



A Crazy, Holy Grace: The Healing Power of Pain and Memory

Frederick Buechner

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When pain is real, why is God silent?

Frederick Buechner has grappled with the nature of pain, grief, and grace ever since his father committed suicide when Buechner was a young boy. He continued that search as a father when his daughter struggled with anorexia. In this essential collection of essays, including one never before published, Frederick Buechner finds that the God who might seem so silent is ever near. He writes about what it means to be a steward of our pain, and about this grace from God that seems arbitrary and yet draws us to his holiness and care. Finally he writes about the magic of memory and how it can close up the old wounds with the memories of past goodnesses and graces from God.

Here now are the best of Buechner's writings on pain and loss, covering such topics as the power of hidden secrets, loss of a dearly beloved, letting go, resurrection from the ruins, peace, and listening for the quiet voice of God. And he reveals that pain and sorrow can be a treasure—an amazing grace.

Buechner says that loss will come to all of us, but he writes that we are not alone. Crazy and unreal as it may sometimes seem, God's holy, healing grace is always present and available if we are still enough to receive it.

A Crazy, Holy Grace: The Healing Power of Pain and Memory Details

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Frederick Buechner**

From Reader Review A Crazy, Holy Grace: The Healing Power of Pain and Memory for online ebook

Heather King says

I've become a curious thing, a fan of Frederick Buechner without having read many of his books. I've seen his quotes posted online or read other authors as they referred to him. It's only been in the past year that I've jumped into reading his books myself and enjoying this invitation he offers to quiet contemplation and thoughtful consideration of life and faith and believing God even when we're in pain. Zondervan's newest releases of Buechner's spiritual memoirs, *The Remarkable Ordinary* and *Crazy, Holy Grace*, are part of that discovery for me.

Each of these books collects essays and lectures Buechner gave in the past, some of them never-before published and other just shared anew. In each of these books, Buechner shares a little about his life and how He saw God at work in it, even in his father's suicide when Frederick was a boy, even in family tensions and the hushing up of the past, even with his daughter's anorexia, his brother's death, and his own depression. In all of these things, he reminds us to listen for God. He says, "We cannot live our lives constantly looking back, listening back, lest we be turned to pillars of longing and regret, but to live without listening at all is to live deaf to the fullness of the music. Sometimes we avoid listening for fear of what we may hear, sometimes for fear that we may hear nothing at all but the empty rattle of our own feet on the pavement....but He says he is with us on our journeys. He says he has been with us since each of our journeys began. Listen for him. Listen to the sweet and bitter airs of your present and your past for the sound of him" (*A Crazy, Holy Grace*).

The Remarkable Ordinary is my favorite Buechner book so far, particularly his writings on story and Christ's parables and how we can learn so much about God by slowing down and listening and looking in the most ordinary parts of our most ordinary days. He says, "joy is knowing that this is true from your stomach. Knowing that even though you see only through a glass darkly, even though lots of things happen—wars and peacemaking, hunger and homelessness—joy is knowing, even for a moment, that underneath everything are the everlasting arms."

I received this book free from the publisher. I was not required to write a positive review and the opinions I have expressed are my own. I am disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's 16 CFR, Part 255 : "Guides Concerning the Use of Endorsements and Testimonials in Advertising."

Steven King says

Author: Frederick Buechner
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Writing of Frederick Buechner, Philip Yancey leads readers to believe that his writings inform the very nature of how to live: "Frederick Buechner doesn't just show us how to write; he shows us how to live."

At this point in my reading career, I have read three works by Buechner: *Godric*, *The Remarkable Ordinary*:

How to Stop, Look, and Listen to Life, and now *A Crazy, Holy Grace: The Healing Power of Pain and Memory*. While I do not intend to disparage this simple one-liner from Yancey, whose collective works and ideas I have enjoyed for decades, I patently disagree with the premise. After reading this tome, I do not feel that I am better equipped to know “how” to live. Perhaps this read solidified that I might just not enjoy the genre of memoir as much as I thought I did.

