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The Lesson of Grace in Teaching

Francis Su
Harvey Mudd College

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The Mathematical Yawp

Friday, January 18, 2013

The Lesson of Grace in Teaching

After giving this talk, I had so many requests for the text that I shared it on Facebook. But Facebook deleted it. So I created a blog just for this. I hope you find it helpful.

It was the hardest thing I ever had to write: because it is deeply personal, truly me, and about my biggest life lesson... given at a conference in front of hundreds of people who, I'm sure, struggle with the same things that I do.

The Lesson of Grace in Teaching

From weakness to wholeness, the struggle and the hope

Francis Edward Su

MAA Haimo Teaching Award Lecture
Joint Math Meetings, January 11, 2013

An audio file is available: bit.ly/W4gyD0.
Published in print [here](#).



"We know truth, not only by reason, but also by the heart." ---Blaise Pascal

I'm honored but I'm also really humbled to be giving this talk to a room full of great teachers, because I know that EACH of you have a rich and unique perspective on teaching. I had to ask myself: could I really tell YOU anything significant about teaching?

So: I decided instead to talk about something else, that at first may appear to have nothing to do with teaching, and yet it has everything to do with teaching.

I want to talk about the biggest life lesson that I have learned, and that I continue to learn over and over again. It is deep and profound. It has changed the way I relate with people. It has reshaped my academic life. And it continually renovates the way I approach my students.

And perhaps it will help you frame your own thoughts about teaching. The beginning of that lesson is this:

Your accomplishments are NOT what make you a worthy human being.

It sounds easy for me to say, especially after having some measure of academic 'success' and winning this teaching award.

But twenty years ago, I was a struggling grad student, seeking validation for my mathematical talent but flailing in my research, seeking my identity in my work but discouraged enough to quit. My advisor had even said to me:

"You don't have what it takes to be a successful mathematician."

It was my lowest point. Weak and weary, with my identity and my pride stripped away and my PhD nearly out of reach, I realized then that my identity and self-worth could NOT rest on whether I succeeded or failed to get my PhD. So *IF* I were to continue in mathematics, I could not do it for any acclaim that I might receive or for the trappings of what the academic world would call success. I should only do it because math is beautiful, and I feel

About Me



Francis Su

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Mathematician, gardener, writer, sounding his

yawp. Who has realized that all worthy pursuits blend structure and freedom, truth and beauty, reflection and action.

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drawn to it. In my quiet moments, with no one watching, I still found math fun to think about. So I was convinced it was my calling, despite the hurtful thing my advisor had said.

So did I quit? No. I just changed advisors.

This time, I chose differently. Persi Diaconis was an inspiring teacher. More than that, he had shown me a great kindness a couple of years before. The semester I took a class from him, my mother died and I needed an extension on my work. I'll never forget his response: "I'm really sorry about your mother. Let me take you to coffee."

I remember thinking: "I'm just some random student and he's taking me to coffee?" But I really needed that talk. We pondered life and its burdens, and he shared some of his own journey. For me, in a challenging academic environment, with enormous family struggles, to connect with my professor on a deeper level was a great comfort. Yes, Persi was an inspiring teacher, but this simple act of kindness---of authentic humanness---gave me a greater capacity and motivation to learn from him, because we had entered into authentic community with each other, as teacher and student, who were real people to each other.

So when the time came to change advisors, I decided to work with Persi, even though it meant completely starting over in a new area. Only in hindsight did I realize why I had gravitated to him. It's because he showed me grace.

GRACE: good things you didn't earn or deserve, but you're getting them anyway.

By taking me to coffee, he had shown me he valued me as a human being, independent of my academic record. And having my worthiness separated from my performance gave me great freedom! I could truly enjoy learning again. Whether I succeeded or failed would not affect my worthiness as a human being. Because even if I failed, I knew: I am still worth having coffee with!

Knowing my new advisor had grace for me meant that he could give me honest feedback on my dissertation work, even if it was hard to do, without completely destroying my identity. Because, as I was learning, my worthiness does NOT come from my accomplishments. I call this

The Lesson of GRACE:

- **Your accomplishments are NOT what make you a worthy human being.**
- **You learn this lesson when someone shows you GRACE: good things you didn't earn or deserve, but you're getting them anyway.**

I have to learn this lesson over and over again.

