

Anne Lamott on Jesus, grace and forgiving President Bush

David Ian Miller

Anne Lamott, author of the newly-published "Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith" by Anne Lamott.

Twenty-three years ago a very hung-over Anne Lamott stumbled into a small church and started what was to be a long journey towards sobriety and sanity. There were no instant miracles on that road, but many small mercies that for Lamott added up to a growing awareness of God's grace. She soon came to understand that, to her, religion was a "come as you are" party, with no need to pretend to be anything but your own true self.

Her writings on faith — three books so far — are peppered merrily with profanity, doubt and occasionally a bit of wickedness. Sentences like "I was f—ed unto the Lord," descriptions of emotions and things as "Jesusy," plus a political stance that favors abortions, gay rights and euthanasia tend to resonate with those who have a more liberal outlook on religion, while annoying the hell out of more conservative Christians.

But Lamott, 54, who grew up in Bolinas and still lives in the Bay Area with her son, Sam, isn't writing to placate a particular group. She's addressing herself to anyone who's ever awakened in the morning with no clue about what happened the night before, to people who understand that sarcasm, pettiness, self-centeredness and doubt can peacefully coexist with a love for whatever divinity you worship. She is the author of five novels and three works of nonfiction — her most recent book, "Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith," was just published in paperback.

When I spoke with Lamott last week, she was fighting a horrible cold and sitting in the lobby of a hotel in Virginia, where she was on a book tour. She'd hoped to get a nap before our interview, but the hotel mixed up her reservation and she was still waiting for her room. Despite the hassles, she found a bit of grace in the situation by looking up at the intricate imagery on the hotel's ceiling, saying a little prayer in praise of eye candy.

This is your third book on faith. Would you say that writing itself is a kind of spiritual practice for you?

No, although it's based on a lot of hope that I'll pull it off one more time. For me it's always been a discipline and a habit — I guess the spiritual part is the desire to help people feel less isolated and more a part of a common humanity, and I love to make people laugh. If I have any message or meanings at all, it's to make people laugh.

Each of the stories in "Grace (Eventually)" touches on different ways that grace has come into your life, but you don't really define the word. What does grace mean to you?

Eugene O'Neill said that man is born broken and the grace of God is glue, and I think that's pretty true, that it's divine glue. It's glue that surprises you. Classically, grace is unmerited assistance from God. I know that grace meets you wherever you are, and doesn't leave you where it found you. I experience it as buoyancy, as a very strange sense of calm in the midst of tremendous anxiety and lostness. I often get my sense of humor back, or I just feel safe and in God's care.

I read somewhere that you say two prayers: "Help me" and "Thank you." Which one do you say more often?

I say them both equally. I also say a third prayer ... I go, "Whoa!" — in the most California way possible. Sometimes I say it when I step outside or when I look up — like I'm sitting in this hotel, and, I mean, it's like the Sistine Chapel here but in a Southern, Deep South kind of way. I was looking up before you called, and I thought, "Whoa!" Armistead Maupin would love this ceiling. This is so Armistead, because he's from the South and this is just so gay and so fabulous. It's the most fabulous ceiling I've ever seen.

About half the time in my stories, there's a breakthrough where the plates of the Earth shift inside my tight, frightened heart. Often I say, "Help me, help me," and I know that within the same minute, that I'm being heard and that help is being assembled, and the most unlikely caseworker on Earth is about to arrive with some sort of spiritual question or offering. But when I step outside and I look up, I am blown away. It's hard to be this smallest package on Earth, this tightly-wrapped, spoiled alcoholic woman, you know, and so to step back into some sense of community or the beauty of nature is when I say my third prayer. Sometimes I say, "Wow." I think I used to say, "Wowww!" — or "God!" When Sam was little, he said, "I think the reason they call God 'God' is because when you see something really, really beautiful, you go, 'God!'" And I said, "OK, it works for me."

Do you ever feel like you are asking for help too much?

I don't usually ask for specific things. Every so often I'm really praying for a certain outcome, like for doctors or lawyers to use their skills for the greater good, for the common good. I grew up in an era, the '50s and '60s where people quite naturally used to talk about the greater good, which they don't anymore. In the the '50s and '60s, you could also talk about "fair" without being laughed out of the room and having people say: "No one ever said life was fair."

