IMAGES OF HEALING

States of Grace: A Review

Alissa Murray, *United States* Content designated
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States of Grace, visit
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Dr Grace Dammann had devoted decades of her life to the compassionate care of AIDS patients in San Francisco, California, when, on May 21, 2008, a head-on vehicle collision on the Golden Gate Bridge nearly took her life. When she not only survived but came out of a coma with all of her mental faculties intact, Grace, her family, and her doctors agreed it was nothing short of a miracle. Her path to healing, however, had only just begun and would prove far more complex, challenging, and enlightening than any of them expected.

This is the journey chronicled in *States of Grace*, the 2014 documentary written and directed by Helen Cohen and Mark Lipman that follows Grace and her family after she returns home from a year-long hospital stay and struggles to realign her life with her new physical reality. Grace had spent her entire life as a dedicated caregiver, not only for her patients but as the mother of a special-needs child as well. The traumatic accident transformed her from caregiver to care-receiver, a shift she found immensely disconcerting. Her struggle to find new purpose in the face of abrupt, severe disability highlights one of the most important messages of the film: that healing can—and must—go far beyond the physical.

States of Grace deftly demonstrates this point with its careful consideration of the many major factors in Grace's recovery. Grace's accident does not affect only her; it causes a dramatic shift in her family, in which her partner is forced to take up the role of selfless caregiver and their daughter must become increasingly independent. The Buddhist community to which Grace returns revitalizes her spirit but proves a considerable logistical challenge. Zen Buddhist practice initially gives Grace hope and comfort but cannot prevent desperate moments in which she wishes she were dead. Each aspect of Grace's life can be seen as a double-edged sword. The documentary's filmmakers consider each aspect in turn, weaving them together into the tapestry of Grace's recovery, just as each played a complex and integrated role in Grace's life as a whole.

Though the documentary could have benefited from delving more deeply into Grace's Buddhist beliefs—which are clearly central to her life but touched upon only superficially—overall, it presents a remarkable example of the complexity of the healing experience. True to her giving nature, Grace stated that she agreed to participate in the project with the hope that it could help others who have experi-

enced a traumatic event move toward healing. At the end of the film, 5 years after the accident that changed everything, Grace says, “A whole way of life for me died, and I’m coming to terms with that.” She returns to work as a doctor leading her hospital’s pain clinic, using her experience to help guide others through their suffering. In this, Grace not only finds new meaning, she provides a beautiful example of resilience and grace in the face of change.

A LEWIS THOMAS VIEW OF MEDICINE

*Teach that
We do not know
All the answers
And likely
Never will.*

*Each certainty
Of science
Yields in its turn
To new data
And perspectives*

*Which turn
The accepted order
Around*

*By offering refined
But still unfinished
Truth.*

Author: Jerome W. Freeman, MD, FACP, professor and chair, Department of Neurosciences, University of South Dakota Sanford School of Medicine.

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