



Review of Anne Lamott's *Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith*

By Carolyn Copenhaver
Oakhurst Baptist Church Library Committee Member
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As you can see from the cover picture above, this book, Lamott's tenth, entices the reader by depicting a serene white clapboard country church shaded by a green and gold leafed tree. In front of the church door, a wooden marquee announces a sweetly-tensioned "sermon: "Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith," the title of this book. Don't be fooled. Start reading this very funny, very moving, and very testy book and you will soon discover that those "thoughts on faith" recount true life events morphed into comic, sometimes lunatic, and even tragic tales. As one reviewer says, "No one could make this stuff up."

The Author

These memoirs come from the pen of a 50+ Californian living in Marin County where she is a social activist and a cheerfully controversial figure. With great honesty she frames these stories within a personality haunted by insecurity, fears of ageing, past errors, lost love, a deceased mother she guiltily loves better dead than alive, and a teenage son who quit Sunday School and mouths off way too often. All in all, she is both a common and an extraordinary woman, rescued during a drug stupor by a vision of Jesus crumpled nearby in a corner. Her faith is supported by a small and mostly-black Presbyterian church, whose woman minister "Annie" deeply loves. Lamott is also a mindful woman who daily wonders in what form grace will come—if it comes at all.

The Book

Lamott's "Christian journey" is the theme of her work. "God let's me start over," she once told an interviewer. She might have added, "and over and over and over." For her Oakhurst fans, this book is now available in hardback in our library. Before you head for the sign-out sheet, be forewarned. I would not lend this book to my 90-year old very intelligent, good-humored, well-read Christian mother. I can see her quietly pressing the covers shut (not with anger, but with sadness and disappointment) when she encounters the first "f" word—and that from a writer who claims to be centered in Jesus. So I gently suggest to my Oakhurst brethren who may also be sensitive to occasional swearing in a religious memoir to bypass this work. It is not for everyone, as evidenced by the fact that some Christian bookstores will not carry Lamott's books. For the rest of you, run for it. It is her best book yet.

Obviously, I love this book and I'm not alone at Oakhurst. Lamott has enough fans to land her last three books, including this one, on the New York Times Bestseller list. The recently issued paperback is back on the list again. So there's something meaningful here for a lot of people, and not just Christians. This book, third in a series of "Thoughts on Faith," is a collection of 24 essays, many reprinted from a multitude of respected sources, including Salon. Lamott crafts her daily failures of love, unrestraint, self-absorption and a host of other sins into tales of redemption—so recognizably true, and so recognizably *you*, that over and over again you have to laugh—both at Lamott and at yourself. Rare writer that she is, she composes metaphorically and analogically. She is a master of irony. She compounds this miracle of compositional skills with angelic prose that seems to spill effortlessly from her pen.

The Critics

Despite her abundant literary gifts and a vast majority of positive reviews of this "divine comedy," Lamott has her detractors. My favorite negative Internet review by a "devout, traditional Christian" goes like this: Lamott's spirituality is "muzak best suited for calming the nerves of emotionally unhinged ferrets." He claims that Lamott's [unwarranted] vast sales "are a sobering warning of the spiritual dehydration of our generation."

Recently, a month into recovering from a total knee replacement, I actually did have the nerves of an "emotionally unhinged" ferret. I needed distraction from pain, some solace, some laughter, so I reread this book. When I came to the essay, "Dance Class," where Lamott and a friend help Karen lead an adult special-ed dance class, I was moved yet again by the depth of Lamott's compassion and self-awareness. She writes: "I will never know how hard it is to be developmentally disabled, but I do know the sorrow of being ordinary and that much of our life is spent doing the crazy mental arithmetic of how, at any given moment, we might improve, or at least disguise or present our defects and screw-ups in either a more charming or more intimidating way."

Then Karen, the dance instructor, told Lamott after class that one of the women dancers had exclaimed, "I liked those old ladies. They were helpers and they danced." Lamott reflects on this and ends the chapter this way: "These are the words that I want on my gravestone. I was a helper and I danced."

May we at Oakhurst always be "helpers and dancers." And practitioners of self-awareness and mindfulness. Though we may sometimes fall into sins great and small, may we constantly, moment-by-moment, be seekers of God's grace—not eventually, but now--as this writer tries to be.



Lamott, Anne. *Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith*. NY: Riverhead Books, 2007.

Note: Cokesbury, the Christian bookstore whose slogan is "Resources for the Christian Journey" discounts the paperback edition. (www.cokesbury.com)

This review expresses the views of the writer only and not necessarily those of any member of the Library Committee.