it's not your edge. If you can coast through it, it's not your edge.

If you're not feeling raw, it's not your edge. If you're trying to fit yourself into a cognitive framework, it's not your edge. If you think you've got it figured out, it's not your edge.

If you leap too soon, you'll bounce back to your old ways before long; and if you wait too long to leap, you'll remain bound to your old ways after the novelty of seeing different ground has worn thin. Going to your edge is not a one-time activity; it's a way of being.

If you're clinging to complication, ricocheting between perspectives, it's not your edge. If you're clinging to easy answers, it's not your edge. If you're settling for crumbs, it's not your edge.

If you're being seduced by hope, it's not your edge. If you're making explanation more central than revelation, it's not your edge. If you're overthinking this, it's not your edge.

If you're trying to make it all make sense, it's not your edge. If you're clinging to despair, it's not your edge. If you're remaining intact, it's not your edge. If it doesn't peel back your eyelids, it's not your edge.

If you're handing your inner critic a megaphone and an uncritical ear, you'll approach your edge only partially, sideways, half-heartedly. If you're fusing with your inner child, your approach to your edge will slow to a crawl, and then a standstill. If you look as you leap and leap as you look, your edge no longer will be ahead of you, but a deepening plunge into an unmapped, fully alive now.

If you keep shelving your invitation to your edge, you run the risk of dying before you truly live, of settling for a meager portion when the feast is not out of reach. If you allow self-sabotage to dethrone you, your edge will be reduced to a postcard you occasionally mail to yourself.

Your edge is where you are most alive, most challenged, most broken open, most in touch with what you were born to stretch into. Your edge may not be a precipice, but it is a naturally precarious place until you learn to homestead there, no longer turning impermanence into a problem or inconvenience.

If it's easy, it's not your edge. If it doesn't call for the very best from you, it's not your edge. If it doesn't seize your heart and ignite your belly, it's not your edge.

If it remains conceptual, it's not your edge. If it gets bogged down in emotion, it's not your edge. If it values the spiritual over the personal, it's not your edge.

Going to our edge uproots us until we find truer ground. It shakes and quakes us, stripping us of our lethargy, reluctance, and bypassing. It is rough grace unbraked, at once undoing and reforming us, without our usual input.

Going to our edge is a risk; not going to our edge is a bigger risk. Listen very closely – do you not detect the pull, however subtle, of your edge? And do you not also feel a response, however slight, to this, regardless of the hubbub of the rest of your life?

Your edge, as always, awaits you. Now.

A Different Kind of Intimacy

Source: [Robert Augustus Masters](#)

by Robert Augustus Masters

Along a colorfully crowded sidewalk I walk, slowly. I feel both right here and all over the place. There's a very subtle pleasure suffusing each step, starting in the center of my soles, spreading through my feet and up through my torso.

I have a growing sense that there's nowhere in particular to go, no one in particular to be, no pull of any history. There's a motiveless easing into now and a deeper now, step by step...

Abruptly but softly, there arises a feeling of unveiled communion with everyone I see. My heart and belly energetically butterfly open and my back softens and widens between my shoulder blades, as if making multidirectional room for what I'm experiencing. My mind is speechlessly spacious, my walking embedded in fluid ease, my movements as complex as they are simple.

I move just fast enough to flow through the bustling crowds, enjoying the needed weaving, pausing, shifting. My body knows what to do. Each life is displayed in a few frames of poignantly vivid color, rippling with its own unique history. I don't register the details but grok them, almost like they are my own.

At the same time, I recollect many people from my past, all in just a few seconds, also experiencing them the same way. No evaluation. Each person, here now or here from another time, is lit up with a reality-unlocking clarity. No thinking, no reflection. And no way to preserve this.

Things intensify. I recognize that I am in good hands. I experience no tension or ambition, just an opening, a clearing in space that's immensely soft, vast, open, edgeless. My interior softly expands out, widening, blooming in all directions with no dilution of care or love. I've the uncanny feeling of being turned inside out.

I'm a sieve for the breeze and sunny warmth. My mind is not blown, I am not in rapture – I feel extraordinarily ordinary, centered not by my usual sense of self but by the indescribably raw presence of self-aware Mystery. The usual me is but more color and movement, uniquely and ever so briefly here, just like everyone else. Nothing special. The mysteries of the obvious have me by the heart.

