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A Measure of Grace

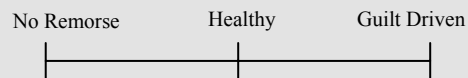
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Acts of Conscience *by Roger Jones*

I remember when I was first introduced to the idea of having a conscience. Many of you will probably have the same memory, as it came from a song sung by Jiminy Cricket in Disney's *Pinocchio*: "And always let your conscience be your guide." This is a valuable lesson to learn: our own sense of right and wrong can help us to make good decisions for ourselves and focus our attention on how our choices affect other people. But what happens when our conscience becomes warped or impaired?

People with healthy consciences learn from their mistakes and move on. They will make further mistakes, but because their consciences are not impaired, they will continue to learn and grow and move forward. If the conscience was illustrated as a spectrum, with "healthy" at the center, to its extreme left would be "no remorse" and to its extreme right would be "guilt driven."



Having worked with men and women at Where Grace Abounds for almost 15 years now, I have heard recurring themes on the topic of conscience. Of course, I have been working with myself and my

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Where Grace Abounds
P.O. Box 18871
Denver, Colorado 80218-0871

Office: 303/863-7757
Fax: 303/863-7769

email:
info@wheregraceabounds.org
website:
www.wheregraceabounds.org



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own conscience for much longer. I have experienced the whole of the spectrum: no remorse, guilt driven, and the healthy conscience.

We have all heard the phrase “a guilty conscience.” This usually refers to someone who has done something wrong and is now feeling badly about it. Continuing to engage in behaviors or relationships which cause one to feel conflicted can result in a guilty conscience. Addiction certainly offers a clear illustration.

Caught up in a cycle in which legitimate needs are met through an addictive or sinful behavior, a person who is dealing with a sexual or relational addiction may feel terminally guilt driven. The addictive behavior leads to feelings of guilt, from which the only seeming relief is further such behavior. This is followed by more guilt and more destructive behaviors; on and on the cycle goes. Of course, addiction isn’t necessary to this cycle. Sin causes remorse. Anytime a person turns to further sin as an escape from remorse, he/she has begun the cycle.

In his workbook, *Facing the Shadow*, Patrick Carnes, an author and speaker on the topic of sex addiction, says:

Part of the pain of sex addiction for many sex addicts is that they have violated their value system, and they are guilt driven. One of the essential drivers of the addiction cycle is the despair after doing behavior you feel bad about. Addicts act out further in an effort to blot out the despair. Torturing yourself for your behavior that was exploitive or thoughtless adds power to the addictive process.¹

On the other end of the spectrum, we have “no remorse.” This is the person who seems jaded, as if their choices have no consequences. Or perhaps he/she simply doesn’t seem to care about the effects of his/her choices. While some may display this lack of remorse more readily than others, it is often the result of a long season of addictive behavior. The “guilt driven” cycle described above becomes so automatic that the “remorse” part of the process gets skipped over. The conscience becomes seared, much like the taste buds after drinking something too hot. The destructive behaviors must be kept up or the overwhelming feelings of guilt will come rushing back with a vengeance. Carnes says,

Some addicts have no remorse for their behavior, even though they clearly hurt others.... Often, sex addicts talk about not wanting to see someone again after seducing him or her. Or in prostitution or anonymous sex, part of the deal is no entanglements. Bottom line, this means no regard for the other.²

If and when we find ourselves living in these extremes of conscience, how do we move towards health? Here are a couple of things that can help you get started:

- First and foremost, we need God. He is the ultimate arbitrator of what is right and wrong. And, He is our healer. Talk to God about where you are on the spectrum. Confess and repent. He will restore your conscience.
- Someone, besides you and God, needs to know the things with which you struggle. Surround yourself with people who can support you on your journey. These need to be men and

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(Acts of Conscience *continued from page 2*)

women with similar life goals and ethics. If you are primarily spending time with people who do not share your values, this is a set up for confusion and compromise. I'm not suggesting your move to a commune, just try to keep the scales tipped in favor of your life goals and standards.

