

# THE EXPERIENCE OF GRACE: DIVINE ASSISTANCE IN MAKING A CHANGE

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*ABSTRACT:* One of the most universal yet under-researched human impulses when faced with seemingly unmanageable conditions is to ask for Divine assistance to effect a change. The purpose of this qualitative study examined how 25 people aged 22–66 experienced grace as Divine assistance in making a positive change in their lives, especially what convinced them that the change had been the result of some Divine agency. Thematic analysis of in-depth interviews of experiences ranging from choosing a graduate school to the spontaneous recovery from a life-threatening illness revealed four common components of grace: *mode of transmission*, which includes intuition, other people, audition, vision, felt presence, and dreams; *subjective impulse to change*, which comprises guided movement, cessation, spontaneous surrender, and effortlessness; *emotional experience*, which includes enlivenment, surprise, and love; and *external effects*, comprising accelerated timeline, synchronicity, and positive impact on others. The experiences clustered somewhat across presenting problems, fulfilled needs, and increased self-efficacy while propelling people forward in the change process.

One of the most universal human impulses when faced with seemingly unmanageable conditions is to ask for Divine assistance to effect a change, something even nonreligious people often do when they are suffering. The notion of grace as Divine assistance occurs in most religions (e.g., Galatians 4:6–7; Genesis 60:2; Lotus Sutra 5; Qu’ran 1.1., 12.64; Rig Veda 7.100.4; Vitargastava 13.1). Without reviewing the massive literature on grace as Divine assistance, the five largest religions describe what humans can accomplish with or without grace, and whether and to what extent they can obtain grace through their own efforts, with the emphasis on effecting spiritual progress rather than on help negotiating earthly life’s challenges (c.f., Bakker, 1965; Bloom, 1964; Blumenthal, 1987; Chethimattam, 1987; Craig, 1985; Dreyer, 1990; Du Preez, 1989a, b; Dumoulin, 1970; Fransen, 1965; Hummel, 1969; John, 1970; Koenig, 1982; Noble, 1997; Ochs, 1992; Palihawadana, 1982; Sharma, 1978; Unno, 1998; Water, 2002).

This exalted view of Divine assistance in transformation may also be inferred in the writings of transpersonal theorists regarding psycho-spiritual change (e.g., Assagioli, 1976; Maslow 1968, 1971), including those of two psychologists who have developed change theories specifically involving grace: Meissner, a Roman Catholic priest and psychiatrist, (1966, 1987) and Almaas, a

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psychologist (1984, 1990, 1994). Both posit grace as an integral part of human development.

From an object relations framework, Meissner claimed that although God exists outside the objective dimension, the subjective experience of God evolves throughout life, and is a real experience of the subjective touching the objective (1966). According to Meissner (1987), object relationships are an integral part of human nature, and relating to the Divine (God) is subject to the same dynamics and maturity individuals have for other objects: “The psychic process of creating and finding God continues through the course of the human life cycle. Thus, the characteristics of the God representation are shaped following the epigenetic and developmental law” (1987, p. 45). Thus, people develop an internal God-representation, and it is through grace that people may be assisted in maturing or perfecting themselves, not only in this relationship but also in other object relationships within the ego: “But from a supernatural perspective, the capacity to enter into a divine relationship must be given as a special gift out of God’s loving initiative....This capacity through grace could be understood as building on, enhancing, and elevating our natural capacity for object relationships” (Meissner, 1987, p. 28).

Thus ego supports psychological development while grace, as a separate force, supports the development of spiritual qualities:

Grace does not force the ego to act, nor does it replace the ego’s proper function with a Divine activity. Its healing effect is precisely to enable the ego to mobilize its own latent resources and direct them to purposeful action. (1987, p. 23)

Meissner theorized that the development of the ego and grace are recursive: “the action of grace is directed to the formation through ego-activity of a spiritual identity, and that spiritual identity can be regarded as an enlargement, development, or elevation of personal identity” (1987, p. 54).

Almaas (1994) also considers grace inherent to human development, which is a quest to realize Essence or the Essential Self: “True identity is the identity with all essence, with all reality. This very moment is the center, and from there you can see that you are nothing but grace” (1990, p. 47). According to this theory the true and timeless Self becomes obscured or cut off as the ego and personality develop and become the predominant focus of the psyche, but meditation and service can facilitate the dissolution of identification with the ego: “This marks the Divine realm of Essence where grace and mercy begin descending into consciousness” (1984, p. 46). While Almaas did not directly state what kind of changes happen as persons begin to experience Essence, he did describe an aspect of the Essence he called the Will Essence, which “feels like sense of solidarity of inner support, of determination and confidence” (1994, p. 300) that might be needed in order to persist in the quest for realization.

