

Grace in the First Person: Growing Into Life and Faith

Summer is the time to grab a book and head to some leisurely spot to unwind.

Knapp, a Virginia artist who runs a one-woman studio from her home (located in a lawnmower shed she calls her “shedudio”), sculpts with words as artfully as she does with clay. Through a variety of family stories, from childhood to the present, Knapp recalls the “little turning points, small infusions of grace ‘in the first person’ that spun the dimmer switch of my soul around to make it a bit brighter.”

Originally heard on a local National Public Radio affiliate in Richmond, her collected stories are woven like threads to create a kind of tapestry of Knapp’s life as well as a travel log of her spiritual journey toward self-understanding and acceptance.

Though not told in straight chronological order, the stories unfold as if told while rocking on the front porch late one summer evening. Knapp writes with wit and honesty about her quest to understand grace and the acceptance that brings “true freedom” from the “bear traps of insecurity.” Her eye for detail bring her stories to full color, three-dimensional life, often with a few quirks that sometimes find their way into the art she molds with her hands.

In one story titled “The Great One” (one of the many references to the television shows that shaped her and other boomers), Knapp offers a moving tribute to her father, owner and manager of a car parts store who lost a battle with throat cancer that quickly spread to his lungs. She writes tenderly of her dad’s bouts with depression, which led him to try to drown his pain in alcohol until a vision of Christ standing behind him changed his life and outlook forever. “It endears me to God to remember that when my father was utterly hopeless, he saw himself in a mirror the way he always should have—with his Maker firmly behind him.”

Like art itself, Knapp's insights to life's meaning are subtle, revealed only after careful observation. She finds truth in the everyday routine of life, ranging from her discomfort with her own physique to the antics and trials of raising her "litter" of three boys.

"I wonder," she muses when speaking of her "southern" womanhood, "if I can dig my heels into life, leading not with thin thighs but with a hard head. I think the answer is, 'Not yet. Not as long as I want to be somebody else.'"

Knapp writes with a refreshingly honest style, working with the raw materials of life and, like the clay she shapes, molds her life stories into something worth owning. In particular, the two stories about "grace with children" and the memory of a wedding for a friend's adopted child will encourage all parents who long to share intimately with their children—and who wonder whether they're making a difference.

In suburbia, "a place where nothing seems sinister," Knapp found herself lulled into a false sense of security regarding the direction of the lives of her kids. After a particularly trying set of circumstances in a three month period of time, Knapp summarizes the ordeal: "Love is love, but the kind that never fails shows up a little more when life turns a little ugly. It produces much better communication, too," she writes. While innocence is good, she concludes, "Honesty is better."

Knapp's work with clay serves as a metaphor of the grace she recalls receiving throughout the odd course of her life. In hindsight, she is now able to perceive the imaginative work of divine hands, sculpting her life and bringing her to a place where she has learned to accept herself.

Through her personal stories and the insights she's gained, Knapp reminds us that even the ordinary and the awful become pressure points for shaping us into works of art, "God's masterpiece, created anew in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:10).

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