You can have worthiness apart from your performance.

You can have dignity independent of achievements.

Your identity does not have to be rooted in accomplishments.

You can be loved for who you are, not for what you've done---somebody just has to show you grace.

You are worth having coffee with!

Now the academic world does not make it easy to learn this lesson. Especially when so much of academic success depends on achievement. Grades, PhD, publishing papers, getting tenure. And we are applauded for those achievements. We crave that applause! So it's tempting to be drawn into this trap of needing my achievements to justify me.

So even now, as I receive this award, I must hold fast to this lesson. I must not cling to this award too tightly. It does not GIVE me dignity... because if someone showed me grace, I'd realize I already HAD dignity.

Don't get me wrong... I'm not saying that achievement shouldn't be rewarded. There IS a place for credentials in academia. We would not want to hear a talk by someone without credentials. We would not want to graduate students who didn't have skills. But achievement, in its rightful place, is NOT where we should derive our ultimate sense of identity and self-worth, and we need to have a healthy separation between achievement and worthiness.

If I could really believe this then it gives me great freedom! I can do math SIMPLY because I enjoy it, not because I have to perform. I don't have to be "the best". I can stop being so hard on myself. I can have a healthy ambition without competition: striving towards goals, without having to compare myself to other people. I can be happy for another person's success. I can be appropriately open and authentic---I don't have to fear showing weakness. Because my worthiness isn't earned, there's no need and no room for pretense. I can stop worrying about what others will think of me, if I believe the lesson of grace.

Grace gives people dignity they don't have to earn.

Grace seems simple but it is such a deep concept. Once you recognize it you begin to see it everywhere. Some might recognize grace as a part of many of the world's great religions.

That makes sense, because at its core it's a theological concept, making a claim about who we are as human beings, and why. In my own religious view, I see Jesus as the ultimate giver and source of grace, endorsing all human beings with worth and dignity that they don't have to earn. But whether you are religious or not, everyone can give, receive, and be drawn to grace, graceful actions and its lessons. Because grace gives people dignity they don't have to earn.

What does this life lesson have to do with teaching? Well, if life is one gigantic learning experience, then you'd expect any life lesson we learn would shape our teaching. But the lesson of grace has remarkable implications. Here are 4 ways that I see grace can shape our teaching. These go from easiest to hardest: giving grace to students, understanding grace in our teaching, communicating grace in the struggle, and sharing grace in our weakness.

Giving GRACE to our STUDENTS:

What does it mean to give grace to our students?

The first example is something we already all do. What do you when you want to be nice to your students and you want to wake them up and 8am in the morning? Yes, you give them donuts! They didn't have to earn that. That's grace! (Except on evaluation day---then it's a bribe.)

Here's another way we show grace to our students---learning their names. By naming people, you give them DIGNITY. Imagine the other possibility: suppose you only learn the names of the people who are getting A's, or coming to office hours. That's not grace, because it only dignifies only the people who EARN it.

Spend time with students outside class. That's grace: it's a good thing they didn't have to earn. As long as it's not just the best students you hang out with, then it's grace.

I have often given fun exam questions: students can earn some easy points just by sharing the most interesting thing learned in the class, or a question they'd like to pursue further. Or "write a poem about a concept in this course." Or "Imagine you are writing a column for the newspaper 'great ideas in math'. What would you put in it?"

These are graceful questions. They really didn't have to earn those points, and they're having fun while doing it.

And of course, sharing the joy of mathematics is grace. And going off on tangents in class. Many of you know that I have a collection of "math fun facts". I have often started off calculus lectures with 5-minute "math fun facts" that have nothing to do with calculus, just to get students excited about mathematics. This is a graceful action. Because going off-topic communicates something to students: that they can learn math just because it's cool, not because they have to "get through some material" that they'll be tested on.

There's a website where you can find my collection (google 'Math Fun Facts' to find it), and if you prefer a mobile version, there's an app for that!

Understanding GRACE in our TEACHING:

If we fully understand the lesson of grace, then we'll understand: since my performance doesn't define me, I don't have to be the center of attention in my classroom. I can do experimental things, and fail. I can get out of the way of my students... I can open up the classroom for things like inquiry-based learning. I don't have to be in control of everything. I don't have to worry about what people will think of me.