Now the doors really come unhinged, and language falls into its pre-conceptual roots: I am, it appears, both everyone and no one in particular.

This is only paradoxical to what's left of my mind. All things, all appearances, are but brief blossomings of uniqueness, so soon to fade, to disappear, leaving only life, only Mystery, only unspeakable Presence. No ultimate arrival here, only endless discovery and revelation.

Now I am simultaneously sad and grateful. My sense of poignancy is the presenting surface of a vast grief, shared by all, a grief that coexists with the inherent joy of being, the absolutely non-conceptual wonder of simply existing in this impossibly thin personalized slice of forever.

In this I am me and I am you, and I am also more than I can imagine, more than me and you and them and it, not stranded or intoxicated in an endless ocean of oneness, but rather feeling an endlessly evolving intimacy with all of it, knowing that I don't get the full extent of it, and that what does get the full extent of it is ever present, offering not explanation or understanding, but revelation, the kind of revelation that eludes all translation.

A moment ago I was not here, and a moment from now I will not be here. We are all in the same position, the same existential boat, members of a transitional species that is leaning into its own destruction, flirting with extinction.

We continue to war with each other on a watery heartbreakingly

beautiful blue-green speck in one of innumerable galaxies, blind but not completely blind, all too many of our hearts not broken open but hardened and thickened, held in place by a collective myopia behind which coils a collective trauma that will not be healed until we are able to fully grieve together, grieve so deeply that we remember where we've been and what we truly are.

Each life I see is so different, so unique, so quickly gone, its history fading into tattering information and memory, and then nothing. This is a kind of hell when seen only through the eyes of our everyday individuality, but is far from hellish when seen through the eyes of what we truly are.

The sidewalk rises up to meet my feet, carrying tidings from the earth below. The sun's warmth is all over my face. A short time later, I am back to at least some semblance of my everyday sense of self, internally bowing in gratitude. It's enough that I am here, that I get to be here, that I am alive, that intimacy with the Mystery is less than a breath away.

What is Grace?

[What is Grace?](#)

by [Robert Augustus Masters, PhD](#)

sourced from [Robert Masters newsletter](#)

December 2018

The notion of Grace is suggestive not only of a dimension of being beyond us yet palpably right here, but also of a guidance and support profoundly attuned to our deepest needs.

In Grace there often is an implication or felt sense of sacred intervention, a not-by-us engineered doing that serves our essential well-being, often in ways that are far from expected.

A serendipitous infusion of what may quite convincingly appear to be more-than-human guidance – this is Grace, however ragged or rough its delivery may be, however unreceptive its reception may be.

Grace arrives whether or not we recognize it. And it does not cease arriving.

The very consideration of Grace conveys a sense of something unexpected and uncannily supportive – though it may not feel supportive at the time! – showing up on our doorstep, permeated with undeniable significance.

Grace is a gift – and more often than not a surprising gift – regardless of its wrapping or manner of arrival.

Somewhere in us there persists a longing for Grace, a longing to receive it and let it carry us where it may – and at the same time there may be a longing for Grace to arrive in a particular form, which of course does not necessarily happen.

Sometimes what we most need is what we assume we least need or don't need, and Grace serves what we most need, which often means that it doesn't seem to us to be Grace at all, but rather just a nasty or unfortunate turn of the wheel.

Grace, however, is neither good luck nor the inevitable result of our good deeds. It is much more mysterious than that, responding as it does to more than just the obviously visible and known.

It's important to recognize that Grace takes much more into account than we can see, being unimaginably intimate with what is out of sight. Grace won't let us down, even if in the short

term it deposits us in places or situations that we don't like.

May we let Grace guide our days; may we let Grace flow through us; may we allow Grace to come to us – such prayers are but confessions of intuiting or wanting to host the presence of something gloriously Other, something that, sooner or later, is recognized to be none other than part of what we truly are.

May we not limit Grace to how we think it should manifest. May we not decide beforehand how Grace should look or behave. May our prayers for Grace reach without grabbing, ask without begging, and ready us without leaving us on hold. May we recognize Grace for what it is, and remain grateful for it.