Psychological research on grace or on Divine assistance is rare, even though studies have called attention to the dearth of research on spiritual issues and

psychotherapeutic processes and outcomes (e.g., Clements & Ermakova, 2011; Poloma & Pendleton, 1991; Rosenfeld, 2011; Worthington, Kurusu, McCollough, & Sandage, 1996). Most studies that could be considered to involve some aspect of grace or Divine assistance focus on coping or well-being and perceived locus of control (e.g., Clements & Ermakova, 2012; Jackson & Bergeman, 2011; Tix & Frazier, 1998; Wachholtz & Sambamoorthi, 2011) rather than on how people experience aid from Spirit or determine that they indeed have received some kind of Divine beneficence. If believers and nonbelievers alike pray for Divine help, are their prayers answered, and if so, what makes them believe that help came from a supernatural source rather than through some more mundane agency? The purpose of this exploratory study was to investigate what kinds of experiences are interpreted as Divine grace in making a change, especially what convinces people that the change is a result of Divine agency rather than other means.

Other than the biographies of avatars, saints, spiritual teachers, and the scattered personal testimonials in popular literature, only three systematic studies bear on phenomena related to Divine assistance, all defined differently: “feeling grace” (Gowack, 1998), “Divine guidance” (Kaplan, 2005), and “inspiration” (Thrash & Elliot, 2004). Their different approaches produced diverse results, but nevertheless some commonalities can be discerned.

Gowack (1998) interviewed 12 participants who had “felt grace” (not operationally defined) while voluntarily serving the terminally ill. This phenomenological study examined how grace was experienced under such circumstances. Grace in those circumstances was characterized as feeling present in the moment, often with heightened awareness; feeling oneness or connection, often without fear; feeling blessed and/or loved; feeling energized; feeling guided; feeling peace; and feeling joy. It is notable that the demand characteristics of attending the terminally ill may be more reactive and responsive to the dying person, and thus may differ considerably from situations that are more goal-oriented, such as actively seeking Divine aid of some sort.

Indeed in Kaplan’s (2005) grounded theory of “Divine guidance” as described by 9 spiritual teachers, the experience was divided up into three distinct aspects: seeking, receiving, and following Divine guidance. Receiving Divine guidance, the phase most relevant to the current study, was distinguished from ordinary experience by a perceptual shift or felt sense that might involve insight for life changes and transformation variously conveyed through supernatural flow, an inner voice, dreams, intuition, meaningful signs and wonders, intuition, synchronicities, peak experiences, visions, and an energetic sense.

The only large study about a related concept was conducted by Thrash and Elliott (2004) in three phases to examine their hypothetical definition of inspiration. They postulated that inspiration was characterized by three elements: (a) transcendence, defined as an orientation toward something more important or better than mundane concerns; (b) evocation, defined being evoked by another and unwilling; and (c) motivation, defined as a drive to

express or make manifest that which is newly apprehended. All three phases of their study were conducted with psychology students who received extra credit for their participation. All three phases involved mixed methods; narratives were subjected to text analysis, and quantitative data were subjected to ANOVA and some factor analysis. The first and second phases, involving 148 and 221 participants, respectively, differentiated inspiration from baseline and from other positive-affect-activating experiences. In the first phase participants attended two small-group sessions one week apart in which they were asked to recall vividly an experience of inspiration (not defined to participants) or an everyday experience, and complete instruments that assessed affect, task involvement, spirituality, meaning, and volitional control. Since “inspiration” was not defined to participants, their narratives covered a range of experiences, including artistic or scientific insight, discovering a vocation or calling, role models who influenced participants to higher endeavor, or the realization that greatness might be personally attainable. The second phase followed the same procedure except that inspiration was defined to participants as “a breathing in or infusion of some idea, purpose, etc. into the mind; the suggestion, awakening, or creation of some feeling or impulse, especially of an exalted kind” and the baseline condition was replaced by a positive-affect-activating condition defined as “being enthusiastic, interested, determined and excited” (p. 963). Additional instruments were administered to assess state openness and extraversion, triggering events, controllability, and responsibility appraisal. The third phase was designed to replicate and refine results from the first two. One hundred and five participants were asked to fill out trait questionnaires and to complete on-line diaries each day for two weeks regarding three different conditions (baseline, activated positive-affect experiences, or inspiration) during the previous 24-hours.

The results from Thrash and Elliott’s (2004) research relevant to the current study are that across all three phases of the study, inspiration was distinct from baseline or positive-affect-activating experiences. Inspiration consistently involved greater transcendence and less personal responsibility, which included being both inspired by some other agent and inspired to new action. Thus the three elements postulated by the authors to distinguish inspiration were supported by the results. The authors consistently avoided references to the supernatural or the utilization of spiritual language throughout the article, and regrettably, no detail was given from any of the narratives; however, they noted that inspiration was positively and significantly correlated with an enhancement of spirituality, meaning, and metaphysical concerns according to quantitative scores and presumably supported by text analysis of the narratives.

In summary, according to the few studies of some form of Divine assistance, it is a distinct experience involving non-ordinary qualities and positive affect that differentiate it from more mundane events. “Divine guidance” and “inspiration” also includes an impulse to action. However, no study actually addresses the experience when people believe they receive Divine assistance to better their life conditions, perhaps the focus of most prayers. It is a significant area of interest for transpersonal psychology, whether it involves the study of spiritual realization or psychotherapy to realize greater potential. Without attempting

to prove anything about the objective validity of Divine intervention, this study asked what is the experience of receiving Divine assistance (or grace) in making a positive change, and what about those experiences seems to indicate that the change is the result of Divine agency?