I remember something that really affected me years ago, when Arthur Ashe died. I saw a quote of his that said, "I'm not praying to be healed. I never once prayed to win a tennis match, and I'm not going to tell God what to do now." But, you know, he was just praying for the willingness to trust and surrender — "Thy will be done," and all that. And that really affected me. That is so beautiful, so "money where your mouth is." You don't pray to win tennis matches. You don't pray for them to get your room ready sooner, just because you have a sore throat and possibly tuberculosis.

You are quite outspoken in your liberal views on many topics. But there are a lot of conservative Christians who stand, in the name of Christianity, for things that you abhor. Does that make it difficult for you to be a Christian?

After I wrote "Traveling Mercies," maybe it was the nature of the tour, but I was in the South more. I would be on big radio stations, and I would get very crazy angry Southern people that would speak in that extremely polite, bless-your-heart sort of way where they would say: "Oh, Miss Lamott, I know many, many people find it witty what you say, but I wonder how witty it will be when you are in Hell?" They would always mention Hell, and I would just say: "Thank you so much for calling ... I don't argue. If I were seated across from (outspoken atheist) Christopher Hitchens, it would be like shooting fish in a barrel for him. I don't have an interesting understanding of theology. I don't understand doctrine, I don't debate people, I don't let people tell me I'm full of s—, I don't tell people they are full of s—. I never once in my life tried to convert anyone. I just want people to know that what they learn as children is very possibly not true and has more to do with their parents' repressed shame and self-loathing than it does have anything to do with the very radical and very gentle, progressive teachings of Jesus.

You write about a Christianity that seems very open, very tolerant, very focused on accepting people as they are. But there are parts of the Bible that to many people do not seem very tolerant. So how do you reconcile those parts of the Bible with the faith you practice?

I've always belonged to the same church, St. Andrew, and it's always been a church that believed in the Jesus of Martin Luther King. It's a social gospel church and totally inclusive — It's a big Jesus-y "Shalom" (welcome) — that's how I ended up there, drunk and hung over for a year before I got sober. So I've never been instructed — I've never taken extensive Bible study. I read a little Bible every day, but I don't believe it to be the literal word of God ... I don't even particularly have a relationship with God or God the Father. If I think of God, I think of God, the Mother-Father God and Creator, you know? The Big You. And I really have a relationship with Jesus. I'm one of those very rare Protestant girls who has a real affiliation with Mary. I wear a Mary around my neck. I think of Mary more like Bette Midler, a rich, juicy Jewish woman of 18, instead of the anorexic, meek, Lutheran blue-eyed Mary of the Sunday school posters.

You were originally drawn to Christianity when you began your recovery process. Is that right?

All through my 20s, I really tried to find something that would not be as embarrassing or awful as being a Christian, because I had been raised by atheists to believe that being Christian was kind of like people believing in pyramid power. So I would read ecumenical or Eastern stuff or Eastern stuff on Christianity that made it much more palatable, much less fundamentalist or evangelical. And somehow I very accidentally, if you believe in accidents, ended up at this church in 1985 when I was 31 and hung over. They were singing these old spirituals, and it was really lovely to hear those songs, so I stayed there, and the people didn't hassle me. They didn't try to get me to stay or to sign up for Bible study, and most important, they didn't threaten to come have a home visit and get to know me more, because I would have so run screaming back to my cute little life. They just let me be there at a time where I didn't really have much sense of belonging anywhere or of being OK, because I was pretty hung over most mornings.

I went to church for months and months and months without staying for the sermon because it was too bizarre to hear the Jesus beliefs. Then a year later, I just started to feel like Jesus was around me. I would feel His presence. It would be like a little stray cat. You know, I would kind of nudge him with my feet and say, "No," because you can't let him in, because once you let him in and give him milk, you have a little cat, and I didn't want it. I lived on this tiny little houseboat at the time, and finally one day I just felt like: "Oh, whatever. You can come in." And from that day on, which was almost 22 years ago, I have really felt a relationship or friendship with Jesus, a connection to Him.

How did your family react to your newfound spirituality?

My father was already dead — he would have been the person who was shocked, because his parents had been Presbyterian missionaries in Tokyo, beginning in 1918. My father hated Presbyterians most of all, and of course I blundered into this funny little Presbyterian church in Marin City. He called Presbyterians "God's frozen people." But he wasn't there (when I became a Christian). My mom had always gone to Episcopalian midnight Mass on Christmas, but she was like: "Oh, for God's sake, this is ridiculous!" So you think about whom you want to talk to about these sorts of things.

