

Unexpected Grace

UNEXPECTED GRACE

STORIES OF FAITH, SCIENCE,
AND ALTRUISM



Bill Kramer

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for Janet and Sean

Contents

| | |
|--------------|----|
| Introduction | ix |
|--------------|----|

PART I: Love Stronger Than Death

| | |
|-------------------------------|----|
| 1. Tuesday Morning | 3 |
| 2. The Street | 10 |
| 3. Pradakshina—Church Street | 16 |
| 4. Return to Ground Zero | 22 |
| 5. St. Paul’s Chapel | 26 |
| 6. The Road North | 32 |
| 7. Pradakshina—Liberty Street | 37 |
| 8. A Team Assembles | 41 |
| 9. The Miracle Chapel | 48 |
| 10. Joe Bradley’s Story | 61 |
| 11. Pradakshina—West Street | 64 |
| 12. Creating an Apostolate | 66 |
| 13. Pradakshina—Vesey Street | 70 |

PART II: Friendship In, Prejudice Out

| | |
|---|-----|
| 14. First Session: Fast Friends | 77 |
| 15. The Challenge | 90 |
| 16. California Dreaming | 93 |
| 17. The Man from Canada | 97 |
| 18. Second Session: Jenga and a Hole in the Midwest | 100 |
| 19. When Do You Talk about Race? | 106 |
| 20. Third Session: The Nitty-gritty | 111 |

VIII / CONTENTS

| | |
|-------------------------------------|-----|
| 21. City in the Woods | 120 |
| 22. Running the Study | 123 |
| 23. Fourth Session: Watch Your Head | 128 |
| 24. Overlapping Selves | 133 |
| 25. Deception Dollars | 136 |
| 26. The Big Picture | 140 |
| 27. A Future They Can Live In | 142 |

PART III: *Guided by the Holy Spirit*

| | |
|-------------------------------|-----|
| 28. Talking to God | 149 |
| 29. Responding to Grace | 156 |
| 30. Tales of Unexpected Grace | 159 |
| 31. Transforming Shame | 163 |
| 32. Approaching Forgiveness | 169 |
| 33. Refining the Study | 178 |
| 34. A World of Grace | 184 |

PART IV: *Scanning for Empathy*

| | |
|-------------------------------|-----|
| 35. The 3T | 191 |
| 36. Video Verity | 196 |
| 37. The Teacher and the Nurse | 201 |
| 38. The Turnoff Point | 207 |
| 39. From the Heartland | 214 |
| 40. Out of the Ivory Tower | 223 |
| 41. Just Like a Woman | 229 |
| 42. An Image of Empathy | 233 |

| | |
|-----------------|-----|
| Afterword | 237 |
| Acknowledgments | 239 |
| Notes | 240 |

Introduction

THE IDEA for this book took hold over meals on the campus of Villanova University during the Works of Love Conference in 2003. The actual theme of the conference was Scientific and Religious Perspectives on Altruism. Over the course of three days, studies were presented, research was shared, discussion was encouraged.

Although I was there as a freelance writer covering issues of child development, it was the intermingling with other participants at mealtimes that fascinated me. There was inspired cross-pollination in the conversational breeze.

A professor of applied mathematics from Cape Town, South Africa, could explore notions of forgiveness in middle school children with a social psychologist from the U.S. Midwest. A minister or rabbi might have had an unexpected exchange about enlightenment with a scientist who once felt himself touched by the hand of God—and, decades later, still didn't know what to make of it. A sociologist with expertise on the birth traditions of Native American tribes might have swapped tales of post-birth visitations by ancestral spirits with an anthropologist who'd studied shamanism in the northern reaches of Canada. Or an evolutionary biologist could have been overheard talking to a mystically inclined writer about the implications of reincarnation on multilevel selection theory.

Often, I heard expressions of appreciation for the unusual mix. Conferences tend to be inbred affairs, gatherings of like-minded professionals. In those three days at Villanova, however, boundaries blurred: between academic disciplines, between science and religion, between theory and its real world application.

And stories emerged.

Listening to the professors, clergy, and scientists around me, I realized that behind their studies, behind the research, behind the ivory towers, there were compelling stories to be told—tales of dedicated individuals

trying to make sense of complex issues that touch all of us, lay people and academics alike.

It set me wondering. Who are these people? What are the personal histories they bring to their research? Who are the participants so willing to become statistics in their studies? And how do these studies impact the lives of those involved?

I went looking for answers, bringing to my journey a background in meditation that spans nearly thirty years. As disclaimers go, here's my own: I'm naturally drawn to those who attempt to build bridges between faith and science, between the material world and the realm of the soul. Christ may have been *in* this world and not *of* it, but for those of us who are both *in it* and *of it*, studies that build bridges between faith, science, and altruism may ultimately lead us to that holiest of grails: love. Love that touches us, shapes us, heals us—and has the power to illuminate a transcendent truth.

My first stop was the Institute for Research on Unlimited Love (IRUL), part of the Case Western Reserve University Medical School in Cleveland. IRUL had been a co-host of the Villanova conference, along with the Metanexus Institute, and was funding research studies throughout the country. I easily noted more than a dozen that intrigued me.