Grace is the arrival and expression of not-by-us (at least as we ordinarily conceive of ourselves) orchestrated direction and support, emerging without any strategy or manipulation on our part.

When Grace shows up, we are guided in directions that we very likely would have otherwise overlooked, rejected, or not seen. The gift of Grace is an astonishing thing, no matter how often we have witnessed it. It always feels fresh.

In the same sense that prayer could be said to be a divine personal, Grace could be said to be a divine intrusion.

To the extent that prayer reaches up, Grace reaches down. The gravity of the situation demands it.

Some conceive of Grace as the tangible entry of our deepest dimensions into our everyday life and consciousness, appearing in whatever form fits our prevailing frame of reference. Others conceive of Grace as the tangible entry of something far beyond us.

When it comes to Grace, it doesn't matter if we're religious, agnostic, or atheistic. It doesn't matter what our status is.

It doesn't matter how high we've been, or how low. Grace simply persists.

When Grace shows up, we usually register it at least to some degree, whether we acknowledge this or not. We cannot engineer Grace, but we can deepen our receptivity to it, making more room for it, knowing that we don't know when it will show up, nor in what form it will arrive.

In the same sense that Life could be said to be the Poetry of Being, and Intimacy the Poetry of Relationship, and Beauty the Poetry of Appearance, Grace could be said to be the Poetry of Opportunity.

May Grace touch you, and may you know that it is touching you. Feel it now. Don't mind your mind's denial of it.

Invite it in, even though it's already here. Don't make an idol out of it, for it is as natural to us as our breath. And rest in its Mystery, knowing you'll never really figure it out, and don't need to.

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**To Be a Man: Toward True
Masculine Power**

To Be a Man: Toward True Masculine Power

by Robert Augustus Masters, PhD

the following is an excerpt from Robert Masters' book "To Be a Man"

"Be a man!"

Whatever its intentions, this demand does a lot more harm than good. It's a powerful shame-amplifier, packed with "shoulds" – and the last thing males need is more shaming, more degradation for not making the grade.

Men – and boys – on the receiving end of "Be a man!" get the message that they are lacking in certain factors that supposedly constitute manliness.

And what are some of these factors? Showing no weakness; emotional stoicism; aggressiveness; holding it together and not losing face, no matter what's going on. Sucking it up. (Think of what pride boys may feel when they're successful at this, especially when they're "strong" enough to not cry or show any signs of vulnerability.)

A manly handshake is a firm one, even a steely one; a manly approach means, among other things, keeping it together emotionally, not losing one's cool. To be unmanned is to "lose it" emotionally (except when it comes to anger), such a loss of face often being taken to mean a loss of strength (when Abraham Lincoln couldn't help publicly crying over the killing of a friend, he described his very visible upset as having "unmanned" him). To be unmanned means being visibly vulnerable, being ball-less ("chickening out"), being brought low by shame, being subservient to dominant others.

To "man up" is an expression originally used in football and military contexts, meaning not much more than toughen up, move

into battle, “grow a pair,” with the apparent failure to do so often resulting in one getting referred to as a girl or lady (who in this context epitomize softness, equated in many a male mind with weakness). Imagine a masculine icon, a famous leader or athlete, not just misting up, not just shedding a few silent tears or fighting back his tears, but crying hard and with abandon – this would be very, very uncomfortable for all too many men watching, no matter how “legitimate” the sadness or grief was.

Men may respond to the exhortation to “be a man!” by getting harder or tougher, more ruthlessly driven, more competitive, more uncaring about their unresolved wounds, making “getting over it” more important than “feeling it” or “going through it.” Conversely, men might also respond to the exhortation to “be a man!” by rebelling against its certainties of what constitutes a man, driving their hardness and competitiveness into the shadows and making too much of a virtue out of their softness and more “feminine” qualities. But in either case they are reacting to whatever notion of manhood has been or is being authoritatively held aloft before them, defining themselves through – and impaling themselves upon – such reactivity.

So let’s consider other factors or qualities that ought to – but generally *don’t* – count for much in making a male a “real” man, factors that many men keep in the shadows: vulnerability, empathy, emotional transparency and literacy, the capacity for relational intimacy – all qualities far more commonly associated with being female than male.