Finally, I will end with another quotation from Patrick Carnes, about the rightful place of our conscience:

Conscience is really more than following the rules. We call that compliance. A conscience determines that for which you will fight. If someone attacked someone you love, you would immediately put everything at risk to protect your

loved one. A conscience asks what you are willing to put everything at risk for—because it matters so much. A person with a conscience comes to recognize that which matters. A recovering person draws a line in the sand, saying this is what matters to me. I will do everything for this.³

¹Patrick Carnes, *Facing the Shadow* (Wickenburg, Arizona: Gentle Path Press, 2001), pg. 142.

²Carnes, 142.

³Carnes, 142.

A New Asceticism?

By Scott Kingry

Society was regarded by the Desert Fathers as a shipwreck from which each single individual man had to swim for his life....These were men who believed that to let oneself drift along, passively accepting the tenets and values of what they knew as society, was purely and simply a disaster.

Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert*

Trying to keep up with the latest technology can drive a person insane. My friends and I have this ongoing joke about what is the hippest, must-have cell phone. Several years ago, I acquired my

first cell and finally joined the ranks of people able to return phone calls while driving. I, too, gabbing loudly while I shopped, could annoy everyone in Target. Now this was a good, simple, reliable little cell, but my friends kept “mildly” encouraging me to keep up with the times and get the newest, hottest Razor Phone. Finally after months of prodding, I broke down and procured this latest “holy grail” and basked in my coolness---for about 30 seconds. Within a few months, the new I-Phone came out and as each in my circle purchased this trendy technology, my phone suddenly became an antiquated piece of—shall we say—garbage. Now years later, my

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friends are still hoping I'll enter the 2010s with an I-Phone, but I still have that same little Razor. These days I pull it out to an audible gasp from on-lookers, as though I were holding a 1950's rotary phone in my hand.

As I think about it, this isn't the only way in which I seem to be falling behind the times. I still use a thick paper Day Timer, where I scribble (and scribble out) daily and weekly appointments with my ball point. I still pay my bills with these odd, paper things called "checks" and put them in the snail mail. The only computer I have is at my office, so I only have access to email during the work week. Besides a DVD player, I-pod (plugged into my record player) and cell phone, I probably don't have much more technology in my home than the Bradys did.

I guess this has been somewhat intentional. The above quotation from Thomas Merton describes the early "ascetics"—those Christians who, wearied by their culture, fled to the desert to "practice strict self denial as a measure of personal and especially spiritual discipline." I've often thought of those hermit men and women from the 4th century as a bit fanatical—as tempting as it is, when life is just too crazy-making one can't just go live alone on an island. These days though, I wonder whether, in fleeing 'big bad society,' they were actually running towards something. Compulsivity and addiction thrive around us and in us—where can we go, what can we do for our souls to make space to hear God's "still small voice"? So, who knew that for me, the "new asceticism" would be to live as close as possible to the 60s—How Mad Man can you get?

I am not a gadget person, but I'm not bashing technology and the things that go along with it—not at all. Every Christian must discern what they need to "run towards" and "what to avoid" as the Spiritual Fathers and Mothers have done for millennia. We should examine every area of our lives—pop culture, people that influence us, activities we invest in (even Christian ones)—I want to guard what I allow to infiltrate my life. How can you form the safety of a "Spiritual Hermitage" within the context of your life? Perhaps these questions could prove helpful:

How do I define "simplicity"? What areas of my life could be made more streamlined and simple?

As I try to hear and discern God's voice in my life, where can I cultivate stillness, time and margin?

Where in my life do I settle for efficient & convenient relating rather than "authentic relationship"?