I got baptized, and I invited some friends from my literary community, and the reaction was kind of like, "How very touching — we are seeing Annie's little blind spot. She was getting so bad before with the mental illness and with being an alcoholic and a person who uses a lot of drugs." You know, I never tried to convert anyone. I wasn't trying to get anyone else to come to church. It's just that I learned in early sobriety that you are as sick as your secret, so I didn't want to have a secret that I really loved church and that I had a relationship with Jesus. People all through the years have been basically pretty nice about it, and sometimes they kind of roll their eyes, and I fear they just mock me outright. Lovingly, I don't care.

I read a story in "Christianity Today" that you first connected with Jesus when you were hung over and the second time you "ran into him in an airplane lavatory." What happened on the airplane?

By this time in my life I was sober. I was going to preach a sermon somewhere in the South — it might have been Virginia. And I went into the airplane lavatory. I was just peeing (that was probably more than you needed to know), but I was absolutely overcome with gratitude for my life, for my perfect, beautiful son, for the fact that I had been so bad off when I was drinking, and yet I had come so far, and my work was getting good again. I could hardly contain myself, and I put down the lid and sat down, and I absolutely unshakably felt the presence of Jesus for only the second time in my life. I haven't felt it in that bodily way since.

In your book "Plan B," you wrote a lot about trying to forgive President Bush. And in "Grace (Eventually)" you wrote, "I don't hate anyone right now. Not even George W. Bush. This may seem an impossibility, but it's true. And it indicates the presence of grace or dementia or both." Have you figured out yet, was it grace or dementia?

It was probably equal proportions of both. I went up for prayer a lot of times at our church, and I said that I thought I may have gone crazy because I hated these people — Cheney, Bush and Rumsfeld — for so long. I had so much hate in me, and I couldn't do it anymore.

I still feel I would love to see both of them — Bush and Cheney — on trial at the Hague for war crimes and impeachable acts, but barring that, one thing that really helped me put down some of that hate was that their time started running out, and their polls started really tanking. That made me feel much less crazy, like the rest of the world wasn't buying it either. Now I look at Bush — I accidentally caught a glimpse of him on TV in my last hotel, where he was giving that poor McCain his endorsement, and I realized I can look at him now and just think, "tick-tock, tick-tock." He's leaving soon.

How did your pastor react to your statements?

I went up every week, and my pastor never said anything judgmental or anything encouraging. She just said, "So glad you brought this up here. And she would very quietly ask the congregation to help me with that with prayer, and little by little it was lifted.

Are you feeling hopeful or nervous about the upcoming presidential election?

I'm feeling exhausted right now. But that's hard to separate out from having jet lag and having been on East Coast time and California time still after two weeks on the road, and being sick so much, but I feel thrilled, thrilled, by the Democratic candidates and what a real weak candidate they (Republicans) have, because even they hate him. Any poll you look at, 70 percent of America is against the war. Only the absolute fundamentalist base, the Cheney base, are still supporting it. And I just don't think McCain, whatever spiritual or heroic message he has to impart, can get America behind the war again.

Judging from the primaries in Texas and Ohio, the Democratic contest is not quite over. Are you rooting for either of the two candidates?

It's not over. No, well, I think I would not want to say in this interview right now. All I can say is I totally love them both, and I will commit as much time and money as I can to their campaigns once it is decided.

Over the years, you have written a lot about the joys and struggles of being a single mom, and I wonder: What are you teaching Sam about God and faith?

Well, he is 18 and a half now, and I brought him to church all those years, since he was five days old. And then, when he was 14, I didn't make him come anymore, but he came back about 10 times on his own. The people there love him, and consider him theirs. And then I was like the chauffeur to get him to them every morning ... he has grown up in church school, and he believes in God totally. He assumes that the God thing is true, like a scientist's child might naturally believe that the laws of physics are true, but he is not a Christian. He loves Jesus, but he has lots of other influences. He prays, and he says this hilarious stuff about God all the time. He makes me laugh out loud. But he is not on the same spiritual path I am on, which I am glad for him — I just wanted him to have this influence, and to find an authentic path. And so, you know, maybe it was a mistake, but too late now to do anything about it. And, when something really quirky or coincidental or wonderful happens, he will call or text message and say: "Oh my God, God is so showing off right now!"

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During his far-flung career in journalism, Bay Area writer and editor David Ian Miller has worked as a city hall reporter, personal finance writer, cable television executive and managing editor of a technology news site. His writing credits include Salon.com, Wired News and The New York Observer.