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# A Measure of Grace

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## Enmeshed, Disengaged, and Interdependent Relationships ~ Part One

*by Roger Jones*

If you've been a reader of *A Measure of Grace* for any length of time, you have probably discovered that many of the articles I write connect to something I currently see as an issue within WGA's groups or something that I am working with in my personal life. This month is no exception.

In preparation for my marriage, I've been doing some reading and study on the topic. I have found that much of what is written about marriage is information I have learned about from other resources, but focused in a different way.

In their book *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts*, Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott address a number of myths about marriage. One of these is "My

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Spouse Will Make Me Whole.” As I read the section about this, I found some familiar themes that apply to single and married people: enmeshed relationships, disengaged relationships, and interdependent relationships. Even though the quotes I’ve pulled from the book are written for those who are married and engaged, I’ll try to connect the dots for both single and married people.

“Couples who swallow the myth that their spouse will make them whole become dependent on their partner in a way that is by all standards unhealthy. These couples cultivate what experts call an *enmeshed* relationship, characterized by a general reliance on their spouse for continual support, assurance, and wholeness. It is easily coupled with low self-esteem and a sense of inferiority that is easily controlled by their partner.

Dependent partners desire happiness, not personal growth. They are not interested in nourishing the relationship, but in being nourished by their partner. They believe the lie that says they will effortlessly be made whole simply by being married.”\*

As I read these paragraphs, I was reminded of my experiences with emotional dependency. If you replace every instance of the word “spouse” above with the word “friend,” it

would effectively describe several of the intense *enmeshed* relationships I have experienced.

One of my friendships that became enmeshed happened when I moved to Denver in 1995, and I quickly became friends with someone I met soon after I arrived. He and I had quite a bit in common. We enjoyed the same TV shows and movies. We could talk for a long time (and we did) without running out of things to say, and we spent a lot of time together. Before long, we were relying heavily on one another. If he wasn’t available to talk or to spend time together, I felt rejected. I needed that “continual assurance” from him to feel that the relationship was not in jeopardy. My own sense of “self” was so limited that I was constantly looking for someone to attach myself to. I felt incapable of being a whole person on my own. The Drs. Parrott refer to enmeshed relationship as *A-frame*:

“*A-frame* relationships are symbolized by the capital letter *A*. Partners have a strong couple identity but very little individual self-esteem. They think of themselves as a unit rather than as separate individuals. Like the long lines of the letter *A*, they lean on one another. The relationship is structured so that if one lets go, the other falls. And that is exactly what happens when one partner outgrows his

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or her dependency needs.”\*

Fortunately, our friendship did not fall apart as we worked through dependency and enmeshment issues. My friend and I were both committed to personal growth, and we grew together (and separately) in such ways that we were both able to eventually stand on our own. We remain friends to this day, although with much healthier approaches to our relationship with each other and with our other relationships as well.

I have also seen this pattern happen quite often with the couples I have worked with at WGA. A pattern of *enmeshment* has occurred throughout the course of their relationship. There is a cost to living in such a dependent manner... limited relationships outside the marriage which can lead towards resentment or addiction. One partner grows tired of the way things are and decides to change some things. This upsets the balance of the relationship and causes all kinds of problems.

In the film *When a Man Loves a Woman*, Meg Ryan and Andy Garcia portray characters who illustrate this type of relationship. Ryan’s character is an alcoholic, and Garcia plays the role of her husband. They both hate her alcoholism and the problems it causes for them. But, as she goes to Alcoholics Anonymous and begins to make some positive changes, their marriage falls apart. They had

a pattern of relating to one another where she was always the mess, and he was always the one who was strong and picked up all the pieces. When she began to get stronger, he did not know how to show his love for her anymore. All of his attempts at doing so were rejected, because she didn’t need him to throw out her bottles of alcohol or to take care of her when she was hung over. They both needed to learn how to be healthy individuals so that they could be a solid, healthy couple.

Enmeshment carries many different labels. Emotional dependency and codependency are some of those. For further reading on the topic, I recommend reading *Codependent No More* by Melody Beattie. You can also find more information on the WGA website at

[www.wheregraceabounds.org](http://www.wheregraceabounds.org). In the following months, I will delve into the *disengaged* and *interdependent* relating styles and how these can affect relationships in marriage, family, and in friendship.

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\* Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott, *Saving Your marriage Before It Starts: Seven Questions to Ask Yourself Before – And After – You Marry – Expanded and Updated Edition* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2006), 30-32.

## Pick Your Porn, 'Cuz Everybody's Got Some

By Scott Kingry

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Have you been breathing lately? If you have, you're probably more than aware that "vampires" are all the rage in the media these days. These are not the old-school "Count Chocula" type of vampire either, with a thick slobbery Transylvanian accent and who could turn into a big plastic wriggling bat at any moment. A new brand of the "undead" is on the scene these days—beautiful, sexy, tortured and even though evil incarnate, attempting to live as "good" every day citizens. The latest of these non-blood sucking makeovers are in the *Twilight* book series (and now films) by Mormon writer Stephanie Meyer.

