

Grace in the running magazine

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I'm a regular reader of [Runner's World](#). Like most special-interest magazines, there's a lot of repetition of ideas if you read long enough, but it's excellent monthly motivation and entertainment for this unexpected hobby and lifestyle of mine.

At times the magazine is downright inspirational. This month's issue has great profiles of "runners of the year," including a Kenyan distance runner who is blind. He convinced a childhood friend who had never run (in a country where children routinely run to school every day!) to train to be his guide, and now they're winning races. (As someone who picked up this sport less than four years ago, I may be more inspired by the never-runner than the blind runner.)

But here's the piece I'm pondering days later. It's at the tail end of the celebrity runner column, called "[I'm a Runner](#)," and this month it profiles Brooklyn street dancer Storyboard P:

A lot of dancers don't like running because they think it's painful and that dancing is only about being graceful. But grace is acquired strength. You've got to run and work out to get to that.

Grace is acquired strength.

Of course, he's talking about "grace" in terms of beautiful and fluid motion. Or is he?

I recently heard an elite runner talk about the importance of running for the joy of it. If you're constantly stressed and focused on your metrics, your run won't be smooth and fluid, and you won't be as effective. Your run will lack grace. But it's also true that the more miles you put in, the stronger you'll be, and there will be an ease to your running. It will be grace-full.

Christians are used to talking about grace as a gift freely given from God. There's nothing we can do to earn or deserve this gift. The only thing we can do is receive it and steward it responsibly and joyfully.

I also give thanks that in this age we are moving beyond faith as intellectual assent and instead are reclaiming the importance of practice, of Christianity as a pattern of life. I myself struggle with all kinds of questions and doubts, and have a special affection for skeptics both inside and outside the church. I've had multiple non-churchy (or even atheist) Facebook friends call me their pastor. I am honored and take that call seriously!

Amid all of my questions, I'm heartened by the biblical meaning of *believe*, which is akin to giving one's heart to something. Giving one's heart is not primarily about agreement. It's about participation.

So yes, grace is a gift from God. But that gift comes in the midst of striving to live in the manner of Jesus, or the way of love, if you prefer, for I believe they are one and the same. And getting it wrong 95 percent of the time. But, oh, that luminous 5 percent . . .

I know people who are shouldering tremendous burdens right now. I know people who've been dealt the crappiest hand you can imagine. Their ability to not only get up in the morning but to give a damn about the problems of others, and to refuse to let their defeats define them, is grace, wherever it comes from.

That kind of grace is not a sweet and delicate thing. It is strong. It is muscular. It is acquired strength, obtained over many years of practice and stumbles and *I don't know how I got through that day, but I just saw the sun rise so I must have done it*. And it is beautiful.

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