

J O H N L E A X

Grace Is Where I Live

THE LANDSCAPE OF FAITH & WRITING



“Leax writes an unvarnished prose, easy and graceful and blunt all at once.”

—Walter Wangerin Jr.

“*Grace Is Where I Live* abounds in plainspoken profundity.”

—Paul J. Willis

“*Grace Is Where I Live* is an engaging and informative series of reflections upon aspects of the writer’s identity and art. In the informal and intimate tradition of the personal essayist, John Leax invites the reader to share his life and the experiences that shaped his vocation as a writer. In the course of doing so he leads us through the critical questions that [all writers] serious about . . . vocation must ask—and especially those committed to a Christian worldview.

“Leax’s reasoned scrutiny of the steps that led him to become a writer could well spare some students the particular anguishes and cul-de-sacs that lie in wait for those tugged in several vocational directions. The chapter ‘Giving Up Everything’ I think is especially valuable in this regard—it goes to the heart of the matter.”

—Robert Siegel

“While Leax belongs by commitment and heritage to the evangelical community (both his ‘primary audience’ and his ‘most troubling’ one), he echoes the work of no other writer in the stables of evangelical publishing. ‘I am less and less sure of what I have to say,’ he muses. One thing he knows is that ‘language and reality are inextricably bound.’ With that as a given, he sees three possible ‘strategies.’ He can ‘choose silence . . . the way of the mystic and my late dog, Poon.’ He can accept ‘the language of [his] culture group as final, and . . . speak clichés and platitudes.’ Or he can ‘consciously choose the creative responsibility of language.’ The latter is clearly his choice.”

—Shirley Nelson in *The Christian Century*

“John Leax makes the most promising attempt I have seen to enlighten novice writers, and he does it in a refreshingly lucid prose, unpolluted with the ego that so often finds its way into the best writers’ words.”

—Virginia Stem Owens in *Christianity Today*

Grace Is Where I Live

For Lionel Basney
1946-1999

Contents

Preface	13
Introduction	15
What I Have Found.	19
P A R T O N E	
Holiness and Craft	23
Stewardship and Witness	29
Story, Place and Marriage	31
Giving Up Everything	36
P A R T T W O	
Sabbatical Journal.	49
P A R T T H R E E	
Becoming a New Creation	69
Telling Affirmations	77
Truth by Moonlight	84
P A R T F O U R	
In the Care of the Spirit.	95
P A R T F I V E	
Border Life	113
The Child Is Father of the Man	120
Boy in a Blind.	123
A God to Thank	126
In the Presence of Slugs.	128
The Hawk on the Pergola.	130
Vow.	133
Bibliography	135
Works by John Leax.	137

Preface

When I gathered the essays for the first edition of *Grace Is Where I Live*, I selected from work that had been written over a period of twenty years. My intention was to shape a summary of what I had learned about writing and vocation and go on to other things. That, in fact, is what I did.

My life in the local community and a new direction in my teaching turned me to writing nature essays and a regular column for a regional newspaper. Much of that work was collected in *Out Walking*. The demands of writing so much prose on short deadlines, however, overwhelmed my imagination and I stopped writing poetry. That made me an unhappy writer and a disconcerted man. After a careful consideration of my gifts, my desires and my vocation, I committed myself to writing only poetry.

When the editors of WordFarm proposed this new edition of *Grace*, I was enthused but sadly lacking in new material to enrich and enliven an old book. Through the spring and into the summer of 2003 I struggled with how to make *Grace* new and avoid writing prose. My struggle was not intense. Mostly I procrastinated, worked in my garden, and completed a long poem. But finally a copy of the text presented to me by Jane Miner, the secretary of the Houghton College Department of English, who makes my life one of ease, forced me to read my own words and do something constructive.

In the last essay of *Grace*, "In the Care of the Spirit," I found a way to proceed. In it I identified three themes that have shaped my life as a writer: incarnation, the place of the human in the physical world, and the meaning of community. In the ten years since completing the first edition of *Grace* I have ceased to think of them as separate themes and

have come to understand them as a single exploration of the presence of God in creation. While I am convinced that this exploration is so fundamental to my life as a Christian that it would have focused my attention had I never written a word, I am also convinced that for me writing has been the best way to discovery and faith.

For this edition of *Grace* I have added a small number of essays that carry forward this single theme while simultaneously reflecting on the act of writing as a means to discovering grace.

I began the first edition of *Grace* with a poem, "What I Have Found," that looked back and set the tone of summary I intended. I want to close this edition with another poem, "Vow," to indicate an active looking ahead to more and better work.

