



## Nine Days of Grace: Novena 2018

*Grace: Pray for the grace that comes from remembering and reflection. Give us the strength, endurance, and freedom to face adversity, and teach us compassion.*

I remember, as a child, growing up in a house without my Dad. Right after the Vietnam War, when I was six months old, he was put in a re-education camp because he was a ranking officer in the South Vietnamese government. To the Communists, he needed to pay his “debt of blood” to his people because he worked and associated with the American invaders.

I remember when my father came home after seven years in the forced labor camp, he was both an unfamiliar character and an authoritative figure. For me, to love my Dad means that I must change my behavior and follow his instruction. This is good for me because everyone in my hometown says that I could become a gangster if my Dad did not come home at the right time. I was raised only by two women, my grandmother and my mom.

I remember the bittersweet departure the day I left Vietnam. On one hand, this goodbye means saying hello to a bright future. It means an opportunity to attend college which would not be possible if I remained in Vietnam, because I am Catholic and the son of an official of the old regime. A one-chance sponsorship was being offered by the U.S. government to political prisoners who were held in a re-education camp. The offer covered their family members also. A chance to go to America was a golden opportunity not to be missed.

On the other hand, this goodbye means that I will break my grandmother’s heart. She decided to stay in Vietnam to hang on to the house because she knew how hard that was to migrate especially to a new country since she had had that experience from the North to the South when the country of Vietnam was divided in half in 1954. She has raised me for fifteen years. All memories, bonding, and comfort become a flood of tears as we separate.

My necessary departure splits us apart. To love her now means to hold her in my heart from across the Pacific Ocean.

I remember my mom’s dreadful cry after witnessing my dad suffering from a severe stroke that paralyzed the left half of his body. I remember the moment when I opened the door coming home from Chicago where I was studying philosophy during my Jesuit formation. My mom collapsed right in front of me as I entered the house. To love her now means not to comfort her physically but to accompany her daily in prayer and through long-distance conversations. Knowing all this heartbreak makes me ask: “Am I using all my energy in vain? Should I be honoring my religious call, or should I be fulfilling my duty as the only son?”



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As I recall my twenty-eight years in America, I sometimes feel that I don't belong to any country. I am a stranger in my homeland and a foreigner in my host country. Being Vietnamese American means living in-between two cultures. Loving my neighbor means bridging the gaps of difference and then striving for the hybridity which allows me to blend and mix two cultures and create a new strand. And through this process of integration, loving myself means opening myself up to be vulnerable to any insecurities and embracing the complexity of cultural identities, often undefined and contradictory.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk who works tirelessly for peace, puts the complexity of Vietnamese identity in his poem titled, "Please call me by my true names"

*"Don't say that I will depart tomorrow even today I am still arriving. I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry, to fear and to hope. The rhythm of my heart is the birth and death of all that is alive...I am the twelve-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat, who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate. And I am the pirate, my heart is not yet capable of seeing and loving. I am a member of the politburo out of focus with plenty of power in my hands and the man who dies slowly in a force-labor camp. My joy is like Spring, so warm it makes flowers bloom all over the Earth. My pain is like a river of tears, so vast it fills the four oceans. Please call me by my true names, so I can hear all my cries and laughter at once so I can see that my joy and pain are one. Please call me by my true names, so I can wake up and the door of my heart could be left open, the door of compassion."*

In my personal experience, loving my neighbor as myself requires humility, courage and much patience.

Adversity comes with every stage of life and so does the commandment to love God, my neighbor and myself. Trauma, violence, and adversity could push a loving equilibrium out of balance, and challenges might be overwhelming and weigh me down, but one thing is clear from the commandment: I need to move through any tribulation with all my heart, my soul, my mind, and my strength and God above all is the author of my life. If I am persistent, the door of compassion opens and offers me deep understanding about humanity and the freedom from disordered attachments as well as freedom to love others across any boundaries-whoever they are and wherever we meet.

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