The visible presence of these “soft” qualities induces far more discomfort in most men than the “hard” ones. But once they are brought out into the open and respected/honored – which takes courage – they can coexist with the capacity to express anger skillfully and take strongly directed action, empowering men in ways that serve the highest good of all of us. True masculine power is rooted in this dynamic blend of

“softer” and “harder” attributes – showing up as a potent alignment of head, heart, and guts. When head (thinking, rationality, analysis), heart (caring, compassion, love) and guts (resolve, resilience, bravery) all inform each other and work together, a truly healthy manhood cannot help but arise.

Getting to such power requires facing and outgrowing less-than-healthy forms of power. There is great beauty and much to celebrate in men stepping more fully into their authentic manhood, a beauty at once rough and tender, caring and fierce, raw and subtle, anchored in standing one’s true ground, whatever the weather.

Shame Left Unattended Is Shame that Runs Us

“Be a man!” may seem a straightforward statement, but is packed to varying degrees with pressures and expectations – and often an in-your-face shaming – the *delivery* of which often alienates men from much of their basic humanity. Such alienation has enormous consequences. When we are thus cut off – emotionally and relationally disconnected or numbed – we are far more capable of dehumanizing activity, far more able to rationalize harmful behavior, far more likely to be caught up in abuses of power and sex. But nothing can truly compensate for what’s been lost through such disconnection and numbing. Dissociation from one’s soul – one’s individuated essence or core of being – is hell, regardless of one’s comforts and distractions, and all too many men are suffering this, doing little more than just getting by or dutifully “manning up.”

There is such pain in the pressure, the demand, “to be a man,” such deep and often debilitating hurt, however much it might be camouflaged by stoicism, excessive pride, apparent sexual prowess, aggression, and conventional success. Men in general are hurting far more than they are showing, and *everyone* is paying the price for this, regardless of gender, age, nationality, or occupation. Attempts to address this have barely made a dent in conventional manhood’s armoring, one key

reason for this being that such efforts can, however unintentionally, shame men for not meeting the standards of yet another way of saying what a man needs to be.

Until such shame (and shame in general) is recognized and understood, it will dominate – often from behind the scenes – men’s emotional and relational lives, obstructing their capacity to face and work through their unresolved wounding. Shame left unattended, shame left in the shadows, is shame that will run us from behind the scenes, disempowering us and determining far more of our behavior than we might imagine.

To in so many words tell a man (or boy) to “be a man!” carries the implication that he is not enough of a man (or enough of a person), that he is not measuring up – he’s not only failing to meet a certain standard, a preset expectation or “should,” but also is being shamed for this, however subtly or indirectly.

The shaming effect of telling a man (or boy) to “be a man” is rarely seen for what it is, being commonly viewed as a kind of tough-love support (psychologically akin to “spare the rod and spoil the child”), especially in authoritarian or militaristic contexts. And such shaming usually becomes internalized as yet another aspect of the inner critic (a heartlessly negative self-appraisal originating in childhood), the shaming finger of which gets waved in our face so often that it gets normalized. This internal drill sergeant, this love-barren relentless inner overseer, simply wears us down even as it pushes us to be better, to be more successful, to be more of a man, etcetera after self-castigating etcetera. And if the delivery of this is sufficiently harsh, we may lose much or all of our drive to better ourselves, sinking into depression, apathy, and self-loathing – so long as we leave our inner critic unquestioned and in charge.

The pressure to “be a man!” is generally little more than oppression in good intentions’ clothing. Such pressure, such

insensitive or out-of-tune motivational intensity, is but unhealthy or toxic challenge. From an early age, boys thrive in the presence of healthy challenge – non-shaming, age-appropriate, loving encouragement infused with a significant but safe degree of risk – learning firsthand how to both extend their edge and respect their limits. But boys who are steered by overly zealous (and commonly well-meaning) parents and teachers into overachieving and being “little men” (often taking on a premature responsibility) quickly learn to make a problem out of whatever in them counters such parental ambitions and pressures – like their tenderness and empathy and vulnerability.