I'll give a recent example of where I had to think about these things. A couple of years ago, a former student came to me with an idea. He was creating an online learning platform, and wanted to pair up videos of my Real Analysis course with scrolling notes and social learning features, and I said: that's interesting... what would it involve? He said: we would just have to record your class and put it on YouTube! And I hesitated.

Then he said, it would cool if my class could try out the software and he could run some experiments... and what he was suggesting sounded to me like a radical overhaul of the way I would teach my class. And it made me nervous. This is getting to be a bit much, I thought.

But upon reflection, what I realized is the only reason I hesitated is because I was fearful of losing control, fearful of crazy internet comments and what others would think of me. And I could extend him a great grace by helping him pursue his passion.

So I agreed to have the class taped. What's interesting is the unexpected grace that occurred as a result of the YouTube experiment. The students were excited about it. They loved the fact they could watch the videos later. They didn't stop coming to class, as I had worried about. And to my surprise, I began to get grateful e-mail from people around the world. Many of them didn't have access to a university, were facing particular economic hardships, or learned best when they could pause and rewind lectures.

For them the videos were a grace they didn't have to earn. I had thought at the beginning of the semester, I would just take down the videos at the end, because I was so worried. But I never took them down, because I realized they are serving a needed function for the least fortunate in our global community, and for people who learn differently.

Communicating GRACE in the STRUGGLE:

I want to demonstrate to my students that their worthiness does NOT depend on the grades they earn in my class. Of course, I want to give my C students the same attention that my A students get. But if I am really honest with myself, I have to admit I like talking to A students, because they "get it"... they already speak the same language.

But what credit is it to me as a teacher, if I only affirm the students who already "get it"? It's easy to affirm the student who asks great questions in class, but I must be thoughtful about how can I affirm the questions from a struggling student. Or the one who comes from a different cultural background. Or the one whose educational system didn't provide them with the tools they need. How can I affirm these students?

I like to tell them the struggle is the more interesting place to be: because a healthy confusion is where the real learning begins. Just like in life, the most meaningful lessons are learned when our afflictions and struggles are greatest.

But I want to be clear: I am not saying extending grace is a recipe for helping my students feel good about themselves. I am saying it will help them have a right understanding about themselves. So if my students know in their bones that I have given them a dignity that is independent of their performance, then I can have honest conversations with them about their performance. I can judge their work justly AND graciously. In fact, failing a student CAN be done with grace, so that the student understands their dignity has not been tarnished even though their work has been justly assessed---just as a parent can discipline her child if the child knows her love is unconditional. Grace is precisely what makes hard conversations possible, and productive, between people. But you have to extend the grace first.

I want the failing student to understand clearly that grades are just an assessment, not a sentence. I try to meet with every failing student in person, and I will explicitly articulate the distinction between their grade, and their worthiness. I will often give them this explicit word of encouragement: that while grades attempt to measure what you have learned, they

do not measure your dignity as an individual.

Sharing GRACE in our WEAKNESS:

I don't mind telling students that I almost didn't make it in graduate school. Because I understand that my worthiness is not in my accomplishments, I don't fear that people will think less of me. I know what it means to enter a program with a weaker background than my peers, to feel woefully underprepared, to feel misunderstood, to have family pressures that somehow became paramount. To wonder if I was really cut out for this profession. So I know that weakness can be powerful when a former student shares:

"He gave me the single most important piece of advice I got before heading to graduate school, which greatly shaped how my mathematical career developed. It occurred when I asked him about his graduate school days, which surprising as it may be, did not go very smoothly for him! He confessed to me that at one point he considered dropping out of Harvard! The lesson he learned was to pick an advisor you can ... thrive with, even to the sacrifice of a particular subject or project. I took this advice to heart... and as a result I thrived in graduate school which has directly resulted in my early career success as well."

This is from a student who was not the top of his class at Harvey Mudd, but he chose a graduate school where he could thrive, and it led to an NSF postdoc and he's just finishing that now.

