

The Zen of Puzzles

A Ritual for Accessing the Subconscious Mind

Anitah Draimon

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With great love and gratitude, this book is dedicated to all my family, friends, and contrarians, both seen and unseen, whose love, support, and challenges have brought me to this miraculous moment. You know who you are.

Published by
Moontide Productions,
Ashland, OR 97520
www.moontideproductions.com

ISBN# 978-0-9826497-0-1

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Cover and interior design by ProVisual Design, Inc.
Medford, OR 97504, www.provisualinc.com

Introduction

I was having dinner with a friend one evening when we landed on the obscure subject of jigsaw puzzles. We discovered that we had both been raised “with the love of the game” and learned to extrapolate real-life lessons from working on puzzles. We were amazed by the similarities in both our puzzle approaches and perceptions, and we confessed to using jigsaw puzzles to access information from the subconscious mind. After discussing how this learning could be applied to all kinds of puzzles, we agreed that this information should be made more available to anyone looking for hints about how to make life easier and more satisfying.

My friend then disclosed that she still had a written journal and a number of voice recordings from one intense period with her Great Aunt who had helped Rachel sort things out after her divorce. While puzzling, her aunt had drawn analogies between the working of a jigsaw puzzle and everyday situations. Rachel offered to let me read the journal and listen to the recordings which I subsequently did with great interest and appreciation. By the time I reached the last journal entry, I had emotionally adopted Rachel’s Aunt Grace as my own. Her

down-to-earth and insightful way of handling the human and spiritual aspects of life continue to touch me in many unexpected ways.

Grace had named her approach to puzzling The Zen of Puzzles which she defined as the ability to be in the moment and listen closely to what is needed in order to respond appropriately and work cooperatively with all aspects of self. Doing so in right timing allows the aha moments that deliver crucial information not through the mind's logic but through the heart's knowing. She said that living life this way takes practice, but the effort would be well worth it. After taking her advice and practicing these concepts myself, I agree with her completely.

Rachel has always meant to assemble her aunt's observations in book form, but her husband, three children, and full-time job seem to keep her rather busy. So, she asked if I would be willing to review her materials about Aunt Grace and introduce her aunt to a broader audience. I consented with great alacrity. The world is in great need of this grand woman's warmth and wisdom.

So, it is with great pleasure that I offer you this short compendium of events that suggest how to gather valuable life clues through the work/play of puzzles. The story demonstrates how one woman's life lived fully and richly can influence and inspire many others. May this "beacon on a hill," a symbol that accurately represents Grace's vibrant life, cause your own light to flame more brightly and more strongly.

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Ashland, Oregon
12.02.09



Chapter One **Grace**

I watched out the front bay window that broadly framed the gray Atlantic Ocean as my father went to greet her and carry her bags. She still stood tall, and not even her days-from-now 90th birthday could slow her down, diminish her strength, or dim the sassy gleam in her eyes. I felt the thrill that I always had when I saw her, knowing that some kind of adventure would inevitably unfold.

My father laughed as he automatically bent his head from his 6'3" vantage to hear more easily what she was saying from her own 5'8" height. They were quite a sight—her sleekly silver hair hinting at what his salted black head might look like when it grew up. Though she charmed everyone, few loved and liked her the way we did—my father, mother, brother, and I. Few could relate to her story. Few even bothered to try.

The state of Grace

Great-Aunt Grace was not my legal aunt, though she had lived with my Great-Uncle George for almost thirty years before he died eight years ago, so I had known her my entire 36 years. This was enough to guarantee her being embraced as Aunt Grace, though the rest of my father's stodgy family refused to acknowledge her as such. I still cannot fathom why they thought she was a gold digger of questionable character. Grace had come to the relationship with Uncle George as a wealthy woman in her own right and inherited nothing from him except the house where they had lived.

Uncle George's three children had nothing to complain about as they had been most tidily taken care of in his will. However, the two oldest persisted in righteously ranting about Grace to any hijacked listener. I was happy that these two nasties would not be coming to Aunt Grace's birthday party. However, Julia, the youngest, would arrive for the weekend—Julia, the sole exception to their strange common gene pool.

Why all the raised eyebrows and snide whispers? Well, Aunt Grace had "a past." An only child, she had been raised in a small town in Maryland. Her father was a minister in a miniscule farming community where everyone knew everything about everybody and clung to opinions that spanned generations. Grace had a happy, normal childhood until her mother died when she was 12—at that crucial, almost-teenager time.