So much of what Buechner writes seems to be random extrapolations of crucial moments in his life. I do understand that he has felt pain, particularly in his father’s unexpected suicide when he was quite young and the upheaval of his life as his mother spirited him off to Bermuda afterwards. *The Remarkable Ordinary* also built upon these events, so reading it all over again was a little disappointing. Both works also include a poignant memory of seeing a priest dressed in black, wearing a broad-rimmed black hat like a rector out of Lawrence Sterne. In that moment, Buechner felt connected to God—a sentiment I enjoy—but needlessly repeated from *The Remarkable Ordinary*.

To his credit, the author weaves a story about pain that will resonate with those experiencing agony. Especially since hurt is so ubiquitous and those struggling often are tempted to ask, “Is belief real?” or “Is God really there?” In my own life I have felt the crushing talons of pain squeezing the very fabric of my being. Perhaps many of us were taught to sanitize our pain by quietly tucking it away, forgetting it in some dark recess so that it will not intrude on life. Buechner contends that his difficulty with pain arose from the fact that his family dealt with pain in this fashion—they simply shut it out. For example, his mother, whose vibrancy was well remembered from her youth, became a recluse due to his father’s suicide and two failed marriages. Nonetheless, she lived to a ripe old age and never really came into a place of joy. Fortunately for Buechner he entertained therapy later in life and felt that he had enjoyed some breakthrough, finally being able to cry about his father’s suicide.

The author certainly has a poetic wit about himself. Note how he describes his time in Bermuda and his grandmother’s consternation of having moved there in the aftermath of his father’s suicide:

I think it did dismiss anything like the serious possibility that through flaws and fissures in the bedrock harshness of things, there still wells up from time to time, out of a deeper substratum of reality, a kind of crazy, holy grace.

This idea is a reinvention of what *The Remarkable Ordinary* labeled as the “subterranean presence of grace.” Given this crazy grace, Buechner maintains that the gift to us is that joy is the end of the entire process. Or, more to the point, joy can only be entered through the gates of pain. I find solace in that sentiment, as I hope that so much of the pain experienced is a conduit through which individuals can experience God’s joy. The Apostle Paul’s eloquent words in his second letter to the church at Corinth seem especially fitting, “Blessed is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles so that we may be able to comfort those experiencing any trouble with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.” [2 Cor 1:3-4, NET]

We should frequently remind ourselves of the crazy, holy grace that exists and that is available to us. Those struggling with pain can come to the conclusion that we are here today by grace and that is testament to the fact that our survival is a gift.

If you know someone in pain—this is a good book for them, especially if they have not read Buechner before.

Heatherjoy says

A beautifully written book. This was my first encounter with Buechner (thank you Russell Moore for the recommendation in the October 2017 CT) and I think it is very unlikely to be my last. More non-fiction than not, but with a smattering of holy imaginings and always poetic. This is the sort of book one could read quickly but is best consumed slowly. The meditations on loss and pain are a full meal.

Joan says

This book, it seems to me, must be a cathartic journey for Buechner, reminiscing about so many events in his past. He tells the story of his father's suicide (again) as well as that of meeting the priest wearing black gaiters (again) and that of his brother crying in Bermuda (again and again) and his mother's comments about the gardener passing by (again). He spends pages describing books in his Magic Kingdom, as he calls his office/library.

Included, from time to time, is an insight about remembering and perhaps another about healing. We all experience pain, he writes, and handle it in ways that are not good. Buechner wants us to be good stewards of our pain. He writes of "the importance of being able to talk and live out of your pain ... of pain becoming a treasure..." (32) These are good insights but his rambling stories, memories of events from his past, greatly over shadow and obscure them.

I am not sure there is much of value in this book for evangelical Christians. When writing about what happens after you die, for example, Buechner suggests "you are given back your life again..." He had three reasons for believing it. First, if he were God that's what he'd do. Second, he had a hunch it was true. Third, because Jesus said we aren't dead forever, referencing what Jesus said to the thief on the cross. (76-77) Buechner made no mention of Paul and his New Testament insights into the life after this one.

I have just read the two latest books by Buechner in the past few days. I don't think I'll read another one by him. There was too much repetition of stories. I was not surprised to find that the footnotes indicated much of this book came from earlier ones by him. Also, many of the stories didn't appear to have much to do with the theme of the book. It seems Buechner is still trying to make sense of his father's suicide, some 80 years ago, and everything else that has happened in his life.