I don't mind talking with students who are having serious family issues about losing both of my parents to terminal illnesses and telling them it's okay to let academic work suffer. Because as human beings, they aren't defined by their academic work.

I don't mind telling students with emotional issues that it's OK to see a counselor, because I've seen a counselor.

So with a struggling student, showing my weakness is extending and sharing grace. I am validating their worthiness in our shared struggles. *They don't have to perform well to earn my favor.*

And... sometimes, showing weakness enables us to RECEIVE grace from our students. One of the nicest things a student ever said to me came when my father was dying of cancer, and I was flying back and forth to Texas multiple times to tend to his care. There was a point in the semester when my class had had more lectures from other people than from me, and it was surely disruptive for them to see a different professor every day. So I confessed to my class that I had two roles---as a son and as a teacher---and I felt I was doing neither of those roles well. One of my students said to me, so gently: "Should I be terminally ill later in life, I would want my son to act as you have."

Ah, grace! From my student, who reminded me: I didn't need to be so hard on myself. *I didn't need to perform well to earn his favor.*

So this is the Lesson of GRACE:

- **Your accomplishments are NOT what make you a worthy human being.**
- **You learn this lesson by receiving GRACE: good things you didn't earn or deserve, but you're getting them anyway.**

And this is my HOPE: that you could receive and give GRACE.

We are so trained by our accomplishment-driven culture to believe that our deeds are what make us worthy of honor or respect. To fight this, you have to surround yourself with grace-givers, people who are good at it.

All the best teachers in my life have been grace-givers. Think of that teacher whom you knew was busy, but still made you feel like you were the most important person in the world. Think of those people whom you can be authentic with---those who, even if they know all the rotten things about you, would love you anyway.

The ones around whom you feel you have no shame.

Sure, good instructional techniques are necessary for good teaching. But they are not sufficient. They are NOT the foundation. Grace-filled relationships with your students are the foundation for good teaching, because it gives you freedom to explore, freedom to fail. Freedom to let students take control of their own learning, freedom to affirm the struggling student by your own weakness. Grace amplifies the teacher-student relationship to one of greater trust in which a student can thrive.

“To teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced.”
---Parker Palmer

That community and space that Parker Palmer talks about does not form without grace.

I'd like to think that I'm a good teacher because I communicate well and I choose the best examples, and that when my former students think of my teaching, they think of these things. But that is accomplishment-driven thinking isn't it? Instead what students remember most often are those moments of grace.

Last year, at Harvey Mudd graduation event, a math major Simeon was invited to give a speech to parents about his college experience. I'd like to close my talk by sharing part of it, with his permission:

“The one class that best embodies the essence of Harvey Mudd College was a class called Real Analysis.

In Real Analysis I learned to question the very definition of real numbers and everything I knew about mathematics. What do you mean I have to prove how to add two real numbers? Proof by common sense and elementary education were strictly prohibited.

Real Analysis was perhaps the hardest class I've taken, and my first experience of struggling in math. I wasn't getting the concepts as quickly as some of my peers, and I couldn't help feeling incompetent in math, a subject I had always felt confident in... the “gateway” to mathematics never felt so narrow and without space for an incompetent student like me...

Fortunately, there's more to the story. During that semester I was doing a book study with Professor Su outside of class, and I was uncomfortable. Sitting before me was a super smart incredible professor, and I felt really unworthy to be hanging out with him because I wasn't doing so well in his class, and I thought I might disappoint him once he got to know me personally. But at our last meeting, we were talking and he said, 'I want students to understand that professors don't value students based on their academic performance'... to hear from my own professor, whom I really love and admire, at a time when I felt ashamed of my intelligence and thus unworthy of his friendship, that I wasn't just a student in a seat, not just a letter grade or a number on my transcript, but a valuable person who he wants to know on a personal level, was perhaps the most incredible moment of my college career. And that's the kind of place that Harvey Mudd was.”

Yes, Simeon, you get it! You understand the transformative power of grace! My hope for all of us is that we would understand grace in all its forms and how it can transform our teaching.

And not only will grace inspire our students, it will inspire us. Just like my students, the moments I remember best from my own teaching are the grace-filled moments I have shared with my students and colleagues and former teachers, many of whom are here today. I want to thank them, because I didn't deserve those blessed moments. But they gave them to me anyway.