Without her mother's balancing presence, her father had become angry and embittered—enraged at the fickle God whom he had faithfully served—the God who had dealt him such a dark, crippling blow. Until that point, Grace's father had paid more attention to his congregation

than to her, but all that changed after her mother's death. Grace then became central to her father's ministry, a role that she hated. Almost overnight, she was forced to take on the church work that her mother had naturally championed.

In her newly-defined adult role, Grace was her father's representative at all the church's "female functions." Dutifully, she oversaw bake sales; worked with members of the church's cleaning committee; participated in the sewing circle; sold tickets for the building raffles; and was always there for the many weekly and seasonal activities considered to be "women's work."

Grace felt trapped. She had little time to herself, but she hid her growing resentment well, knowing that one day she would escape her imprisoning life. Until that time, she was careful to do everything that was asked of her the best she could. To survive, she knew she had to keep her father from directing his increasingly volatile anger at his daughter instead of his God. Frankly, Grace was afraid of her father and his blind rages, and she did not want to be around when he finally snapped and lost control completely.

Once Grace reached puberty, the gangly, awkward girl transformed into a crowd-stopping beauty. Her father became even stricter, more demanding, and suddenly, more suspicious. His innate harshness roared to the forefront, and more and more, he carried on like a bombastic Old Testament prophet.

From the lectern, her father would stridently deliver apocryphal warnings of retribution to both his church community and to her. He exhorted them all to faithfully tread the straight-and-narrow road to salvation and depicted hellacious visions of where evil-doing would lead them if they failed. Everyone squirmed during her father's fist-pounding

sermons, but no church member was more severely admonished to do good and conduct herself like a proper Christian girl than Grace.

Grace was not allowed to date, to dance, to sing, or to participate in after-school activities. She was forbidden from wearing age-appropriate clothes, perfume, or makeup. As much as he tried, though, her father could not hide Grace's innate beauty. She still had the boys chasing after her, much to his alarm.

Whenever her father saw her talking to a boy, he would later threaten her with hellfire—accusing her of leading the boys astray “with her seductive woman's wiles.” She was so often compared to the evil temptress, Eve, that Grace felt she should just eat the damned apple herself and be done with it.

Her father accused her of engaging in lewd acts, of drinking and smoking, of general mayhem and debauchery. During these rants, Grace remained silent while mentally arguing that she could not have possibly had the time to do any of those things, no matter how intriguing they might sound. While storming at her and stomping around the room, Grace, with instinctive humor, imagined that her father was a mad little bug, spastically jumping up and down in an empty mayonnaise jar, while a large hand descended with a lid that would finally shut him up. Her images usually deflected the pain of these tormented diatribes. Usually—but not always.

The great escape

By the time she was sixteen, Grace felt that she had endured her father long enough. She was done with that life and steadfastly resolved to leave it behind. Having secretly written to one of her mother's cousins in New York—the one who could never figure out why her mother had

married her father in the first place—she explained her situation and found a sympathetic ear. She also found a place to stay. Feeling freer than she had ever felt in her entire life, Grace took enough money from church donations to get her to New York, buy new clothes, and have enough money left over to find a job.

She departed on a Saturday when her father was at an all-day planning meeting with the church council. Grace left a note telling him where she had gone, gave him an I.O.U. for the money she had taken, and walked out the door with only one change of clothes, her underwear, and a picture of her mother. She would buy new clothes in New York.

Grace took a dilapidated bus to Philadelphia where she boarded a more modern train to New York. Though the ride was uneventful, Grace was thrilled to watch the countryside passing by, bringing her ever closer to the city that had been in her dreams for weeks. She tingled with excitement and saw herself as a heroine—the main character in an adventure novel—ready to conquer this limitless new world.

By the time a taxi dropped Grace off at her new home, however, her father had already called saying that he was disowning her and that she was never to return to either his home or the town she had so thanklessly forsaken. These lines had never been part of her imaginary plot line, and Grace felt a pang that might have been regret. Being a pragmatist, though, she quickly added it to her stack of reasons why she had been smart to get out of Cornville.

Women had rather limited job opportunities in those days, especially girl-women who needed to lie about being 18 to even get one in the first place. Grace did not care what kind of job she was offered as long as it did not require sitting behind a desk all day. The tedium and

routine would have driven her crazy, so she decided to find a job that came with a lot of public interaction.

She needed to look the part of a competent customer service professional and so, for the first time in her life, Grace went shopping for clothes that she would actually enjoy wearing. With a newly-found sense of style and an abundance of untrammelled optimism, Grace carefully purchased thrift-store clothes in several upscale shopping districts. Once she accessorized them with beautiful scarves and tasteful jewelry, she felt and looked like a million bucks.

