

# Amazing Grace

*Revolutionary Common Sense*

*from Kathie Snow*

[www.disabilityisnatural.com](http://www.disabilityisnatural.com)

Dawn Machonis, a parent from Virginia, shared the following story with me:

November 8, 1998 started as an ordinary day. Little did I know it would become an extraordinary day that is permanently etched in my heart's memory. It was the day I saw God.

As usual, our family went to church that Sunday morning. I don't remember much about the service except that a visiting musician was present. We sat in the third row so eight-year-old Gracie (who has Down Syndrome) and six-year-old Jacob could see better.

For some reason, Gracie wanted to sit in the first row, so she did—by herself. When the musician began playing "Amazing Grace" on his zither, Gracie recognized "her song" and stood up. I am grateful I did not act on my parental instinct and ask my daughter to sit down, for what transpired was awe-inspiring. Gracie began to dance.

My daughter has been known to "ham it up," but that was not the case on this day. Gracie was totally lost in her dance.

I can only describe it as Gracie being filled with the Spirit. As I watched my daughter twirl and spread her arms to the sky, I cried—hard. It was one of the most beautiful sights I had ever seen. It was only when the song ended and the congregation took to its feet in applause that Gracie realized there were others in the room.

Some time has passed since that blessed day. But thinking of my daughter's dance never ceases to fill my soul with joy, my eyes with tears, and my heart with gratitude.

A few days later, Grace received the following note from a member of the congregation:

Dear Grace,

Thank you for your wonderful dance last Sunday. You lifted my heart with joy. Thank you for being an Amazing Grace in all of our lives. Thank you, and keep dancing your dances of joy.

Mary

These wondrous events occurred at an inclusive church—the Unitarian Universalist Community Church of Glen Allen, Virginia, led by the Reverend Tim Kutzmark. Dawn shared that every service begins with the following:

*We extend a special welcome to those of you who are visiting our church for the first time. We hope that you find this to be a spiritual community in which you find comfort, stimulation, and inspiration. We are an intentionally inclusive congregation that welcomes people of all religious backgrounds, cultural origins, differing abilities, and sexual orientation. We welcome both adults and children, and worship as a family.*

This affirmation is spoken in both English and Spanish, a practice that was started after several men who spoke only Spanish began attending the church. “We did that,” Dawn wrote, “to make them feel welcome.”

Dawn also wrote, “I’m proud of our church. Are we perfect at welcoming everyone? Probably not. At times I hear people refer to those with disabilities in other than person-first language, and I plan on sharing information to help educate the congregation. But we are conscious of trying to welcome all.”

Two specific words—“intentional” (from the church’s welcome statement) and “conscious”—(from the preceding paragraph) may help people in other congregations (as well as those in homes, schools, workplaces, and other environments) become more inclusive. Much of what occurs in churches, schools, businesses, and even in our homes is routine; we engage in habitual activities and rituals without thinking. We are, frequently, *unintentional* and *unconscious*, and this can have terribly profound effects on others. Grace’s church did not become inclusive by accident; intentional and conscious efforts by individual members and the congregation as a whole are making the hope of inclusion a reality.

What might happen if each of us became more *intentional* and *conscious* in our efforts to include and welcome everyone in our homes, schools, churches, workplaces, and communities? What miracles may occur?

*A 2006 update to this 2002 story from Dawn: “Sixteen-year-old Grace is pursuing her dream of becoming a veterinarian. She volunteers at the SPCA each week and has started a pet-sitting business in our neighborhood.” Dawn Machonis can be reached at [dmmachonis@vcu.edu](mailto:dmmachonis@vcu.edu).*