“We know truth, not only by reason, but also by the heart.” --- Blaise Pascal



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**Francis Su** · Professor of Mathematics at Harvey Mudd College

I added the ability to add Facebook comments at the end of my essay in addition to the Google comments below them. p.s. I won't be able to see your comment unless your comment setting is 'public' or you are my friend.

Like · Reply · 19 · Jan 20, 2013 2:43pm

**John Swencki** · Medford, Massachusetts

God bless you, Doctor.

Like · Reply · 1 · Jan 21, 2013 8:50am

**Elizabeth Mataji Sadhu** · Joy Coach at Self-Employed

Thank you Professor Su for this lovely and beautiful article and sharing. I am in tears and so touched. I shared and I may use Grace as a topic for my Blog Talk Radio show coming up. Love and light and laughter and GRACE to us all!

Like · Reply · 1 · Jan 21, 2013 9:41am

**Alexandre Duarte** · Software Engineer at Google

Bela leitura!

Like · Reply · 1 · Jan 21, 2013 9:56am

**Lonnie Jolene Elliott** · Librarian at Chesterfield County Public Library

This is an incredible essay and well worth the time it takes to read all of it. Show grace to someone in your life today and every day.

Like · Reply · 2 · Jan 21, 2013 10:47am

**Jezzri Cochrane**

Thank you so much for making this available on your blog! I tried to share this with some teacher friends but it was taken down before they had a chance to read it. Thank you for writing this and sharing it. Also, "Math Yawp" is a wonderful name for a blog!

Like · Reply · 1 · Jan 21, 2013 3:54pm

**Paul Varkey Parayil** · Software Engineer at Facebook

"We know truth, not only by reason, but also by the heart." --- Blaise Pascal.

Like · Reply · 4 · Jan 21, 2013 7:40pm

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Facebook Comments Plugin

Posted by **Francis Su** at 11:48 AM

+342 Recommend this on Google

42 comments:

**stearnsybears** January 18, 2013 at 1:43 PM

Thanks for sharing this.

[Reply](#)
**Nano Tellez** January 18, 2013 at 1:52 PM

Thank you so much for this. There are a lot of things here that I had felt before but was never able to put in words.

Also... why did facebook delete your post?

[Reply](#)
[Replies](#)
Francis Su January 18, 2013 at 1:57 PM



I'm not sure why it was deleted. It was getting passed around so much, and it contained a link to the audio. When I tried to repost it, I got a message saying the link was spam. So that's the only reason I can think of. But I got no warning or anything. Anyways, I'm glad you find the piece helpful.



Paul Dickinson January 18, 2013 at 9:36 PM

Hi Francis,

I work at Facebook, and saw your post. I'm sure it was taken down by mistake. I'll try to get it reactivated!

It's a great article!

Cheers,

Paul



Francis Su January 18, 2013 at 11:05 PM

Paul, thank you for looking into this! The saddest part for me was losing all the comments on my page (and other pages where it was shared). It disappeared around 7:40am this morning (Friday). Let me know if I can provide any more information.



Paul Dickinson January 24, 2013 at 9:27 AM

Well, it's been approved for re-instatement! You should have received some communication about what next steps are required. I really hope that the comments are preserved as well!



Francis Su January 24, 2013 at 5:57 PM

Thanks, but nothing was restored. All that's in my Notes is a draft that I made (to try to reconstruct the original after it was deleted, but it's NOT the original (which had ID number 10151372450043217). I'm guessing the FB people saw that and thought it was the original, but it's not. Thanks for trying, though.

Reply



Marcia January 18, 2013 at 2:09 PM

Thank you so much! I love your attitude toward your study--"I still found math fun to think about. So I was convinced it was my calling, despite the hurtful thing my advisor had said." and toward your students--embodying grace-giving. Thank you!

Reply

Replies



Francis Su January 19, 2013 at 10:43 AM

Thanks! I've been reflecting on how learning to RECEIVE grace better equips us to give grace. I didn't mention this in the essay, but years after my advisor took me to coffee, a student came to me, asking for a homework extension because his father was dying of cancer. I knew exactly what to do.