Grace ended up selling perfume in a fashionable department store where after only five months, a man who owned a modeling agency discovered her and literally changed her life. Feeling once again like a fictional heroine—this time in a modern fairy tale—Grace became a well-paid model, an instant member of a glittering world she had never even known existed. She was soon able to pay back her tight-lipped father and offer her mother's cousin and husband monthly rent for the third floor bed and bath they had provided her.

Becoming a model was a true turning point for Grace. Earning a comfortable amount of money gave her more options, but, unfortunately, the once supportive atmosphere in the house turned decidedly chilly the longer she lived there. The couple who had welcomed her as family now became distant and disapproving. They strongly condemned her new work because they believed that models were essentially prostitutes in nice clothes—or at least that was what they so often told her. They also lamented how heart-broken her sainted mother would be if she were still alive and “saw what Grace was up to.”

Though Grace understood that they were probably worried about her (and also about what their friends and neighbors might think,) she

realized that for their sake as well as her sanity, she needed to find another place to live. Within four weeks of making her decision—a record even in those days—Grace found a lovely apartment to share with a friend from work. Everyone was greatly relieved.

Her time in New York swept by in a whirlwind of shoots and makeup and wardrobe changes and endless scheduling. However, after two years of modeling, Grace began to find the work draining and monotonous and finally admitted to herself that she hated it. Though her iconic blond-hair-and-blue-eyed beauty was earning her top dollar, she could not see herself spending her youth sitting still in front of a camera for hours on end. For Grace, the work was dull and uncomfortable—almost as dull and uncomfortable as living with her father, and that was quite a statement.

Socially, she had quickly figured out that many of the men who sniffed around models in those days were generally insufferable and expected either their money or their charm to get them what they wanted. Grace saw them as dim-witted annoyances and chose to read at home rather than be assaulted after dinner and doggy-bagged home as dessert.

Therefore, during the week, Grace led a very solitary life. On weekends, however, she roamed New York, almost living in museums and taking in as many concerts, ballets, and Broadway shows as she could. Occasionally, Grace was escorted by men she had met and considered interesting, though she never had a long-term, great romance with any of them. She lived a pleasant but predictable life.

What happened in Vegas

In casual conversation during lunch one day, Dorothea, another agency model, told Grace that she was giving up modeling for something

more exciting. She was trading the New York winters for the hot lights of Las Vegas and had already asked Vegas connections to get her a job as a showgirl. Then and there, Grace decided to go with her. She could always learn to dance, and she was more than ready to cut loose and really enjoy herself. No more dull days and quiet nights.

Leaving New York and landing a showgirl job had been relatively easy, and, to her delight, Grace discovered that she loved singing and dancing and was actually quite good at both. She loved the entire casino scene—the costumes, the music, the lights, the sounds, the laughter, and, most of all, the chance to be on stage.

She and Dorothea worked at the same casino and shared a big, two-bedroom apartment. They fell into an uncomplicated routine of work, parties, and sleep, and Grace woke up one day knowing that, at long last, she was finally having fun. Life felt so much easier in Las Vegas.

This comfortable routine lasted for about seven months until Grace was unexpectedly offered a terrific job in a top-billed Las Vegas show. Dorothea did not take the news well, and her acerbic remarks quickly became annoying. After a month, it was simply less hassle for Grace to move into her own apartment. Once she had settled in, she quickly began to savor the benefits of being on her own, especially not having to answer to anyone but herself and not being around people who tried to step on her dreams. In her heart, Grace knew she was on her way to enormous success, and she was not going to let anyone or anything slow her down.

Being strikingly beautiful in a high-profile show in a high-roller casino in a high-stakes town was Grace's ticket to a glamorous, over-the-top lifestyle she had only read about. She lustily dove into it as

if into a vat of champagne, and she could not lap it fast enough. She dated, she drank, she seduced, she drank, she accepted expensive gifts, she drank, she went on expensive holidays, she drank. She did everything to excess until that hideous day when she told herself the truth—she had become unmoored and was quickly disappearing into darkness. She had become the main character in the smuttiest kind of cheap pulp fiction imaginable.

This awareness sucker-punched her hard when she woke with a raging thirst one morning in a richly-appointed room not knowing where she was or whom she was with. She remembered nothing of her weekend, and this scared her. When a much older man sauntered in with a smirk on his face offering her orange juice, she had the sense not to drink it, realizing that she had probably been drugged and had done God-knows-what.