Shame, Aggression, and Sex

When a man feels crushed or disempowered by shame (and/or by being shamed), he’s likely going to try to get as far away from it as possible, escaping, for example, into the compensatory power he feels through aggression. And why thus escape? Because shame is such a squirmingly uncomfortable and contracted emotion – especially when it is directed not just at our behavior but at our very being. Quite understandably, we generally want to get away from it as quickly as we can, ordinarily doing so by shifting into other states, like numbness, exaggerated detachment, or aggression

In females, such aggression is more commonly directed at oneself, but in males, it is more commonly directed at others. Men tend to counteract the self-deflation that is felt through shame – falling short of what’s expected of them – with the self-inflation they feel by being aggressive (getting righteously “pumped up”). In such aggressiveness toward others – passive, dominating, and otherwise – we usually feel more powerful, more in control. What more potent antidote might a man find to feeling crushed than feeling his readily-activated, adrenaline-fueled capacity to crush others (as through verbal abuse or physical violence)?

Statements like “be a man” or “be man enough” not only catalyze shame, but also often a drive a man to *prove* himself, a drive put into high gear when our shame shifts into aggression. The “proving” behavior that possess so many males – which start at an early age – needs to be deglamorized and not so unquestioningly equated with masculinity, but this can’t be effectively done without addressing and working with the shame at its root.

Aggression can make us feel better, beefing up our everyday sense of self; we’re not down, but are on top or closer to the top, whatever the scale. Even if we’re low on the ladder, under some unpleasant others, we usually can keep ourselves above some others who are lower in the pecking order than us – and we also can fantasize, perhaps very aggressively, about overpowering those who are above us in the hierarchy.

And what else can make us feel better in a hurry, especially when we haven’t been feeling so good .

Sex.

All the pressure and shame of trying to be a certain kind of man, all the anxiety and tension that can go with that, often can be briefly but potently eased very quickly through sex. And so too can the sense of not having much power, or of not being very important. So whatever feeds men’s sexual appetite, whatever amplifies it, whatever keeps it front and central, can easily take on an exaggerated emphasis, as is so lavishly illustrated by our culture’s sexual obsession. How easy it is to burden sex with the obligation to make us feel better or more secure or more manly!

Pornography has become one hell of an epidemic, gluing vast numbers of men to its screens and ejaculatory dreams, hooking up mind and genitals in dramas that turn relational connection into a no-man’s-land wherein sexual arousal and discharge reign supreme. The power that so many men give to pornography

– and to what it promises – not only cripples their capacity for real intimacy, but also keeps their underlying wounding cut off from the healing it needs. Pornography flattens and emasculates men, obstructing their evolving into a deeper manhood. Merely condemning pornography is not the solution, however, anymore than is being overly tolerant of it (as if any restriction on things sexual is somehow an infringement on our freedom). What is needed is to *outgrow* our “need” for pornography (including as a “solution” to our pain and unresolved wounds).

Shame, power, sex – these three in their unhealthy forms are at the core of male dysfunction, simultaneously possessing and crippling many men. Shame that crushes and shrinks, power (especially in the form of aggression) that inflates and dominates, sex that compensates and distracts – this unholy triumvirate usurps the throne of self in a great number of men, obstructing them from taking the journey that can restore their integrity, dignity, and capacity for real intimacy.

Toward True Masculine Power

Many men tend to be at war – at war with life, with each other, with themselves, consumed by the fight to win at work and elsewhere. Bloodless war is still war, still an arena of battling with whatever weapons are at hand. A victorious athletic moment may not just feature some full-out exultation, but also sometimes a sense of standing over the defeated team as if on some bloody battlefield. Our entire culture is permeated with the language of war: the war on drugs, the war on cancer, the war on poverty, and so on. We don't just die from cancer, but lose our *battle* with it. Warfare is all about oppositional extremes, and so is much of conventional manhood, with an endless list of things to conquer. What a burden! And what a diversion from embodying our full humanity.

What could be more packed with excitation (both positive and negative) than war? After all, it includes huge drama, high

stakes, tremendous challenges and risk, primal encounters, great danger, unusual camaraderie, and extremes of playing-of-the-edge. I once worked with a highly decorated Vietnam veteran, an officer of the highest caliber who'd done plenty of time in the trenches of direct battle; after doing a few sessions with me that took him to the core of his emotional wounding and required a deep vulnerability of him, he said that such work was more difficult than anything he'd had to do while in the military – and that he didn't want to stop doing it. It asked more of him, it gave him more, it further deepened him, bringing out a different kind of warrior in him, in whom vulnerability was an obvious source of strength and relational intimacy a crucible for breakthrough healing.