Reply



Yael Goldstein Love January 18, 2013 at 3:41 PM

I think this is one of most beautiful speeches I've ever read. I'm a Jewish atheist, so "grace", in this sense, is not a concept I've much explored, but everything you say resonates with me on the deepest level. I am so glad your students have you as a teacher. I am so glad you've found your way to such a graceful position in this world.

Reply

Replies



Francis Su January 19, 2013 at 10:23 AM

Thank you! I'm glad the speech resonates with you. You must be a grace-giver! It is a deep concept. It would have been hard to not mention my own faith context, because that is where my understanding has been sharpened: Jesus taught that we don't earn

God's favor by through moral accomplishment, just as I see that students shouldn't earn their teacher's favor through academic accomplishment. That favor is already freely given. Paradoxically, when we're shown grace (in the classroom or in life), it frees us and motivates us to learn and do good things!

And the fact that you are a grace-giver is also an example of grace! You don't have to have any faith to be a grace-giver, because the gift of gracefulness is not something you earn through religious piety, thank goodness. That too, is grace (a theological idea known as 'common grace').

Thank you, Yael, for so deeply engaging this topic.

Reply



naturalbornalien January 18, 2013 at 5:49 PM

Powerful, Francis! I am not a "teacher" in the formal sense... but am struck to realize we are *all* teachers in some sense, and so have the same opportunities to demonstrate -- and receive -- grace. Thank you for sharing grace with us by courageously giving this lecture (and posting it online).

Reply

Replies



Francis Su January 19, 2013 at 12:46 PM

So true! We are all teachers and learners. Thanks!

Reply



Terri January 18, 2013 at 7:11 PM

Worthwhile reading. Hope it spreads around. Good stuff you have learned.

Reply



Muhammad Khairul January 19, 2013 at 2:24 AM

Grateful for this. I believe that the lesson applies especially to teachers, AND to other professions that are in the service of helping people as well.

Because even if we were never recognized for what we have done, we are still coffee-worthy :)

Reply

Replies



Francis Su January 19, 2013 at 12:56 PM

Indeed, Muhammad!

Reply



Alba Marrero January 19, 2013 at 4:51 AM

Thank you for validating the HUMAN element in education; without extending grace to our students and colleagues, the road becomes weary and lonely for all. You have presented something unique yet common, speaking from your life lessons is as an olive branch that transcends position and power. Thank you!!!! I reposted on my FB timeline for colleagues to read as well. We all need grace.

Reply

Replies



Francis Su January 19, 2013 at 12:55 PM

Thanks, Alba. Yes, my life lessons come from a place of weakness and I'm no longer afraid to show it. If we are never vulnerable, we'll never know if anyone can truly love us for who we are and not just for what we've done. Without showing weakness, we'll never be the recipients of grace.

Reply**Carrie** January 19, 2013 at 9:08 AM

Thank you, Francis. One part of your essay that was most helpful to me was this: "I am not saying extending grace is a recipe for helping my students feel good about themselves. I am saying it will help them have a right understanding about themselves."

I am a professor of education, and I've been uncomfortable with the "feel good about yourself" approach which has been entrenched in our K-12 system, but I also knew that some kind of self-understanding was huge in any student's learning and development. You tied that up for me.

Reply**Replies****roolily** January 19, 2013 at 5:42 PM

Carrie, "right understanding about" ourselves is what stood out for me, too.

Beautiful talk, thank you. It's helpful for people in any profession. I love the ideas of a community of truth and just assessment separate from worthiness.

**Francis Su** January 19, 2013 at 11:45 PM

Thanks to you both. And for roolily, I might recommend Parker Palmer's books, especially "To Know as We are Known" in which he explores the importance of community in education.

Reply**Hoineilhing Sitlhou** January 19, 2013 at 10:11 AM

thank you! I am truly inspired!

Reply**Carrie** January 19, 2013 at 12:28 PM

Thank you, Francis. Now that I am a faculty member at another PUI, I often find myself reflecting on what made my own undergraduate experience at HMC so special. You have summarized it beautifully, and it's a great reminder of how I hope to continue approaching my interactions with students, both in and out of the classroom.