## METHOD

For purposes of the study, grace was construed as the experience of assistance from a supernatural or Divine force outside the self to which was attributed an outcome of positive change, defined as an improvement in some aspect of the individual's life that excluded causing intentional pain, loss, or suffering to others. This definition was not shared with participants who were recruited for having experienced "Divine grace" or "Divine assistance" within the last 3–24 months. The limited period was chosen to ensure recollection was still fresh as well as that the change had been established. Volunteers had to be 21 years old and fluent in English. Further screening determined that they succeeded in making a positive change they attributed to a supernatural force, and that the change was still manifest in their lives.

Respondents were located using a networking approach of distributing letters and flyers to friends, colleagues, spiritual communities, and 12-step meetings for Alcoholics Anonymous, Nicotine Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, and Overeaters Anonymous in the San Francisco Bay area. Low response to posted flyers led to visiting various spiritual communities to announce the project personally or to have a leader of the community do so and pass out flyers.

Basic demographic information was secured during the screening process, and qualified participants participated in in-person, semi-structured interviews lasting up to two hours. The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions (see Appendix) to elucidate as much information as possible without prompting. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using standard thematic analysis since this was an exploratory study to identify the type and quality of the experiences.

## RESULTS

Sixty-five people volunteered, but many were excluded because their change did not fall within the time criterion or had not been sufficiently established to be considered successful. The final sample consisted of 25: 15 women and 10 men aged 22 to 66 years (mean age 45.92 years). The majority (21) were Caucasian, with 2 each Asian and Hispanic. Ten were married; 9 were single and not dating; and 6 were single but in a relationship with a significant other. The sample was well educated with 5 holding doctoral degrees, 8 master's degrees, 9 bachelor degrees, and 3 with some college and/or associates degrees.

Most (22) had grown up with some religious affiliation: Roman Catholic (10), Protestant (5), Jewish (4), Hindu (2), and Unitarian (1). At the time of the

study, the largest group (6) described themselves as spiritual but having no religious affiliation, followed by Unity (4). Three each were Roman Catholic and Buddhist; 2 each, Protestant, Sufi and eclectic; and 1 each, Jewish and Christian/Buddhist. All 25 engaged in meditation (21) and/or prayer (19), most daily, at the time of the study, but two were not engaged in spiritual activities or affiliations of any kind before their experience of grace.

Participants were asked to describe the circumstances leading up to the experience of grace and give a detailed account of the experience. For a few, most aspects of their lives were going well and pressure was felt in only one area, such as career. For more participants, life posed multiple problems. For example, Joyce, a divorced 59-year-old librarian and leader in her spiritual community, had had to take in her mentally disabled adult son when her ex-husband had died the previous year. In her one-bedroom home, privacy was now nonexistent, and she was no longer independent. Soon after, her elderly mother, who lived in another country, sickened and died. At the same time Joyce began rapidly gaining a lot of weight and felt crushing exhaustion owing to an undiagnosed illness. All of this combined to produce spiritual aridity: "I don't remember God that year at all. ... It was just me and my anger and pain and fat and my son. ... Totally devastated." The prevailing life circumstances that warranted a change were grouped into five categories—*logistical*, *psychological*, *addiction*, *illness*, and *unclassified* (an outlier not reported further here)—based on what participants identified as the primary focus of their dilemma. In Joyce's case, for instance, it was her illness.

The *logistical* group (10, 8 f, 2 m) was defined as facing a life path decision to choose a course of action that was unclear or blocked. These involved going to graduate school or difficulty graduating; determining how to work and go to school; and finding a new place to work or live. For example, 56-year-old Kabir was distressed by adverse management changes at work. His colleagues were bailing out of the company at a rapid rate. Despite supportive relationships and a positive spiritual life, he said, "Things were closing in... I'd wake up at 2 or 3 in the morning and have cold sweats. I'd sit and I had prayer beads. ... I couldn't get back to sleep. ... I'd lost twenty pounds." He wanted to quit his job but could not figure out how he could pay his insurance and bills.

Seven participants (3 f, 4 m) were focused on *psychological* issues, attempting to heal or resolve an emotive process: troubled relationships, loss, isolation in a new city, anxiety, and a costly professional mistake. For example, Rachel, a 58-year-old retired nurse was facing a number of life changes that were causing her apprehension. Her husband was about to retire, and she was afraid having him around the house would be burdensome because of his emotional neediness. She worried that her chronic pain condition would interfere with a cruise they had planned. Worst of all, dreams about her younger sister's death when they were both children made it impossible for her to sleep. Although her sister had died accidentally, Rachel had always felt complicit in her death. In another example, Duncan, a physician, missed a cancer diagnosis at work. He felt "very upset or depressed...a great deal of guilt and shame."