Upon arriving in the small town of Forks, Washington, angst-ridden teenager, Bella Swan (who likes to run her hands through her hair frequently for some reason) is introduced to the ultra vogue Cullen family. After several encounters, she is thrown together with and eventually falls for Edward, the most brooding Cullen of them all. Edward sorta looks like your everyday 17 year old high-schooler, except that he's actually over 100, with pasty white skin, too-red lips and very tall, dramatic John Travolta hair (most people first



meeting him might think, "Hey, you're a vampire, right?"). Bella is pretty into Edward—and why not—he's super strong, mysterious and his main focus is her. She wants to consummate this relationship quickly, not only to get her hands on those pasty white abs, but also to be turned into a vogue vamp like him. Edward's confused about that desire (and aren't we all?)—he often asks her, "why would you want to be immortal and evil?" But alas, they're not able to complete one another for a variety of reasons—his family has sworn an oath not to kill humans, his strength would hurt her and he kind of wants to eat her too, etc., so they mostly lie on the lawn and gaze nauseatingly into one another's eyes for hours on end. As if this weren't tragic enough, Bella's best friend is a beefy Native American dude named Jacob, coincidentally a Werewolf—

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who just happens to be in love with her. Oh, those wacky teens; what is a girl to do?

What is a girl to do, is right. Young girls are absolutely gaga for these stories. The male stars interviewed about their fan base have confessed that the mothers are actually worse than their teenage daughters and paw them all over, screaming out their desires for a “hot” vampire boyfriend. Really? On the flip side, most men detest these movies (shock). We were at the opening weekend of the second film, *New Moon*; at the end as the credits began rolling, the guy in front of us turned to his girlfriend and exclaimed “There, now we’re even!” Wow, what’s that all about? A few months ago, the staff met with a youth pastor and we got to talking about the strong reactions from both genders to these stories. It seems from his observations that guys disparage them so vehemently because the characters only highlight mortal male inadequacies. Their complaints include—“I’ll never have a body like that”; “I’ll never be that strong” (to stop an oncoming car with my hand); “I can’t stare that long”—basically bottom line is—“If that’s a woman’s measure of the perfect man, we’re in big trouble!”

As I mulled over these laments, it all started sounding vaguely familiar--objectifying the perfect body, having a “fantasy person” I could conjure up to be there for me and only me,

someone to do what I want, when I want and meet my needs exclusively. This is what women have been protesting about pornography and men for years. The list of criticisms is similar—“my body will never be like the women in those videos”; “I’ll never be sexy enough”; “I feel like an object and not a person” etc. If that’s the measure of a perfect woman, not many are going to make the cut.

The sad thing is that if we continually retreat to these two-dimensional representations of love, sex and relationship that the media constantly floats before our faces, we miss the very real people who are right in our midst and relating in an authentic way. Our loved ones, and potential loved ones, will always miss the mark and will always leave us massively disappointed; my goodness, why wouldn’t you run to those false images? Loving an actual flawed human, someone who might have countless irritating idiosyncrasies and whom you can’t control, is not a very glamorous task. It’s not surprising teachings like speaking the truth in love, unconditionally loving someone right where they are, bearing one another’s burdens and extending a heap load of forgiveness daily, permeate the bulk of Scripture.

As I remember the couple in the theatre after our vampire adventure, I smile and often wonder—what horrible movie did the woman have to see that would make *New Moon* a fair punishment?



## Fear: How to Pray

By Mary Heathman

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Often when a person is working through painful emotions, the issue of fear comes up. When we talk about fear, there are several ways to look at it. Fear is an emotion and therefore to be managed and considered in light of our other emotional responses. Fear is sometimes also a warning—and can motivate us to take action to protect ourselves. But fear is also . . . , well, we'll get to that later on.

Since fear is an emotion, the response to one's fear is oftentimes a soft careful treatment, like we might reassure a frightened baby with enfolding, protective arms and soothing words. This is a good initial response upon the onset of fear—it is good to pay attention to our emotions, including our fears; it helps to take care of ourselves by slowing down, paying attention to what we are feeling, to reassure ourselves of the care of God and others who love us; this self-nurturing at the onset of a fear response functions as a stabilizer, helping us get our bearings, remembering we are not alone.

Another typical response to fear is to react—running in any way one can to get away from that which triggered the fear. This running can actually be physical, removing oneself from the situation, or an emotional and/or psychological withdrawal—something commonly called “shutting down.” This flight response is appropriate, of course, when there is imminent danger and the greatest need of the moment is to remove oneself from the circumstances, relationship, etc.

But. . . .

The first couple of paragraphs are no-brainers, right? We know that fearful people need reassurance. We also know that fear alerts us in the face of immediate danger and provides strong motivation to act quickly when our safety or well-being is threatened.

But there is another function of fear that is often overlooked—I believe that *my fear is often a manifestation of unbelief*. I have come to understand that when I am fearful, at least one reason for that is because I am believing that there is something that is going to happen to me that God either can't or won't turn around to my benefit. This lack of faith, this unbelief in the goodness of God, I have learned to confess as sin, so that I may be free of it—free to deal with all other aspects of my emotions, circumstances, and relationships without the overlay of spiritual oppression that comes with unbelief.

