



*The Gift of Hard Things: Finding
Grace in Unexpected Places*
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*"It is a book absolutely after my
own heart."*

— Anne Lamott, author of
Traveling Mercies and *Small
Victories*

Finding Grace in Unexpected Places

As a white, middle-class Westerner, I have been taught that the pursuit and realization of my individual desires and appetites are my birthright. I have been taught that with discipline, planning and hard work life will conform to my expectations. Our society doesn't tolerate the idea that we (individually and collectively) lack control. Even in our spiritual lives we hold up teachers, books and spiritual practices that promise happiness, peace and health. And yet is there anything more destructive than human beings who believe they have life under control? Under this illusion we assume our every fortune is earned and every suffering deserved.

How isolating.

We need to cultivate an ongoing awareness that we are small, sensitive creatures with short lifespans in a world that is often chaotic, capricious, mysterious, terrible and wonderful all at the same time. Failure, disappointment, loss and other difficult experiences call us to accept our humanity, feel grateful for what has been given, receive the care of others and seek guidance from the Holy Spirit. . . .

From Jesus' perspective our sufferings provide an opportunity for awareness, insight and enlightenment. In the Beatitudes we hear Jesus claim that our disrupted plans, our broken faith, our poverty and sufferings, our grief and unmet longings can be held as gifts that make us more compassionate toward others and more open and available to God's love.

Looking back on nearly five decades of life, it is still sometimes difficult for me to admit that my struggles, disappointments, doubts and failures in life and ministry have opened me to the very love, acceptance and peace that all my controlling behaviors sought to attain. Ultimately, grace can never be earned. Like all gifts it can only be received, requiring that I simply open my hands and trust. The more I accept difficulty as a natural part of the spiritual life, the more I find myself available to the deep gifts of the Spirit—compassion, trust, gratitude, humility, wonder, joy. . . .

It's interesting that Jesus had no system for helping move people from despair to hope, from fear to trust. Jesus used a number of tactics—he told stories, he confronted, he led people into nature, he put his fingers in ears and smeared mud in eyes, he stayed silent, he asked questions, he challenged preconceptions. In all that he did he sought to shift perspective. His words and actions disoriented those around him, inviting listeners to step away from their fearfulness and suffering (sometimes just for a moment), remember their humanity, and become aware of God's field of grace.

Jesus moves us to behold with compassion our suffering, the suffering of others and the

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suffering of the world. To do this a change of perception is required. We need some distance, some space, some practice to help us step out from our hurt and see ourselves and others through the eyes of love.

A woman is caught in adultery. She is humiliated, filled with shame. The men around her are burning with self-righteousness – and most likely, for some, fear that she might expose them as coadulterers. What does Jesus do?

He writes in the sand.

Such a strange act, so out of sync with the typical violent, shaming tension between victim and accusers. Jesus writes in the sand, and this creative act disorients. It draws people's attention away from the hurt and anger and onto this unusual teacher. When they are knocked off balance, Jesus is able to speak a word of recognition that diffuses the hostility, empowers the shamed woman and humbles the crowd, allowing everyone to become more available to God's grace. Through a change in perspective the whole unfortunate incident moves from tragedy to blessing.

We all need holding spaces where our perspective can deepen – a friend, a community, a prayer, a chapel, a story, a forest, a book to hold and trust us until the rage calms, until the despair is comforted, until the voice of self-hatred quiets. This is what the Christian faith offers. It provides us with stories, rituals, people, imagination, sacred places and practices that move us out of confining barns with dusty oats and tepid water so we might hear and see the wider landscape of our being and receive the green love of God.

We fall in holes. Plans fall apart. Dreams die. Faith disappears. Suffering is real. We need help to recalibrate our lives back to our compassionate, God-trusting selves. Often we need safe, creative space and trusted companions in order to move through hard and disorienting experiences. My hope is that the chapters in this book might provide that same creative companionship. Like life itself, this book does not present a formula for transforming difficulty into spiritual freedom (only God can bring about that mysterious conversion). What I am offering is a holding space: stories, personal experiences, honest reflections and (at the end of each chapter) practices that might help you move out of the hurt and disappointment for a moment and remember your deeper capacities for love and generosity. These same stories and practices have helped me to receive my own failings and sufferings as spiritual gifts. My ultimate hope is that you might be stirred to trust your own story as revelation, that you might begin to widen your perspective and discover that within your own struggles there awaits a (sometimes difficult and hard-won) blessing.

– Taken from the introduction, *"The Alchemy of Grace"*

Using extraordinary stories from his own life and the lives of others, Mark Yaconelli offers a narrative journey through ways in which disappointments have turned into gifts. In these pages is a wealth of spiritual practices that will carry us deeper into the grace we find in unexpected places.



Mark Yaconelli, *The Gift of Hard Things*

Mark Yaconelli is a writer, speaker, spiritual director, retreat leader, community activist and storyteller. He is the founder and executive director of The Hearth Community, a registered nonprofit that assists cities and charitable agencies in producing personal storytelling projects.

Mark has developed, facilitated and produced community storytelling events for multiple groups within the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, including the Ford Family Foundation, the Church of Wales, the Boys and Girls Club, the Geos Institute, Asante Hospital Hospice, the Oregon Department of Human Services and many others. Prior to his work with The Hearth, Mark spent five years as the cofounder and program director at the Center for Engaged Compassion at Claremont Lincoln University where he helped to develop a compassion formation program.

Mark is the author of numerous books including *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, *Growing Souls*, *Downtime and Wonder*, *Fear, and Longing*. Profiles of Mark and his work have appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, *ABC World News Tonight*, *New York Times Online*, *Washington Post Online*, CBS Radio and *Youthworker Journal*. Mark lives in Southern Oregon with his wife Jill and their three children.

Visit Mark's website at markyaconelli.wordpress.com.

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"To my thinking, Mark Yaconelli is one of this country's most important and articulate spiritual teachers. Anyone seeking knowledge and union with God will be informed, edified, nourished and utterly charmed by The Gift of Hard Things. I savored every story and was nurtured by the expression and depth. It is a book absolutely after my own heart."

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