Over lunch one recent afternoon, a friend who's about my age and I were reminiscing fondly about the early years of WGA. How fast time has flown since the 80s and what a different world we now live in. My friend remarked, "You only have to watch reality television for about 5 minutes to get in touch with the depravity of mankind." Even though I can totally get sucked into an episode of "The Bachelor," I guffawed loudly and thought "so true." It's confusing to try to figure out how to escape the noisy, neurotic, obsessive world and satisfy the deep desire to hear from God. Got any thoughts about that? Call me on my Razor phone some time and we can chat.



Turning On the Risk Pressure

by Mary Heathman

This will be the last article in a series based on the book, *Right Risk* (Treasurer, 2003). Previous articles have explored (1) the importance of silence out of which can rise direction and purpose, (2) how to defy inertia in order to “resist the status quo that is pulling us back into inaction or indecision,” and (3) rewriting old scripts, replacing them with “new beliefs, new thoughts, that we practice until they are internalized.” This month’s article will explore author Bill Treasurer’s fourth principle in the preparation for right risk taking: Turn On the Risk Pressure.

To open the discussion, Treasurer offers two quotes:

Public opinion is a weak tyrant compared with our own private thoughts. Henry David Thoreau

Numerous decent, wholesome young persons permit themselves to become involved in unwholesome pursuits which they do not personally condone or even enjoy, because they are ashamed to say no when the gang says yes. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Two of the most powerful motivating pressures, for good or for evil, are known to be peer pressure and personal pressure, the expectations, we place upon ourselves. The words of Thoreau and King underscore the universality of this phenomenon—we really care and are motivated by what others think, and

we expect ourselves to perform to a standard that we have ourselves set. With these points in mind, I turn now to a few thoughts about why we would intentionally put ourselves in situations that pressure us.

An illustration from my own life comes to mind. When my step-son, Tom, came to me in 1984 and told me about his struggle with same-sex attractions, my mind and heart were thrust immediately into conflict. As I said to him, “Tom, I love you and that isn’t going to change; but I am feeling a jumble of emotions and thoughts that are confusing and distressing. I am going to need some time.” I was also thinking, but didn’t say, “No, no, no. . . . what you are saying to me doesn’t match anything I believe about you, about homosexuality, about relationships. Both my head and my heart feel like they are going to explode!”

That is exactly how it felt—intense pressure in my chest and head. Physically, I was aware of a ringing in my ears, an accelerated heart rate, a lump formed in my throat. My eyes were hot and itchy, stinging. My thoughts were chaotic—mutually exclusive thoughts darted about in my head—confusion reigned.

On the outside, I think I looked relatively normal. The only indicators of distress might have been the untouched fruit salad in front of me, and the sudden wrap-up of our time together. Tom gave me a stack of books that he thought would be helpful; and I escaped the restaurant and headed home. Before I got home, the lump in my throat and sting-

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ing eyes gave way to a flood of tears and more confusion. I pulled the car over until I could see to drive, and then headed home, praying, “Lord, I don’t know what to do; I don’t know what is true; I love Tom but suddenly it feels like I don’t even know him. I don’t think I can do this; I don’t even know how to start. . . .” This moment in time is burned into my mind because it thrust me into intense conflict—what I knew about Tom and what I knew about homosexuality were like two freight trains racing down the same track—a head-on collision was imminent. In the context of right risk-taking, I was faced with a choice—whether to turn away, run away from the problem and ignore it, or face into what felt like a dangerous storm threatening both my relationship with my son and my relationship with the Truth.

Treasurer (2003) says, “Our lives have many points of risk pressure that act on us by forming an acute dissatisfaction with our current circumstances. Often our dissatisfaction intensifies until it grabs us by the throat and screams, “Take a risk and jump, you fool!”(p. 75). I was acutely dissatisfied with the status quo of my understanding—something needed to change, and the only “something” I had any control over was me, “What could I do?”

The choice I made was to take the dive right into the confusion. I decided to find out the truth about homosexuality, the truth about my son, the truth about what the bible had to say. The first few months after that decision, in retrospect, align

pretty well with Treasurer’s principle of Turning On the Risk Pressure, so I will illustrate his ideas with my own experience.