Reply**Replies****Francis Su** January 19, 2013 at 11:47 PM

Carrie, so great to hear from a Mudder! We're keeping the torch burning brightly here! :-)

Reply**Emily Lavin Leverett** January 19, 2013 at 1:19 PM

This is so wonderful! I saw the link from a friend of mine on FB and shared it with some of my colleagues. The whole thing has given me a lot to think about, but the part about feeling like a failure in grad school--I'm not sure I know a single person who, at some point, didn't feel that way. Some more than others, sure. This would have helped me a lot then (and the idea of dignity separated from accomplishment was certainly one I learned in grad school), but it helps me now to think about my own attitudes toward teaching and toward my students. Thanks very much for this. (And, as a slight non-sequiter, I graduated from CMC in 1998. It's not a surprise this came from someone who teaches at the 5 colleges!)

Reply**Replies****Francis Su** January 19, 2013 at 11:39 PM

You're right, Emily... grad school is almost universally a difficult adjustment. I think it's partly because as students we are so used to benchmarking our progress (and our worthiness) by the grades we get, and when we stop taking classes then we no longer have that regular feedback. I was so miserable then, after striving so hard and still hitting bottom. But that experience has helped me see now that any good thing that happens in my life is just pure grace. Thanks for writing! And hooray for CMC!

[Reply](#)



Jeff Hobson January 20, 2013 at 6:34 AM

Thank you, Francis. This is a lovely expression of what it means to be a powerful teacher, a worthy person. Thank you.

[Reply](#)



Unknown January 20, 2013 at 1:43 PM

Hello Professor Francis. I really enjoyed reading your article. It really gave me more hope for my aspiring path in life. Currently Im a senior at Hofstra university and I am a major in mathematics and biology. I apply mathematics in to the many fields of science, something rare because of how much work it takes to master even one of the fields.

I learned about you when I started watching your videos for real analysis. You are an amazing professor and you should be a model for all other professors, because believe it or not, not every professor can profess.

I looked into your work more and what you have been doing in terms of research. I would love to talk to you one day and possibly work on something together as well, because it would be an honor!

Thank you for everything!

[Reply](#)

[Replies](#)



Francis Su January 23, 2013 at 12:20 AM

Thanks for your kind words. Remember that you, as a student, can show your professors grace, too. Especially the ones you feel are not good teachers. Acts of grace from you will motivate them to grow in their teaching, and will help you see what they struggle with. One example: you can send your professor a note of thanks, affirming what you like about their teaching. You may not feel like it (because they didn't earn it), but that is an act of grace. Better yet, get the whole class to show your professor grace! What professor wouldn't feel joy and motivation after that? :-)

[Reply](#)



JD Phaup January 20, 2013 at 2:02 PM

Francis,

You write so gracefully about grace. Would that all teachers everywhere could understand this -- that it's not ALL about the subject matter. That people matter. That how well a student is doing in your class at some point in time is exactly that; but it is not a measure even of the student's overall intelligence or industriousness, much less a measure of his or her value as a fellow human being. My wife, who taught freshman English, ESL, high school English to kids, most of whom spoke Spanish as a first language, and adult literacy, was one of the most incredible teachers I ever knew. Much of her magic stemmed precisely from the vast store of grace which she freely doled out to any and all of her students on a daily basis. Some of my own teachers were fascinating lecturers, but every teacher who really touched my life did it through grace as you describe it. No wonder Jesus Christ was the greatest teacher who ever lived. He gave everything, even his own life, for His students (all of us). What grace! Those who want to be great teachers and to really impact their students' lives have only to emulate His example. From what you describe, you do that wonderfully. I have known you since you were a child, but I'm so happy you have revealed this important aspect of your personal and professional life here that otherwise I never would have known. I can see why this piece has been so wildly popular. It strikes a responsive chord with so many teachers, students, and former students. And many of us have room to learn from your experience. Thanks.

[Reply](#)

Replies

**Francis Su** January 20, 2013 at 11:48 PM

Dr. Phaup! So wonderful to hear from you. You have shown my family great grace over the years, and in some of our most difficult times. I am really grateful. And so honored that you would read my essay.