Four participants (2 f, 2 m) were struggling with *addiction*, only one of whom recognized his behavior as problematic. Leah, for instance, a married psychiatrist with a busy practice had had her personal life completely change after giving birth to twins. Her friendships and marriage were altered by motherhood, and her family of origin became much more involved in her life, yet she could not let go of taking on more at work. Her grandmother's recent death had affected her spiritually: "I loathed God. ... and had practically become hopeless." Exhausted by new demands, Leah nevertheless adhered to unrealistic norms of self-sacrifice. She was "burnt out and exhausted. ...social organizations, professional organizations, I was so over-committed, it was ridiculous. ... I was a total workaholic ... I couldn't say no, not only at work, but to my friends, anyone." Similarly, Anthony, a 38-year-old graphic artist, with no spiritual practice or religious affiliation, knew his life was in turmoil but was unaware that his drinking was a problem. The ad agency where he worked kept downsizing and finally laid him off; his marriage was "inconsistent....We could go along three or four days, and it was okay, and then another three or four days it was horrible, and I wanted to get out of it." He now went to the bar every day to "deal with the stress." He thought he might want to stop drinking: "Actually I didn't think, 'Quit drinking'. ... It was, 'Control drinking.'"

Three participants (2 f, 1 m) were struggling with a physical *illness*. Hilda, a 66-year-old divorcee was on social security. She had moved to a new city near her daughter's place of work, but a week later, her daughter was transferred, and shortly after that, Hilda had to give up her car because she could no longer afford it. Then suddenly her legs swelled rapidly like "elephant legs" she had to be rushed to the emergency room. Within two days, she had gained 50 pounds of water weight. She went into kidney failure and was in excruciating pain. A battery of specialists finally diagnosed laptomyolysis, a muscle-wasting disease that could very well kill her.

Not surprisingly, especially given the multiple stressors for many respondents, their primary emotions reported just before the experience of grace were fear (11, 5 f, 3 m), uncertainty (11, 10 f, 1 m), distress, (9, 4 f, 5 m), self-doubt, (7, 5 f, 2 m), resistance (6, 4 f, 2 m), grief (5, 3 w, 2 m), anger (5, 2 f, 3 m), desperation (5, 2 f, 3 m), depression (4, 1 f, 3 m), and—the one positive emotion—calm (3, 1 f, 2 m). The types of feeling varied by situation. The dominant emotion for the logistical and illness groups was uncertainty; for the psychological group, distress; and for the addiction group, anger. Despite the negative tone, most of these orientations inspired behavior that ultimately led to the change, usually pleas for Divine assistance. For example, Cathy, who had a chronic problem of waking in the middle of the night, said, "I got so desperate, that I finally asked God for help." However, for some, even though a course of action might be clear, such as going to graduate school, fear and self-doubt blocked them, leading them to ask for answers or assurance.

The experiences of grace or Divine assistance varied considerably, but all involved a series of four dynamics distinct from normal activity: *modes of transmission*, which marked the identifiable start of the experience; the

participant's *subjective impulse* in response; a distinguishing *emotional experience*; and finally *external effects* that seemed to affirm the subjective experience.

The *mode of transmission* is the channel or manner through which the participants received Divine assistance that led them to understand the experience as grace. Many of these combined various altered-state phenomena. Nineteen (12 f, 7 m) reported an unusual realization resembling *intuition*, defined as a sense of knowing without the use of, or independent of, the reasoning process: "I just knew," "it felt right," or "inner guidance." Rachel, driving home after a therapy session, got a message to telephone an estranged sister: "We haven't spoken in years because she wanted it that way ... [and] I just knew that I needed to make this move and call her." Billy, a chiropractor who had been working in another doctor's office for nine years, for no apparent reason was informed that his contract would not be renewed. A year later he still felt angry, betrayed, and also frustrated with his rented location even though his practice was still going well. Spiritually he was frustrated, too: "Anytime I prayed before and really asked for guidance...it always happened, and now the months were going on and nothing happened." Then one day, when he and his wife were meditating, they each got an answer: "It felt right that I was going to find my own building to move into... It was time to buy my own building....We just knew."

Six participants (3 f, 3 m) described their transmission of grace as receiving an important *message through other people*, usually in the form of encouragement or information they needed to proceed. Karen, beset by barriers to entering graduate school, reported how a colleague's casual remark suddenly revealed a direction to pursue and "by the response I was getting from the outside world that that was the direction to go even though there was an obstacle in the way." Joe, on the other hand, attributed his experience of grace to a spiritual teacher capable of causing transformative processes by his very presence or will.

Another six (2 f, 4 m) had *audition* experiences of a voice not attributable to natural, environmental sources or their own thoughts providing direction. During a yoga class, Khoba's anguish about losing his girlfriend was overwhelming.

In an act of desperation I asked inside myself..., "Is it meant to be?" And I got an answer from a source that I refer to as God ... this voice had a vibrational power to it that was like on a sensory mode more than I could handle. It was extremely powerful and empowering ... directly in the center of my chest. ... The voice said, "It is, but not right now." I jumped up ... and looked around the room and initially felt, "Who said that?" ... There probably wasn't a person within range of me closer than 6 feet. Everybody was doing their poses in yoga. Nobody was paying attention to me. So I knew that voice came from inside.