Perhaps there is more to Buechner's faith experience than he is willing to tell. Near the end of this book he says he fears that if he writes too much about how he has experienced holiness, "then I risk being written off as some sort of embarrassment by most of the people I know and like." (116)

I received a complimentary copy of this book through Handlebar. My comments are an independent and honest review.

Veronica says

In 'A Crazy, Holy Grace' sometimes I found his thoughts intriguing or an original way of thinking of

something and other times he just seemed confused about God, Jesus and the afterlife. He quotes Scripture so he's read at least part of the Bible but I don't know if he doesn't believe what it says about Heaven and Hell, doesn't want to believe it or views it as a metaphor. Sometimes he seems hopeful and reminds us that God is there and we're not alone and other times he doubts and questions. He mentions that Jesus was human and could have been wrong sometimes but was also more than human. I would say Christians believe Jesus was also fully God while being fully human, so He wouldn't have gotten anything wrong. There was also a longer section where he's imagining conversing with his dead grandmother and talking about what happens after you die and her "answers" don't sound at all like what the Bible says, including it sounding like everyone's there, which if she's talking about Heaven, that won't be the case. It was a strange section. He also mentions the god Ganesh and praying to him and using a Ouija board, which he mentioned he didn't like but not about the dangers of it. I didn't like this book.

There was some overlap between the two books with him mentioning the same memories sometimes. He also swore sometimes, which I didn't like. Both were pretty easy reading as it just felt like he was talking to you over coffee. I would recommend 'The Remarkable Ordinary' but not 'A Crazy, Holy Grace.'

I received these books from Handlebar in exchange for an honest review.

Eric Black says

As with so much of Buechner's work, *Crazy Holy Grace* sits with me and makes me wonder what he is hoping to accomplish, or is indeed accomplishing, in the writing and the reading. I was most unsure in Part I, stunned into sorrowfully numb silence in Part II, and left wondering in Part III. Perhaps that's the crazy of *Crazy Holy Grace*. I'm still looking for the holy and the grace. Well, with Buechner, it's not looking as much as waiting, which is to say it is there and will be seen in due time.

Prasanta says

Much of this book is material already published elsewhere. As I am a Buechner fan already, I didn't mind the re-read and there aren't too many books I do enjoy reading again. The material in chapter one, "The Gates of Pain" was a very interesting and helpful chapter. He shares the stories of his father's suicide and how his family dealt with the pain, as well as other non-healthy ways we can deal with pain. The most memorable quote for me is: "Another way of dealing with your pain is to be a good steward of it." That was a fresh way of putting it: usually, we are talking about being a good steward of our resources or our talents and gifts, not our pain. Overall, I enjoyed the book and would recommend it to new or established Buechner fans.

Jackie St Hilaire says

We share to encourage others to reflect on their own life.

By telling his life's journey, Frederick Buechner gives us a deeper understanding on life and facing our humanity.

In story form from his own lived experiences and those closest to him, he gives the reader a heartfelt, compassionate assessment of his past life and how it affects the here and now. In hope and faith into the unknown of every day. In the struggles of being and living in what life has been thrust upon him.

Let us become companions on the journey by being open to our inner self and moving toward one another. We are gifts to one another.

We begin a healing process so that one can continue on the journey and lighten our steps.

Let it begin with me.

Peace

AJ says

While reading this, I texted a friend that Buechner was holding my hand through a time of emotional pain. That is what I sense when reading his works. He has obviously walked through his own struggles and pain and because of that, he writes to reveal God's crazy, holy grace that comes to us through suffering and trials. He explores what eternity might be. He discusses loss and grief and searching for meaning and acceptance. I love reading his writing over and over again with only one exception...I didn't enjoy his version of Jacob's life story.

Buechner writes, "When you remember me, it means that you have carried something of who I am with you, that I have left some mark of who I am on who you are....For as long as you remember me, I am never entirely lost." For me, he will never be lost.

Marlene Hekkert says

In *A Crazy, Holy Grace: The Healing Power of Pain and Memory*, Buechner looks at the age-old question: when pain is real, why is God silent? Buechner has truly been a "steward" of his pain, a remarkable idea he brings forth in this book. Since the loss of his father at a young age, Buechner has learned hands-on what it means to steward painful things that happen during the course of our lives, rather than trying to forget painful events or feeling trapped by them. He writes that God does not sow the pain, he does not make the pain happen, but he looks to us to harvest treasure from the pain. If we bury the pain and don't face it, our life shrinks. He writes that miracles can happen when we are willing to open the door into our pain, and share out of the depths of our lives. I couldn't agree more. When I have been willing to be vulnerable with others, and share the truths I have learned from the depths of my deepest pain, people have come forward to say, "me, too." That is the miracle - to know that you're not alone.