Reply

**Catherine Crouch** January 20, 2013 at 3:47 PM

Hi Francis,
This is truly awesome. Thank you so much for crafting this and sharing it!

blessings,
Catherine

Reply

Replies

**Francis Su** January 23, 2013 at 12:34 AM

Catherine, thanks so much for this feedback. Means a lot to me because I know you and Andy to be such gifted writers. And come to think of it, a "gift", as the parlance suggests, is also grace, isn't it? Something one does not earn, but is given anyway. :-)

Reply

**Bhaskar Krishnamachari** January 20, 2013 at 10:20 PM

Dear Francis,

Your definition and exposition of "grace" crystallizes beautifully what I have felt and experienced myself as a student and teacher over the years, but could never articulate so clearly. I will never forget a mentor in graduate school who offered me unconditionally warm support and advice during a low period. I am grateful to have the chance to pay it forward in my own interactions with students, by treating them all as worthy individuals deserving of encouragement, advice, help, or as they very often need, a friendly, non-judgemental, ear.

We live in an achievement-oriented society, particularly in academia, with its strong emphasis on competition and external evaluation of achievement through grading, recognitions, etc. Much harm is done by this system, both to those students who do poorly, but counter-intuitively, even to those who do well, because it reinforces the wrong connection between self-worth and achievement.

I wrote about something related a while ago, the "impostor syndrome" (the name given to the feelings of inferiority that many students doing a Ph.D. have). I'd like to share it with you and your readers: <http://academicsfreedom.blogspot.com/2011/01/impostor.html>

I wrote there that "having given the matter much thought over the years, I feel that what exacerbates the impostor syndrome, or perhaps even gives rise to it in the first place, is adopting the world view that ties one's sense of self-worth to one's achievements and treats achievement as the goal of one's efforts."

I believe that your talk, by urging educators to think differently, and treat all students with grace, could have a tremendously positive impact. Thank you for sharing it with the world.

Best,
Bhaskar

Reply

Replies

**Francis Su** January 23, 2013 at 12:38 AM

Bhaskar, your words ring true. I've been overwhelmed and surprised by the reaction to my essay, but indeed I am happy to share it in hopes that it can help people think differently about the craft of teaching.

Reply

**Bryan** January 21, 2013 at 6:42 AM

Thank you, thank you so much for this article. Understanding grace is so elusive, but it is also so true and so good. As a math graduate student, reading and re-reading this gives me motivation to enjoy my studies and to be a better TA, and it gives me hope that my failings and shortcomings can be and will be used to show grace.

Reply

Replies

**Francis Su** January 23, 2013 at 12:52 AM

I'm so happy to hear this. Grad school was such a difficult time for me, but as my essay suggests, every hardship I've experienced has been used since then to show grace to others. And now even the popularity of the essay has redeemed my hardships multiple times over... in some sense, it makes me feel happy to have suffered. Weird eh? So I'm confident that all your failings and difficulties will be redeemed as instruments of grace too.

Reply

**gtanders** January 24, 2013 at 8:29 AM

Dr. Su,
Thank you for this. I think we also need to extend grace to ourselves, and I that's the subject of my response.

<http://www.gtanders.com/creativity/extending-grace-to-yourself/>

Thank you again.
George

Reply

Replies

**Francis Su** January 24, 2013 at 9:55 PM

So true, George. I loved your response to my essay. Thanks!

Reply

**Only the Good...** January 25, 2013 at 7:41 AM

Thank you Professor Su, for articulating so clearly a principle I have cultivated and applied in my teaching practice, but never had the words to share it with my colleagues and students. Your article itself, as evident by the outpouring of thanks in these comments, is grace itself.

Reply

**cogscimom** February 20, 2013 at 4:01 PM

Thank you Francis. Munyi fwded this to me after I had a bit of a crisis in teaching and I realize that somewhere along the way, I had stomped the grace out of my teaching. I valued performance so much that I started to equate it with not only my students' worth but also my worth as an educator. Their failures were my failures. The concept of grace is so hard to hold on to because it seems like a mental/spiritual discipline sometimes in the midst of evaluating students, evaluating myself, and wanting all of us to strive towards better achievements. Thank you for this reminder to return to grace... Ji

Reply



David March 29, 2013 at 10:12 AM

Thank you for sharing this! I know it to be true but often wrestle with this in my own teaching!

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