Two participants (1 f, 1 m) had *visions*, defined as an image that appears credibly or vividly to the mind, though not actually present, and is attributed to

the Divine. Both were accompanied by audition, and one was multimodal. After a day of asking for “a really big sign” regarding which graduate school to attend, Mary lay sleeping when “it felt like someone grabbed me by the shoulder and picked me up and threw me ... out of my bed.” She saw a robed woman she took to be the Virgin Mary who told her to go into the living room. There Mary saw an acceptance letter, that she had just finished reading from one of the schools, was literally on fire. She fetched some water and threw it on the flames, but the fire flared up instead, burning her right breast through her nightshirt. Then it extinguished. The letter was completely destroyed, but none of the papers or books next to it were singed, nor was her nightshirt, though her flesh was burned and hurting. The vision told her, “You’re going to be taken care of if you go to [the school from which the acceptance letter came]. ... You will remember what has happened because of the burn on your breast. ...”

Two participants (1 f, 1 m) experienced a *felt presence*, defined as a particular sensation or impression of a supernatural being in the immediate vicinity that cannot be discerned by the senses. According to Paul,

I’m not alone. Like there’s a presence. ... There’s nothing I can see. I can just feel it. ... This was the third time it happened, so I knew what it was. ... So in my body I could feel energy or heat or your hair stands on end and things like that. ... And it’s all over my entire body and it’s usually accompanied by crying of some sort. Not necessarily weeping crying. ... More or less like the realization of the Divine that I’m in touch with that.

Finally two women had *dreams* that brought a Divine message. Leah, the self-proclaimed workaholic, dreamed she was in France around World War I when a man resembling Carl Jung looked at her very seriously and said twice, “If you go to Calais you will be killed.” She believed him, and not knowing where Calais was in the dream, said to herself, “I’ll just have to look at the signs, so if I see a sign saying Calais coming up, I’ll have to get off the train.” She awakened knowing that her “life was. ...heading toward some terrible end results, that I had to change course. ... Whatever idea I had to escape this route was not going to work.”

Some experiences were short, discrete events, like the dreams, but others spanned days. Billy’s intuition to set up his own clinical practice, for instance, was followed by months of synchronicities supporting his decision, discussed below.

*Subjective impulse* describes the inner experiences of grace that propelled or fostered change during or immediately after the transmission. The most common subjective impulse (13, 8 f, 5 m) was *guided movement*, defined as feeling drawn or led into a new course of action. Polly described “a pulling and a willingness.” Ananda volunteered to be a prayer chaplain, saying, “It was just like I felt compelled to offer.” Anthony said, “After hearing that voice, I said, ‘Okay, I will quit drinking.’ ... For some reason, I felt very motivated to not drink.”

For some (5, 3 f, 2 m) the subjective impulse was *cessation*, the stopping of dysfunctional behavior or unhealthy conditions. Raymond, the only one of the

addiction group to acknowledge that he had a problem, was worried about his daily dependency on marijuana, which was altering his sleep patterns, increasing his junk food consumption, and changing his temperament, “crankiness, short-temperedness, that sort of thing.” But he felt helpless to change it: “Pot has become my new god. I remember thinking that, and it was sort of a resigned sort of thing.” Then craving just evaporated:

I asked in my meditation for this [smoking pot] to be gone. ... I don't remember experiencing any sensation. ... All I know is that the ... smoking went away. Just went away. ... I didn't seek it anymore after that point. ... The whole drive for it was completely gone.

Luke and Hilda's diseases spontaneously resolved. Luke's cancer had metastasized to his bones, with lesions in his cervical vertebrae, pelvis, and all over his rib cage. Then one day when he went in for an appointment,

The technician took one set [of x-rays] and then ... another. He said, “I shot this twice. I thought this was a machine problem.”... [Then Luke saw his doctor Pat who] shows me the film. And there's ... nothing here [in his chest]. ... [The doctor] says, “What are you doing?” And I say to him, “Prayer, every day.” I say, “Come on, Pat, tell me why. There were more than ten spots there. So, Pat, where are they? What happened?” He says, “I don't know.”

Five participants (3 f, 2 m) reported spontaneous *surrender*, letting go of their typical behaviors, expectations or attachment to outcome without conscious effort. Heather, mourning the end of a relationship, said, “[Grace was a] willingness to fully embody, energetically, and spiritually to fully give over ... just opening my heart to this pain and grief.” According to Ananda, trying to adjust to the isolation, great expense, and culture shock of a new city, “My journey of grace I would say is one of defrosting, letting go of clutching rationality.” Quan Yen, struggling with an eating disorder and her first romance after a divorce, said: “I am no longer sitting there with my mind closed and my cynicism running amok. I'm just open to what might be happening.”

The last category, *effortlessness* (5, 2 f, 3 m), is defined as the sense that change occurred without the participant's exertion or agency (“it just happened”). According to Anthony,

It really comes down to a lack of anything I did. ... I quit drinking and began exercising. I have never maintained a consistent workout program for more than a week or two, but this time I just kept going. ... It was weird ... I didn't do anything different.