John Stuart says

Memories are made for this...

I had never read any of Beuchner's books before this one, but a number of my pastor colleagues have been

referring to his works for years. This book intrigued me because of its title – A Crazy, Holy Grace. Throughout my pastoral ministry, I have seen this in action, especially among folks who have had tragic childhoods or heart-rending grief. Beuchner's book is an ideal resource for people who are struggling with the pain of a great loss, as well as their faith in God.

Beuchner tackles grief from the basis of his own heartbreak family experiences. He expresses the reality of his painful burdens and focuses in on the purpose of memory in the healing process. He converses casually with the reader and doesn't come across as holier-than-thou. The chapter which touched me most was the one called 'The Magic of Memory,' where he writes an imaginary conversation with his deceased grandmother. It's a very touching moment and one that gets to the very heart of dealing with the hurt of loss.

The book would make a great small group study or to help a grief therapy group find coping mechanisms. Anyone who loves C. S. Lewis books will be delighted with excellent work of Beuchner. And now that I have read this first one, I look forward to reading more of his writing.

Jeff Crosby says

If you have read Frederick Buechner's earlier works including "Sacred Journey" and "The Eyes of the Heart," you've already encountered the majority of the material that was culled into "A Crazy, Holy Grace." But in addition to one wholly new chapter of content (from all I can tell, and I've read all of his work), it's very interesting and impactful to read this collection of his writings on pain and memory assembled in this way. The overall effect is a greater sense of understanding of the arc of his story (not only his father's suicide, which is threaded throughout so much of his non-fiction and even fiction such as "The Wizard's Tide" but also his daughter's anorexia). Highly recommended to long-time Buechner fans, or as an introduction to his work. Kudos to Zondervan Publishing for working to get this into print.

James says

Frederick Buechner is one of my favorite authors. He is a writer of enigmatic fiction with strange and conflicted characters (e.g. the holy and profane *Godric*, an unsaintly, Saint *Brendan*, and the unlikable religious charlatan Lou *Bebb*), as well as sermons and theological musings, and poignant memoirs which wrestle with darkness, grace and calling.

A Crazy, Holy Grace: The Healing Power of Pain and Memory is vintage Buechner. Quite literally, in fact. Most of this book is culled from the Buechner canon with selections from *The Sacred Journey*, *The Clown in the Belfry*, *Beyond Words*, *A Room Called Remember*, *Secrets in the Dark*, *Telling Secrets*. However, the opening chapter, "The Gates of Pain," is an unpublished lecture he gave, describing ways we can best steward our pain.

I typically am not fond of books of 'selections,' as they wrest passages from their context, catalog, and put them on display, like the bones of an ancient man in a museum. It is so much better to experience a book (and the person!) with its joints and sinews, muscle and skin, passion and intellect, embodied the way its Author intended. That being said, the themes of pain, loss and memory haunt Buechner's works and these selections are well chosen. The lion's share comes from just two works, with large swaths from *The Eyes of*

the Heart and Beyond Words and supplemented by *the Sacred Journey* and the other books.

The book is broken into two principal parts. Part 1 describes pain (chapters 1 and 2) and part 2, memory (chapters 3-6). A third section of the book posts shorter reflections on secrets, grace, depression, death and the ways God speaks.

Buechner begins the "The Gates of Pain" by describing an episode related to his father's alcoholism during his childhood. Someone had told him after hearing the story in a talk he gave, "You have been a good steward of your pain" (16). The essay weaves our universal experience of pain, with the parable of the talents inviting each of us to trade life, what we've been given—joy and sorrow—with those around us, inviting us to likewise steward our pain. "What does it mean to trade? I think it means to give what you have in return for what you need. You give of yourself, and in return you receive something from others to whom you give" (26-27).