True masculine power happens when courage, integrity, vulnerability, compassion, awareness, and the capacity to take strong action are all functioning together. Such power is potent but not aggressive, challenging but not shaming, grounded but not rigid, forceful but not pushy. Again, it requires head, heart, and guts in full-blooded alignment.

I sometimes tell men who are venturing into the work of accessing their true power that the journey they're beginning is one asking for a courage no less than that of real battle, calling forth from them a warriorhood as rooted in tenderness and relational openness as it is in facing and integrating one's monsters and shadow-places. This is a true hero's journey of healing and awakening, connecting the dots of past and present emotionally as well as intellectually, encountering on the way all that we've been and are. Along the way we cultivate an intimacy with *everything* that we are – high and low, dark and light, masculine and feminine, dying and undying – for the benefit of one and all. This is the primal odyssey pulsing in every man's marrow, whether we embark on it or not.

And there is a huge need for us to take this journey, not as one more should, but out of service to everyone. My aim in

this book is to illuminate and support this journey as much as possible, providing navigational guidance for us to step more fully into our own authenticity, helping deepen our capacity for taking wise care of ourselves and our environment.

I have seen many men suffering from shutting themselves off to their own depths, cutting themselves off from what would enable them to have truly fulfilling relationships – not just their empathy, vulnerability, and capacity for emotional literacy, but also their true power and strength, their authenticity, their capacity to anchor themselves in real integrity. There is a deeper life for men, a life in which responsibility and freedom go hand in hand and level upon level, a life in which happiness is rooted not in what we have but in what we fundamentally are. It is to such a life that this book is dedicated.

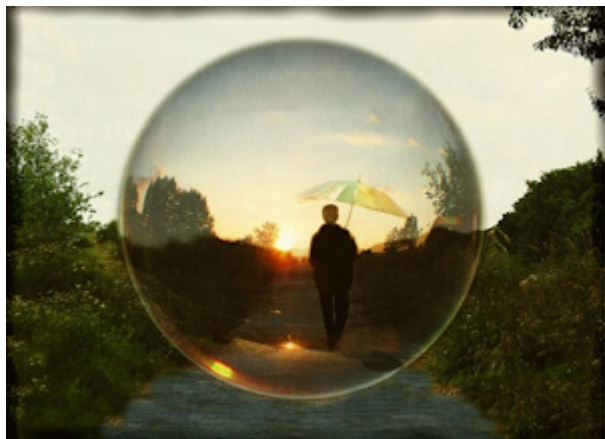
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Spiritual Bypassing: Avoidance in Holy Drag

Spiritual Bypassing: Avoidance in Holy Drag

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Spiritual bypassing, a term first coined by psychologist John Welwood in 1984, is the use of spiritual practices and beliefs to avoid dealing with our painful feelings, unresolved wounds, and developmental needs. It is much more common than we might think and, in fact, is so

pervasive as to go largely unnoticed, except in its more obvious extremes.

Part of the reason for this is that we tend not to have very much tolerance, both personally and collectively, for facing, entering, and working through our pain, strongly preferring pain-numbing “solutions,” regardless of how much suffering such “remedies” may catalyze. Because this preference has so deeply and thoroughly infiltrated our culture that it has become all but normalized, spiritual bypassing fits almost seamlessly into our collective habit of turning away from what is painful, as a kind of higher analgesic with seemingly minimal side effects. It is a spiritualized strategy not only for avoiding pain but also for legitimizing such avoidance, in ways ranging from the blatantly obvious to the extremely subtle.

Spiritual bypassing is a very persistent shadow of spirituality, manifesting in many ways, often without being acknowledged as such. Aspects of spiritual bypassing include exaggerated detachment, emotional numbing and repression, overemphasis on the positive, anger-phobia, blind or overly tolerant compassion, weak or too porous boundaries, lopsided development (cognitive intelligence often being far ahead of emotional and moral intelligence), debilitating judgment about one’s negativity or shadow elements, devaluation of the personal relative to the spiritual, and delusions of having arrived at a higher level of being.