Subjective impulses were specific to the type of presenting problem, with most reporting only one type of impulse, though the addiction group experienced three. The logistical and psychological groups tended to report guided movement; the addiction and illness groups, cessation; the psychological, spontaneous surrender; and the addiction group, effortlessness.

The next aspect of the internal experience of grace was the *emotional*. For many, the grace experience felt profound and affirming, including a sudden shift from the negative emotions they had been feeling initially. The majority (14, 6 f, 8 m) were *enlivened*, defined as a positive or affirming emotion with increased energy or enthusiasm: “very enlivened ... resonance coupled with excitement, and a little bit of bliss” and “a sense of Divine energy that was going into my body and replenishing it.” Nine participants (6 f, 3 m), most of whom did not have an intuition experience, were *surprised*, including feeling startled or frightened: “It was scary to feel such a presence,” and “I think I was in shock or something.” Another nine (6 f, 3 f) felt *love*, variously described as “all-engulfing, all surrounding love,” “love and support and caring community. ... coming from beyond [God] as well,” and “floating on something much bigger than me and lighter and much more love-filled.” Eight (4 f, 4 m) were *comforted*. According to Heather, “[I was] feeling God right there and completely nurturing me.” Joyce described, “physical comfort in my body... It was God the Mother wrapped around me.” Five (3 f, 2 m) reported *calm* or peace, such as “this wonderful, wonderful peaceful feeling came over me” and “all of sudden my mind slowed down and I felt very, very calm.” Four participants (2 f, 2 m) felt *humbled*. When Olivia’s answer to her dilemma appeared within only a few minutes of her heartfelt prayer, she said, “I was humbled. ... I just walked out to my car and started bawling.” For three (2 f, 1 m), the emotional experience included *pain*, usually the knowledge that grief avoided or denied must be embraced. Paul, awakened by a bright light and strong physical sensation, was told to remain with his girlfriend and allow her to leave him (something he had never done before): “It would be very painful for me, and that’s what I needed to heal for all the other times I bailed before I could get hurt.” Heather’s experience involved allowing herself to feel grief completely, which she had feared would kill her. The addiction group expressed the fewest emotional experiences.

Finally 15 said grace unfolded or assisted them through *external events* or activities outside their control in three distinct ways, which validated their internal experience and convinced them that Divine grace was involved. Twelve (6 f, 6 m) reported an *accelerated timeline* of the outcome events. Hilda, who had been unable to move from bed or chew food, was released from the hospital after a week and went home from rehabilitation unassisted after two weeks. According to her, “Everyone was amazed at how fast I was able to do everything.” When Ananda volunteered to be a prayer chaplain, “I went from pre-contemplation to contemplation to action within seconds.” Ten (6 f, 4 m) referred to *synchronicities*, defined as coincidences they believed were meaningfully related. Billy described a “whirlwind” of synchronicities that came together suddenly in the months following his intuition for him to buy and remodel a building as the base for an independent practice: “Getting a loan ... contractors and painters ... other chiropractors called me, saying, ‘I want to work for you.’ ... No matter how intense ... it was all extremely smooth.” Similarly, Daisy said, “Over and over and over, things fell into place. Every time I put a problem out it got solved.” Finally, three participants (2 f, 1 m) believed others involved in their situation were positively affected by grace, too: “The ripple of how it affects everybody. Not just me but when it’s

right, its right for everybody.” Although the accelerated timeline was the most common across all problem types, the logistical group had proportionally more external experiences, whereas the psychological group reported the least.

In summary, the presenting problem was the greatest determiner of trends in the experience of Divine assistance. Four elements characterized the experience of grace: (a) its mode of transmission, including intuition, other people, auditory, vision, presence, and dreams; (b) a subjective impulse that was the actual change element, including guided movement, cessation, spontaneous surrender, and effortlessness; (c) the emotional experience of grace, which included feeling enlivened, startled, loved, comforted, calmed, humbled, and sometimes pained; and (d) external effects of grace in the objective world, including an accelerated timeline, synchronicities, and positive impact on others. Typically, the people received a message from the Divine, which was followed by a type of Divine inner impulse that led to a change, which varied across problem groups. The logistical and psychological groups were guided to act or pursue a particular direction. The psychological group felt that grace helped them let go of preconceived ideas, and the addiction and illness groups experienced a spontaneous end to undesirable conditions or actions. The addiction group also experienced a sense of effortless change. The majority of people described grace as a feeling of being enlivened and loved by the Divine, and many were surprised that Spirit contacted them. Last, the change was supported when events in the material world happened faster and more easily than expected.

## DISCUSSION

The cumulative experiences of this exploratory study sample yielded new information about what may be one of the most common spiritual phenomena of the human condition, how people experience grace as Divine assistance in effecting a positive change. The small exploratory sample, with its bias for race, education, and religious background, is not generalizable, nor was it intended to be. Nevertheless, the results support the three studies that have examined similar phenomena (Gowack, 1998; Thrash & Elliott, 2004; Kaplan, 2005).