Buechner tells of an out-of-town friend who showed up unannounced to sit with him as he was consumed by his daughter's struggle with anorexia (27-28). He challenges each of us to learn to not only share uncontrollable joys but to open up *the door into our pain*, share our struggle and allow God's miraculous healing to enter our lives (28). Jesus doesn't come to us in his own flesh but through the guise of the other, so, Buechner contends, trading pain, allows us to experience His healing presence. "Joy is the end of it. Through the gates of pain we enter into joy" (32).

The second chapter is the passage in *The Sacred Journey* that describes Buechner's father's suicide and its aftermath.

It is probably fitting that as I read part 2 on memory, I was remembering passages and people I had read before. Buechner remembers pain, loss, relationships with friends and family and the way his father haunts his life. He describes the interplay between hope and remembrance, between hope and expectation.

To remember my life is to remember the countless times I might have given up, gone under, when humanly speaking I might have gotten lost beyond the power of any to find me. But I didn't. I have not given up. And each of you, with all the memories you have and the tales you could tell, you have also not given up. You also are survivors and are here. And what does that tell us, our surviving? It tells us that weak as we are, a strength beyond our strength has pulled us through at least this far, at least to this day. Foolish as we are, a wisdom beyond our wisdom has flickered up just often enough to light us if not on the right path through the forest, at least to a path that leads us forward, that is bearable. Faint of heart as we are, a love beyond power to love has kept our hearts alive. (61-62).

One of the gifts that Buechner has given his readers and the church, is a reflective understanding of how pain shapes our journey. But not just pain. There are also the feeble ways God's grace breaks into our lives, bringing hope, healing, and wholeness. As fantastical though it seems.

The world we are living in is filled with walking wounded. Broken relationships, news cycles dominated by natural disasters, racial violence, sexual harassment, and assault. *Even so, come Lord Jesus.* In the meantime, we need friends to come and share the journey with us and so mediate Christ's presence to us. Buechner testifies to the power of sharing our pain with others and has shown us how to trade pain in his

prose.

This is a good book. Even if you have most of it in other forms on your shelf, as I do, "The Gates of Pain" is worth reading and reflecting upon. I give this four stars. -★★★★

Notice of material connection: I received a copy of this book from Handlebar Media in exchange for my honest review

Nancy says

Pain and Hope Shape Our Lives

Our lives are filled with loss, pain, memory and hope. Beuchner writes poignantly about each of these emotions in his life.

Perhaps the hardest part to read is the first chapters on pain. Beuchner's father committed suicide when Frederick was a young boy. For many years he couldn't grieve, pushing the memory down. Because the memory was pushed down so hard it haunted him until finally he was able to talk about it. Now he writes beautifully about it. If you've lost someone under difficult circumstances, his story will resonate with you.

The other painful story is of his daughter's struggle with anorexia and his difficulty coping with it. He recalls a friend coming to sit with him during this trying time. It reminds us how sometimes just being there for someone is enough.

At the end of the book Beuchner focuses on memory and what comes next. He conjures up memories of his grandmother. Although she has been dead for many years he feels close to her and has wonderful imaginative dialogues about the meaning of life and remembering.

If you struggle with loss, this is a good book. I particularly enjoyed the section of reflections at the end, short musings that give you something to meditate on.

I received this book from Handlebar Publishing for this review.

Julius McCarter says

Frederick Buechner's *A Crazy, Holy Grace: The Healing Power of Pain and Memory* explores one of the fundamental questions at the heart of the Christian faith: When our human pain is so real, where is God?

A Crazy, Holy Grace is a release of a lecture given some time ago. Its message has never appeared in print before. But it's as timely as this morning's news. The world is rife with human suffering -- written in the news scroll across my television screen, but as real and burning as the person's life whose story makes the lead on that news.

We all have known this loss and the pain associated with it. That pain has its own unique memories. And in this little book Buechner does again what he has done so many times before: He writes with the poignancy of a spiritual friend who can guide us through that grief and into healing.

Even when God seems the most silent, Buechner advises, he is always the nearest. He gives wisdom about "stewarding" our pain, and about the grace of God that is never arbitrary and consistently quiet -- in the way that love is often quiet but resolved.

Letting go and the faith of resurrection are difficult things, to be sure, but I know of no better guide with them than Frederick Buechner. And this book confirms that belief. It's a must-have for every self.

I received a free copy of this book as part of the Handlebar blogging tour in exchange for my honest review here.