The explosion of interest in spirituality, especially Eastern spirituality, since the mid-1960s has been accompanied by a corresponding interest and immersion in spiritual bypassing—which has, however, not very often been named, let alone viewed, as such. It has been easier to frame spiritual bypassing as a religion-transcending, spiritually advanced practice/perspective, especially in the facile fast-food spirituality epitomized by faddish phenomena like *The Secret*. Some of the more glaringly plastic features of this, such as its drive-through servings of reheated wisdom like “Don’t take it personally” or “Whatever bothers you about someone is really only about you” or “It’s all just an illusion,” are available for consumption and parroting by just about anyone.

Happily, the honeymoon with false or superficial notions of spirituality is starting to wane. Enough bubbles have been burst; enough spiritual teachers, Eastern and Western, have been caught with pants or halo down; enough cults have come and gone; enough time has been spent with spiritual baubles, credentials, energy transmissions, and gurucentrism to sense deeper treasures. But valuable as the desire for a more authentic spirituality is, such change will not occur on any significant scale and really take root until spiritual bypassing is outgrown, and that is not as easy as it might sound, for it asks that we cease turning away from our pain, numbing ourselves, and expecting spirituality to make us feel better.

True spirituality is not a high, not a rush, not an altered state. It has been fine to romance it for a while, but our times call for something far more real, grounded, and responsible; something radically alive and naturally integral; something that shakes us to our very core until we stop treating spiritual deepening as a something to dabble in here and there. Authentic spirituality is not some little flicker or buzz of knowingness, not a psychedelic blast-through or a mellow hanging-out on some exalted plane of consciousness, not

a bubble of immunity, but a vast fire of liberation, an exquisitely fitting crucible and sanctuary, providing both heat and light for what must be done.

Most of the time when we're immersed in spiritual bypassing, we like the light but not the heat, doing whatever we can to distance ourselves from the flames.

And when we're caught up in the grosser forms of spiritual bypassing, we'd usually much rather theorize about the frontiers of consciousness than actually go there, sedating the fire rather than breathing it even more alive, espousing the ideal of unconditional love while not permitting love to show up in its more challenging, personal dimensions. To do so would be too hot, too scary, and too out-of-control, bringing things to the surface that we have long disowned or suppressed.

But if we really want the light, we cannot afford to flee the heat. As Victor Frankl said, "What gives light must endure burning." And being with the fire's heat doesn't just mean sitting with the difficult stuff in meditation, but also going into it, trekking to its core, facing and entering and getting intimate with whatever is there, however scary or traumatic or sad or raw.

We have had quite an affair with Eastern spiritual pathways, but now it is time to go deeper. We must do this not only to get more intimate with the essence of these wisdom traditions beyond ritual and belief and dogma but also to make room for the healthy evolution, not just the necessary Westernization, of these traditions so that their presentation ceases encouraging spiritual bypassing (however indirectly) and, in fact, consciously and actively ceases giving it soil to flower. These changes won't happen to any significant degree, however, unless we work in-depth and integratively with our physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual, and social dimensions to generate an ever-deeper sense of wholeness,

vitality, and basic sanity.

Any spiritual path, Eastern or Western, that does not deal in real depth with psychological issues, and deal with these in more than just spiritual contexts, is setting itself up for an abundance of spiritual bypassing. If there is not sufficient encouragement and support from spiritual teachers and teachings for their students to engage in significant depth in psychoemotional work, and if those students who really need such work don't then do it, they'll be left trying to work out their psychoemotional issues, traumatic and otherwise, only through the spiritual practices they have been given, as if doing so is somehow superior to—or a “higher” activity than—engaging in quality psychotherapy. Psychotherapy is often viewed as an inferior undertaking relative to spiritual practice, perhaps even something we “shouldn't” have to do. When our spiritual bypassing is more subtle, the idea of psychotherapy may be considered more acceptable but we will still shy away from a full-blooded investigation of our core wounds.

Spiritual bypassing is largely occupied, at least in its New Age forms, by the idea of wholeness and the innate unity of Being—“Oneness” being perhaps its favorite bumper sticker—but actually generates and reinforces fragmentation by separating out from and rejecting what is painful, distressed, and unhealed; all the far-from-flattering aspects of being human. By consistently keeping these in the dark, “down below” (when we're locked into our headquarters, our body and feelings seem to be below us), they tend to behave badly when let out, much like animals that have spent too long in cages. Our neglect here of these aspects of ourselves, however gently framed, is akin to that of otherwise caring parents who leave their children without sufficient food, clothing, or care.