John Leax
Fillmore, New York
November 5, 2003

Introduction

When I was a student at Wheaton College, Chad Walsh visited campus to read his poems and to lecture. I was impressed. He was the first poet I'd ever heard read, and his performance was masterful. Not only did his poems hang before me in the air like mist in sunlight, but his commentary on them opened the life behind the poems to me. During the question and answer period after his reading, he was asked how one became a Christian writer. I'm surprised I can't remember the exact words of his answer, for I have come to live by its logic: if one is a Christian, one will be a Christian writer; it is impossible for it to be otherwise.

Those brief remarks constituted the full extent of the instruction I was offered as I tried to find my way to maturity both as a Christian and as a writer. Wise as they were, and adequate to me as they are now, they were not enough when I was twenty. I wanted and needed to hear more. I needed to hear what it might mean to submit my life and my words to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. I needed to hear extensive testimony from those who had gone before me about the struggles, trials and rewards of the vocation of writing. I needed good news.

In writing this book I have remembered my difficulty as a student, and with my students in mind I have consciously written the book I didn't have thirty years ago when I needed it. Had I been given it then, I probably wouldn't have liked it; I would have found it too conservative. But I would have read it and fought with it, and that is what I hope my students and other readers will do with it: read it and fight with it. I have written personally; I am not a theorist—my experience is not definitive. In these pages I offer one writer's testimony to be placed beside the testimony of other writers, men and women, and tested by comparison.

I believe in what I have written, but I know I have written only part of the truth. Much remains to be discovered in practice.

Parts one and two of the book treat questions of vocation. The first three essays consider particular relationships. What does it mean to live a holy life? How does one's craft contribute to that holiness? What is the meaning of witness? How does one use language to a purpose without compromising its integrity? What is the meaning of place and community? How does one speak for and to that community? These three essays are reflective and tend to be summative with strong conclusions suggesting I know what I'm talking about. They are essays to be argued with. "Giving Up Everything," the last essay of part one, is a retrospective discussion of what, at a particular point in time, I understood I was personally called to do and to be.

Part two is an edited version of a journal I kept for two or three months immediately following the completion of "Giving Up Everything." The struggle recorded in these pages belongs in this collection because it is partner to the surety expressed in the reflective essays. Only by placing the two side by side can I begin to say the dynamic of my experience.

Part three explores what working in three literary genres has meant to me. Implicit in the discussion is my sense that each genre inclines a writer to a perspective unique to it and a sense that all genres are necessary to a full expression of human experience.

Part four was originally going to be titled "Continuities." In it I intended to tie together the themes of part three and make a comprehensive statement about what I have been trying to do in my writing. I have a clear sense that over time and over genres my concerns have been guided and focused by the Spirit I have sought to follow. To testify to that is important to me. But as I approached actually saying what I think they are and making some kind of summative statement, I felt a great reluctance. Such a statement is not mine to make; it is a critic's. For me to sum up in absolute fashion a process that is continuing would be both presumptuous and deadening. But I did want to think about the direction such a statement might take. Consequently, I turned, as I have in the past, to the journal format to explore an open topic. Here, however, I have done something slightly different from before. Rather than setting out over a period of time to write on a theme, I have gone back into my notebooks and taken stories and excerpts that

connect small but formative experiences with my growing understanding of my themes and concerns.

The story may be apocryphal, but I've heard that Mickey Spillane once said to Edward R. Murrow, "I write the kind of books I want to read that no one else writes." Whatever one may think of Mickey Spillane, he has a point. In one way or another, all writers write what they want to read.

If in writing these essays I have been writing for my students, I have also been writing for myself. Like Mickey Spillane, I have been writing the book I want to read now. I still need to hear, no longer what it might mean to submit my life and my words to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, but what it means to have tried and to be trying. I have written to explore and test what I think I know and to discover what I don't know.

Writing this way, I have made a marker for myself that reads, "This is where I am." I have made a marker that reads, "This is the place from which I proceed."

What I Have Found

This place that claims my midlife
labor is not an Eden I have made.
It is a place of trial.
My hope resides in yielding
to what calls me still to stay.

No charming serpent curls
about my arm and whispers
in my ear. But I am tempted
nonetheless. Like Homer
I take the stories of my people,
I give them shape, and hand
them down. What I pass on
is truth made new—half-truth
spun through kind invention.

The world I make is finer
than the world I know. How else
contain the bitterness, the pain,
the grief? I have not lied.

I say my words; I seek
the wholeness of the world.
Like Homer I am blind.
I see what is not here.
I see this place by word
and grace a new creation.
That word is what I've found.
That grace is where I live.