Treasurer says, “The trick in applying risk pressure is to apply enough to help you progress toward your risk, but not so much that it causes you to choke”. “. . . by creating what I call purposeful anxiety. Purposeful anxiety keeps us alert to the potential dangers and opportunities that the risk may hold. In balanced amounts, it also keeps inertia at bay” (p. 75-76).

I violated this principle before I ever got home from my meeting with Tom. Instead of giving my self some space to think about what had just happened, I pulled into the park down the hill from our house and dived right into the books he had given me. Instead of choosing carefully which book I would read, I started with the thickest and most intense, and confused and scared myself even further. Instead of creating a “balanced

amount” of “purposeful anxiety, “ I found myself in an undertow of too much information too soon. I was no longer avoiding the issue; my pendulum had swung and now I was obsessed with it and overwhelmed!

The purpose of turning on your risk pressure is to create enough motivation to move toward action. Pressure points that might be applied are different for different people. I already mentioned peer pressure and personal expectations as powerful motivators for many people. In my case,

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peer pressure held no power, for I had not yet told anyone about what was happening. However, my expectations of myself rose high and loud within me. I expect to find out the truth—nothing short will satisfy me! This pursuit of truth has always been a standard operating procedure for me. (Tom knew that, that's why he brought me the books.)

In the next couple of years, my motivating points of pressure were all driven by an intense interest in learning what was true. For me, it has never been acceptable to assume you know what the truth is—there is always more to learn. The “purposeful anxiety” in me was created by the dissonance between what I thought I believed and the evidence in front of me: Tom's story of his same-sex attractions and my perspective on homosexuality.

As I studied and prayed in order to resolve this dissonance, I initially dove in too deep too soon as described previously. But after the first wave of overwhelm, I began to settle into a series of actions designed to close the gap. Besides reading everything I could get my hands on, these actions included: attending conferences on sexuality, attending gay activist meetings and events (these approached the edge of the too much too soon category). I also took the risk to disclose to a few key people what was happening in my family, and how I was feeling. These pressure points served to move (pressure) me into taking action.

There were various actions along the way resulting in the establishment of Where

Grace Abounds twenty-five years later. As I sit and reflect it is a miracle to me to see where the Lord has brought me; I serve in a ministry that was born out of the conflict created in a diner in downtown Denver. I could never have taken the whole thing at once; God developed it inch by inch over time. My part was to enter into the process and purposefully put myself in learning situations—purposeful anxiety. These decisions to take risks, mostly right risks, I hope, were the impetus that kept me moving toward what I believe was God's goal all along. I was drawn first into his guidance into all

truth as he had promised, then into his redemptive purposes for my circumstances. In so doing, he closed the gap between where I was and where I wanted to be.

A couple of years ago, another wave of frustration and dissatisfaction hit and I catapulted myself into pursuing a Master's Degree. But that is another story for another time. I close with another reminder: Read Treasurer's book; prepare for and take right risks; I am convinced this is one of the ways God

moves us toward his purposes!

Treasurer, W. (2003). Right risk: 10 powerful principles for taking giant leaps with your life. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

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February In Review

February 11-12th: WGA staff/ leadership held a conference on “Love Addiction” at The Next Level Church.

February 12th: Game Night with WGA group participants

Thursday Night Group

February 3rd: 27 people

February 10th: 34 people

February 17th: 45 people

February 24th: 35 people

Orientation meeting: 4 new people

March And Beyond

April 2nd: Intercessory Prayer. Join us from 8:00— 9:00 am at the WGA offices

April 3rd: Open House. Come by and see WGA’s new kitchen!

May 28th: Founders Day Picnic. Join us to celebrate Mary’s birthday!

September 17th: WGA 25th Anniversary Celebration. We hope you will join us to recognize this milestone of WGA history. More information will be coming your way soon!

WGA Staff

Roger Jones
Executive Director

Scott Kingry
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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