However, it was not so easy storming the inner sanctums of scientific inquiry. A number of investigators refused my request, wanting no part of a writer peering over their shoulders. In other instances, initial consent fell through when the researchers realized how much access I required.

To be fair, strict confidentiality agreements were a stumbling block. In most scientific studies, these agreements protect the identities of participants. But without access to participants, a crucial part of the story could not be told. What I needed was creative collaboration with researchers that would allow me to interview and profile participants, while ensuring their privacy.

Ultimately, I was left with four studies in which I was permitted an inside view. They led me across America to consider love as friendship, grace, empathy, and the formation of holiness, not with the goal of adding to science but as a seeker of tales worth telling. Along the way, I met some remarkable people. They shared their lives in taped interviews. They talked with me in their homes. And the investigators kept their end of the bargain by providing me with original data, personal histories,

transcripts of interviews, video recordings, slide presentations, diary entries, and even a backyard barbecue.

This book tries to honor the material that I was given and the generosity of spirit behind it. Each study posed its own challenges to me as a storyteller. On several occasions, I switched my narrative from past tense to present. For my walking meditation around Ground Zero, the present tense conveyed a feeling of walking beside me, of seeing the pit for the first time. In the study on friendship, I used the present tense to dramatize the imposed interactions of two students, strangers to each other, one white and one black. And, in the study on empathy, the present tense lent poignancy to the accounts of hospital patients—many of them now dead—who spoke movingly about the emotional and physical toll exacted by illness.

I hope I have done justice to their lives and work. These pages attempt to chronicle moments of the human condition, the challenge and yearning, failure and success. The result is what I would call a collection of love's short stories. Each of them true.

PART I

Love Stronger Than Death





Tuesday Morning

COURTNEY wasn't about to be late, not with twenty-five renowned theologians converging on Trinity Place in lower Manhattan. She didn't bother with breakfast. A spread of coffee and sweet rolls awaited in a second-floor meeting room of Trinity Church's vaulting office headquarters, a block and a half south of the World Trade Center.

At 7:50 a.m., Courtney and Peter Grandell flagged a cab near her Upper East Side apartment on Seventy-fifth Street, just off Central Park. Grandell was her best friend from their days together at General Theological Seminary, and was now the senior canon of the Washington National Cathedral. He'd arrived in New York the day before, eagerly anticipating the remarkable mix of church leaders, both lay and ordained, set for the following morning.

As the taxi raced the morning traffic down FDR Drive, Courtney sat in the back of the cab, appreciating the clear, unblemished beauty of Manhattan's skyline on this late summer day. September is one of the best months to visit New York City. Pollution levels are down, visibility is high, the temperature is comfortably warm. Everything about the city beckons its residents and visitors to stroll the streets, play in the parks, and meet at the restaurants and coffee shops with outdoor tables.

Courtney's mind sped ahead of the cab, thinking about the familiar faces she would greet. The Reverend Fred Burnham, director of Trinity Institute, had asked her to put together a list of invitees. Among the names on the roster were: Grandell; Elizabeth Koenig, Courtney's former professor at General Seminary on Twenty-third Street; Douglas Brown, a Benedictine monk who was Courtney's spiritual director and the prior of Holy Cross Monastery in West Park, New York; Reverend Lyndon Harris, another colleague from General and the priest of St. Paul's Chapel down the street, a kind of spiritual ward of the larger Trinity Church; and Reverend Mary Haddad, once Courtney's student at General and now the priest at St. Bart's on Park Avenue.

The coup of the day, however, was Burnham's getting Rowan Williams to lead the session. Williams was then Archbishop of Wales and is now Archbishop of Canterbury. Courtney, a doctor of theology and a program associate of Trinity Grants, considers him to be the foremost religious figure in the Episcopal Church.

"He's a holy man of Desmond Tutu's stature," she said, recalling her excitement on that morning. "My total hero. My absolute favorite theologian."

Williams had taught at Oxford University in England and had been named the Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity when he was thirty-six—an exceedingly rare achievement. The Lady Margaret Professorship is the premier theological post at Oxford, an honor usually awarded at the end of a scholar's career, when he has accomplished everything else.

"I've spent a lot of time studying his writing," Courtney said, "so it was a huge day for me. He's an extraordinary human being. And he's had an extraordinary life."

No one could have imagined how much more extraordinary it was about to become. The day was September 11, 2001.

Williams had recently flown to New York from the West Bank, and the city must have seemed placid compared to the rage and desperation of the Palestinian refugee camps he had visited. He had accepted Burnham's invitation to lead a special videotaping of four meditations on the shaping of holy lives that would take place in Trinity's television studio on the fourth floor. The operative plan was that the other participants would form a special audience, albeit a relaxed one. All wore street clothes, not a black shirt or starched white collar in the group.

"We didn't want the TV screen to be full of people sitting there in black shirts," Courtney explained. "Rowan would give a meditation and we would respond and have a kind of conversation. It would be an amazing group in this room with him: a powerhouse of spiritual depth."

In a way, it was a reunion. She had invited many of these same individuals to a retreat at Trinity's conference center in Connecticut the previous March. They were met with an icy kiss from New England's winter: a blizzard that dumped four feet of snow, shutting down the roads and shutting them in.

"It was an effort for people to get there," Courtney said, "but everybody did. We played in the snow, and the group bonded. A lot of them had never met each other before."