Gowack’s (1998) research on “feeling grace” when serving the terminally ill identified “feeling blessed and/or loved,” “feeling energized,” and “feeling peace” (p. 160), none of them operationally defined, but supported by direct quotes that match the feelings of love, enlivenment, and calm identified in the current study as an aspect of grace. Furthermore Gowack distilled a number of categories into his final theme “feeling present in the moment, often with heightened awareness” (p. 160), a label that seems to stress presence and receptivity, which would be more consistent with attending the dying, than the goal-orientation of making a change in this study. Nevertheless quotes Gowack used to create his “feeling present” category support Divine assistance phenomena, such as the intuition and felt presence modes of transmission, respectively: “I didn’t need to ask—I just knew” (Gowack, 1998, p. 172), and “especially the presence—a sense that the Divine was present” (p. 174) and “It

[grace] found me and that was something of a surprise. It was something other than self-determined” (p. 172). Gowack also created a “feeling guided” category that included quotes suggesting the intuition mode of transmission as well as aspects of subjective impulse in the current study, such as this one: “I just suddenly found myself connected into and acting from a very deep place, a place that just ‘knew’ what ... to do....You’re doing it with a sense of knowingness but not in a way that your mind is directing it” (Gowack, 1998, p. 185).

Kaplan’s (2005) research of spiritual teachers receiving Divine guidance most nearly parallels the help with a life path decision sought by logistical group in the current study compared to the groups seeking to resolve psychological issues, addiction, or illness. Nevertheless the degree of consistency between Kaplan’s results and this study is not easy to assess since Kaplan’s categories are not operationally defined, nor does the author give many examples to illustrate them. For instance, Kaplan’s most common forms of Divine communication are labeled *perceptual shift*, *felt sense*, *insight*, and *thought-sense*, which have no easily discernible counterparts to the current study. However, almost half of Kaplan’s sample identifies *hearing an inner voice*, *dreams*, *intuition*, and *visions* that are very likely comparable to the audition, dreams, intuition, and vision modes of transmission in this study. It is further possible that Kaplan’s *revelation* may be similar to intuition or vision in the current study, and that his *outer voice* might be similar to the voice Khobe reported “hearing” so loudly he initially thought someone had spoken in the yoga studio. Similarly Kaplan’s *inner dictation*, one of the few categories illustrated with a quote, seems very like the inner voice of the current study or intuition: “The voice that I hear is similar to an inner dictation. Sometimes it’s like getting a green light; sometimes it’s just an inner sense of knowing” (Kaplan, 2005, p. 115).

Kaplan (2005) also identifies but does not define emotional categories likely to be comparable to ones in this study, such as *heart-opening*, *interconnectedness*, and *love*; *consolation or comfort*; and *calmness*, perhaps counterparts of love, comfortable, and calm, as defined here.

The greatest areas of discontinuity between Kaplan’s (2005) study and this one involve the absence of the *enlivenment* that was the predominant emotional reaction in this study, followed by being *surprised*. Possible explanations could involve differences in sampling and the conditions reported. In the first place Kaplan’s spiritual teachers may have been starting from a place of greater equanimity than the lay people in this study, most of whom were beset by problems that baffled, frustrated, or overwhelmed them with negative emotion. Second, the difference in demand characteristics between asking for Divine “guidance” in Kaplan’s study and Divine “assistance” in this one may have introduced mitigating artifacts. The largest group in this study involved logistics, which were more like questions of guidance than of other forms of aid, and those problems tended to be much less emotionally charged. Finally Kaplan’s spiritual teachers may not have been surprised by their experiences of Divine guidance because they were starting from a greater presumptiveness of

spiritual authority than the lay people in the current study. They may, like the Gowack (1998) participant quoted above, have had humbler expectations of a direct connection with the Divine.

Regarding Thrash and Elliott's (2004) three-part study of inspiration, it is difficult to draw direct comparisons with the experience of Divine assistance since they omitted all narrative detail, including identifying themes. Nevertheless, all three of their samples did distinguish inspiration as a discrete event characterized by receptivity to illumination from an external agency (most often associated with the supernatural) for a higher purpose. From their quantitative correlation of inspiration with enhanced spirituality, meaning, and metaphysical concerns, a connection with Divine can certainly be inferred. Their narrative identified inspiration as helping with life-path calling or vocation and affirming personal potential, which would seem consistent with results in this study. Furthermore inspiration was always accompanied by unusual positive affect and an impulse to manifest or express that new realization in the world, similar to the emotional effects noted in this study as well as the subjective impulse.

Significantly, not all participants in the current study believed in Spirit at the time of their experience of Divine assistance, and of those who did, the connection to Spirit ranged from hatred and anger to love and closeness. Moreover, only one of the participants in the addiction group even recognized a need for help. Divine assistance was given independent of spiritual beliefs, devotion or "good works," which seems to contradict much of the theological literature but falls squarely within the traditions that allow for grace freely given to the "undeserving." In terms of the psychological literature, Meissner's (1966) description of the way the relationship with God evolves as part of humanity's developmental process suggests that belief or a positive connection with Spirit may not be a prerequisite for grace. The experience of grace did positively influence the participants' relationships with the Divine by strengthening, renewing, and for some, confirming, "Yes, there is a God."