Some readers may be wondering what experiences brought me to this conclusion; what scriptural foundation supports this conviction? I would like to share a few thoughts along these lines.

When I came to Christ, thirty eight years ago, I was twenty-seven years old and trembling in the aftermath of a profound disillusionment with all that I had counted upon – my understanding of how to live a good life, how to be a good parent, how to achieve peace, and even who I understood myself to be as a woman, a person—all of it had crumbled. My greatest fear at the time was that not only

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was I a failure, but that I would repeat the process—that as I picked up the pieces and began to build a new foundation I would just repeat the past. I was petrified that despite my best efforts, later on, maybe another 27 years down the road, I would face the same failure. I just couldn't know for sure that the new "truths" I was learning were any more solid than the ones I had lived by for years? I no longer trusted my own ability to reason and make good choices.

It was in this context that I surrendered to Christ. One part of my prayer on that day especially illustrates my fear and hope at the time, "God, I never again want to make another decision without you." One of the first Bible passages I memorized was Proverbs 3:5-6: *Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.*

It was the "lean not to your own understanding" part that intrigued me most. I memorized another scripture, *"Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed— not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence— continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose"* (Php. 2:12-13).

With these principles as my "prime directive" so to speak, I set about walking with the Lord according to His understanding. In literal fear and trembling, I learned to be responsive to the God who lives within me; the God who inspires even my desire to do the right thing.

I could go on to develop these ideas, to convince you of what I believe. But I prefer to simply tell you what I do with this conviction, what it looks like in ac-

tion. You may decide to try it yourself, or it may inspire you toward another way, uniquely yours and God's together. Or you may not find it helpful at all . . . ! (In any case, it is my prayer that the sharing of a bit of my heart and mind will fall on kind ears—may God's grace cover us all!)

This is my habit when fear raises its ugly head in my heart and mind: I pray for God's help, confess my unbelief, and ask for His help again. The prayer is simple; it sounds something like this:

*God help me. Here I am again—fearful—believing that something might happen that you can't or won't turn around and use for my good. Forgive my sin of unbelief; 'Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief.' Lord, teach me about myself; is there something I need to face, something I need to run from, something I need to see differently? I trust you, Lord, to cleanse me from the effects of my sin, and to 'guide me into all truth' as you have promised.<sup>i</sup>*

Through habitual praying in this way, my fearful heart has been, and is being, changed into a trusting peaceful heart. I believe that the consequence of surrendering our hearts to the Lord in the midst of our fears results in the closing off of footholds used by the enemy, and nullifies any traction the spiritual forces of darkness may have gained through my unbelief. I praise the Lord for His healing, His teaching, His comfort, His constant love—He alone knows what our fear is about; it is appropriate to put it in His hands.

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<sup>i</sup> Mark 9:24; John 16:13.

You are invited to celebrate  
**Mary Heathman's Non-retirement / 65<sup>th</sup> Birthday!**

When: Saturday, May 29<sup>th</sup>  
Time: 11:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.  
Where: Alamo Placita Park  
3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue and Emerson Street, just east  
of Speer Blvd.



\*In the event of inclement weather, celebration will be held at  
the WGA Offices at 1532 Emerson Street - pray for sunshine!

*We will be having a picnic potluck!  
please feel free to bring your favorite dish to share!*

Please Bring:

- 1) A blanket or chair to sit on
- 2) Your favorite item for play at the park
- 3) a picnic potluck dish to share - beverage will be provided

*Lunch will be served beginning at noon. You are free to stay  
and relax, enjoying the park and the rest of the afternoon  
with your WGA family and friends!*

In lieu of gifts you are welcome to make a donation to WGA in  
Mary's honor.

That truly would be the best present you could ever give her



## March At a Glance

**March 9th:** WGA presented at Younglife

**March 13th:** Men's Event, Women's Event

**March 16th:** WGA hosted a Pastor/Ministry leader training on the topic "Transparency in Ministry at the WGA offices

## April And Beyond

**May 1st:** Intercessory Prayer. Join us from 8:00-9:00 am

**May 20th:** Pastor's Training Event

**May 29th:** Mary's 65th Birthday Party!

**June 5th:** Family and Friends Event. Please contact the WGA office for details.

**June 26th:** Roger and Jill's wedding!

## Financial Update

**Due to the generosity of our donors, the shortage of income in January and February has been made up for in March and April. Thank you for your prayers and continuing support of Where Grace Abounds.**

### Thursday Night Group

**March 4th:** 29 people

**March 11th:** 34 people

**March 18th:** 33 people

**March 25th:** 34 people

**Orientation meeting:** 3 new people

### WGA Staff

**Roger Jones**  
Executive Director

**Scott Kingry**  
Program Director

**Janet Moine**  
Asst Program Director

**Mary Heathman**  
Founding Director

*A Measure of Grace*  
is edited by  
Elodie Ballantine Emig

*Where Grace Abounds*  
exists to guide and support  
men and women who seek to  
understand sexuality and  
relationship, and to inspire  
all people to know and  
personally appropriate  
God's plan for their  
sexuality and relationships.

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