The trappings of spiritual bypassing can look good, particularly when they seem to promise freedom from life's fuss and fury, but this supposed serenity and detachment is

often little more than metaphysical valium, especially for those who have made too much of a virtue out of being and looking positive.

A common telltale sign of spiritual bypassing is a lack of grounding and in-the-body experience that tends to keep us either spacially afloat in how we relate to the world or too rigidly tethered to a spiritual system that provides the solidity we lack. We also may fall into premature forgiveness and emotional dissociation, and confuse anger with aggression and ill will, which leaves us disempowered, riddled with weak boundaries. The overdone niceness that often characterizes spiritual bypassing strands it from emotional depth and authenticity; and its underlying grief—mostly unspoken, untouched, unacknowledged—keeps it marooned from the very caring that would unwrap and undo it, like a baby being readied for a bath by a loving parent.

Spiritual bypassing distances us not only from our pain and difficult personal issues but also from our own authentic spirituality, stranding us in a metaphysical limbo, a zone of exaggerated gentleness, niceness, and superficiality. Its frequently disconnected nature keeps it adrift, clinging to the weight of its self-conferred spiritual credentials. As such, it maroons us from embodying our full humanity.

But let us not be too hard on spiritual bypassing, for every one of us who has entered into the spiritual has engaged in spiritual bypassing, at least to some degree, having for years used other means to make ourselves feel better or more secure. Why would we not also approach spirituality, particularly at first, with much the same expectation that it make us feel better or more secure?

To truly outgrow spiritual bypassing—which in part means releasing spirituality (and everything else!) from the obligation to make us feel better or more secure or more whole—we must not only see it for what it is and cease

engaging in it but also view it with genuine compassion, however fiery that might be or need to be. The spiritual bypasser in us needs not censure nor shaming but rather to be consciously and caringly included in our awareness without being allowed to run the show. Becoming intimate with our own capacity for spiritual bypassing allows us to keep it in healthy perspective.

I have worked with many clients who described themselves as being on a spiritual path, particularly as meditators. Most were preoccupied, at least initially, with being nice, trying to be positive and nonjudgmental, while impaling themselves on various spiritual "shoulds," such as "I should not show anger" or "I should be more loving" or "I should be more open after all the time I've put into my spiritual practice." Fleeing their darker (or "less spiritual") emotions, impulses, and intentions, they had, to varying degrees, trapped themselves within the very practices (and beliefs) that they had hoped might liberate them, or at least make them feel better.

Even the most exquisitely designed spiritual methodologies can become traps, leading not to freedom but only to reinforcement, however subtle, of the very "I" that wants to be a somebody who has attained or realized freedom (the very same "I" that doesn't realize there are no Oscars for awakening). The most obvious potential traps-in-waiting include the belief that we should rise above our difficulties and simply embrace Oneness, even as the tendency to divide everything into positive and negative, higher and lower, spiritual and nonspiritual, runs wild in us. Subtler traps-in-waiting, less densely populated with metaphysical lullabies and ascension metaphors and far more discerning, teach non-aversion through cultivating a capacity for dispassionate witnessing and/or various devotional rituals. Subtler still are those that emphasize meeting everything with acceptance and compassion. Each approach has its own value, if only to eventually propel us into an even deeper direction, and each

is far from immune to being possessed by spiritual bypassing, especially when we are still hoping, whatever our depth of spiritual practice, to reach a state of immunity to suffering (both personally and collectively).

As my spiritually inclined clients become more intimate with their pain and difficulties, coming to understand the origins of their troubles with a more open ear and heart, they either abandon their misguided spiritual practices and reenter a more fitting version of them with less submissiveness and more integrity and creativity or find new practices that better suit their needs, coming to recognize more deeply that everything—everything!—can serve their healing and awakening.

In the facing and outgrowing of spiritual bypassing, we enter a deeper life—a life of full-blooded integrity, depth, love, and sanity; a life of authenticity on every level; a life in which the personal, interpersonal, and transpersonal are all honored and lived to the fullest.

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