The results support the psychological literature that suggests that grace is part of a personal growth process. Some participants were experiencing a new emotion or trying to resolve an old emotional issue that was inhibiting psychological growth. Others were confronting extending themselves beyond their comfort zone. "[Grace's] healing effect is precisely to enable the ego to mobilize its own latent resources. ... Grace raises man to a new level of existence" (Meissner, 1987, pp. 8–23). Further, the experience of grace enhances a process that may be driven by the unconscious striving for health and fulfillment (e.g., Maslow, 1968), especially since four participants were not attempting to change, despite high levels of stress. According to William James (1902/1977),

Yet all the while the forces of mere organic ripening within him are going on towards their own prefigured results, and his conscious strainings are letting loose subconscious allies behind the scenes, which in their way work towards rearrangement; and the rearrangement towards which all these

deeper forces tend is pretty surely definite, and definitely different from what he consciously conceives and determines. ... When the new centre of personal energy has been subconsciously incubated so long as to be just ready to open into flower ... it must burst forth. (pp. 231–232)

This assumption points to a central divergence between transpersonal and other models of change. For example, the Transtheoretical Model of Change (TTM) (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1983; Prochaska, DiClemente & Norcross, 1992; Prochaska, Norcross & DiClemente, 1994; Prochaska & Velicer, 1997; Velicer, DiClemente, Rossi, & Prochaska, 1990), perhaps the most researched model of health behavior change (quitting dysfunctional behaviors, such as smoking, and adopting positive behaviors, such as healthy diet and exercise), is so called because it synthesizes the change elements of all the major psychological theories (psychoanalytic, behavioral, cognitive, and humanistic) *except* the transpersonal. Its author(s) Prochaska et al. (1994) contended that relying on Divine help inhibits people from taking the necessary steps to succeed, though without citing any particular research to prove this point.

Unfortunately, research on the spiritual in facilitating change has been sparse, despite the success of health behavior change models like the twelve-step programs that are built around surrender to a Higher Power, among others. Furthermore, such research is complicated by vague and divergent definitions of the “spiritual” (e.g., Arthur, 2003; Glickman, Galanter, Dermatis, & Dingle, 2006; Holt, Clark, Kreuter, & Rubio, 2003) and methods to distinguish it from other modalities employed in the change process, such as the community of twelve-step programs. Yet the research reviewed here (Gowack, 1998; Kaplan, 2005; Thrash & Elliott, 2004) as well as this study indicate that spiritual experiences, including asking for and receiving assistance from the Divine can actually further self-efficacy, including choosing and committing to act, reflective of Meissner’s theory (1966, 1987) as well as other transpersonal models of transformation (e.g., Almaas, 1984, 1990, 1994; Assagioli, 1976).

Nevertheless, this study as well as those reviewed here on the Divine (Gowack, 1998; Kaplan, 2005; Thrash & Elliott, 2004) are too limited in scope to challenge change models like TTM as they were not focused on outcome but on the exploration of a phenomenon. A significant delimitation to this study was that no attempt was made to identify or assess the outcomes of the positive change, such as validating the guidance given by intuition for its accuracy or efficacy, an area increasingly investigated elsewhere with mixed results (e.g., Dawes, 2001; Ehrlinger, Gilovich, & Ross 2005; Epley & Gilovich, 2005; Kahneman, 2011; Myers, 2002), or conducting follow-up sobriety measures for those addicted to substances. The perception of a positive, sustained change in the person’s life was taken at face value from the participants’ self-report. Given the wide variety of presenting life dilemmas—logistical, psychological, addiction, and illness—, very different research approaches would be needed to assess outcome results. Complex choices like choosing a graduate school or starting a business defy objective measurement as “better” than alternatives. Addiction and disease, on the other hand, may be much easier to assess.

Likewise, conditions that might have conduced to Divine assistance were not investigated here, though determining why some people seem to receive Divine assistance and why others do not has been the basis of religious doctrines on grace and theodicy for most of human history. Transpersonal research is still in its infancy, with phenomena like those reported in this study considered anomalous, random, and “miraculous” even by those who experienced them. Although this study and similar ones start to map its footprint in human affairs, grace remains mysterious. The value of such research at this point may lie in providing evidence that what millions hope for—Divine assistance with the challenges of life—is real, and that it can happen to anyone with convincing results.

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## APPENDIX

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

- What was/were your experience(s) of grace?
- How did you know you experienced grace?
- What were the distinguishing features of grace?

- Starting about a month before you initiated your change, what was going on in your life at this time?  
(Probes: Job/career, financial, relationships, spiritual, physically, developmental influences)
- What were your thoughts and beliefs about the change then?
- Tell me about how you have made this change.
- Were you doing anything different before and during the change?  
(Probe: What do you think changed?)
- How would you define and describe Grace?

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