She was sore all over, and when she stiffly made her way to the bathroom to shower and get dressed, she was alarmed to see large purpling bruises down her thighs, on her breasts, on her buttocks, and on her neck and back. What in the world had gone on? She skipped the shower, threw on her clothes, and left the house as quickly as she could, passing two other men on her way out the door. When one lunged and attempted to stop her, she kicked him as hard as she could in an apparently overused part, and she ran.

Grace eventually came across a taxi that took her home. Once she knew she was safe, she ran into the bathroom and vomited what little food was in her. Then she stood for hours under a hot shower, shaking with unremembered horror, trying to feel clean again, sobbing until there were no more tears.

She became almost reclusive after that weekend. She felt

damaged. She felt stupid. She stopped dating and did not accept the many invitations that continued to come her way. Grace never saw the men again who had essentially kidnapped and raped her, not that she would ever file a police report. She was too ashamed.

Eventually, the party people she thought were her friends deserted her. She had no family. She had no friends. She had never felt more alone in her entire life. With self-revelatory disgust, Grace admitted that all her father's predictions about her had come true. She had well and truly lost her way. She was a fallen woman, a seductress, a foul sinner. Perhaps he had seen the corruption lurking in her soul all along. Maybe he had been right after all.

Redemption comes from within

Then a voice deep inside she had never heard before roared, "No!" The familiarly unfamiliar voice insisted that she would not become part of her father's crazy nightmare and lose herself. She would find a way back to her center. She would survive this, and she would do it on her own terms. She listened. She agreed. In that pivotal moment, armed with angry courage and a fully-charged will, Grace chose to not just survive, but thrive.

She continued to work at the casino, but she asked if she could learn to be a dealer at one of the tables instead of remaining a dancer. There were no women croupiers at the time and this seemed like an outrageous request, but management was smart enough to know that her looks alone would be the magnet attracting a lot of men to her table. So Grace learned how to run a high-stakes blackjack table that became the most visited gambling table on the floor.

When she was not working, Grace studied for her high school

equivalency and handily passed the tests. After that, she began taking part-time courses at a local college in pursuit of a four-year degree. She surprised herself by unearthing a natural instinct for finance, and her studies consequently gave her the confidence to begin investing her savings. More than anything, Grace wanted to secure her future because that would mean she would never need to rely on anybody ever again. She would become her own woman. Furthermore, she was clear about never marrying; she had learned the hard way what men were really like.

Within three years, Grace had converted her savings, her generous salary, and her even-more-generous tips to real estate and various other investments. In time, these brought her the wealth and security she craved. At long last, Grace knew that she could take care of herself no matter what happened.

Then, like a trite plot from a late-night B-movie, Grace caught the eye of a wealthy New York financier who traveled regularly through Las Vegas on his way to San Francisco. Once again, she became a storybook heroine—this time in a romance novel. She was almost 23, and he was 44—childless, and divorced. In an act of rebellion against his own prim-and-proper upbringing, Harold wooed her, won her, and married her, though it took him almost two years.

Initially, Grace was skittish and untrusting, but over time, she began to believe that there could be a different kind of man than the ones who had scarred her. With trust came love and acceptance, and Grace decided to give Harold a chance. However, she was not foolish, and she knew that this unorthodox relationship would cause trouble with his pedigreed family, and it most certainly did—big time. But Grace and Harold simply chose not to care and would frequently tell each other

that there was nothing like a little rebellion to get the blood moving.

Grace and Harold were stereotypically “madly in love.” They lived their lives fully, traveled well and widely, threw parties frequently, and enjoyed each other’s company enormously. To the bafflement of many who predicted that the marriage would not last, they became the embodiment of what a happy relationship could look like. Over the years, Grace’s questionable past receded into the background as most in their social circle came to simply accept her as Harold’s lovely young wife.

Their unshakeable and colorful marriage lasted twenty-two years before Harold suddenly died in bed making energetic love to his always enthusiastic wife. According to Grace, he died with a happy grin on his face fixed at his moment of ecstatic release.

Grace inherited his considerable fortune as Harold had no children either by her or his first wife. Many assumed that she would become the merry widow, but Grace withdrew from the social spotlight and lived as a recluse for almost three years. Men who wanted to court her were repeatedly turned away until, finally, their persistent calls stopped coming.

Grace was devastated when Harold died as she was rocked from what she had considered to be her life’s firm foundation. She was only 47 at the time and had a lot of life left. The problem was, Grace did not know what she was going to do with all of those years. So she retreated into herself to figure out who she had become and plot a new course for herself, one that sadly did not include Harold.

While walking on a Maine beach at sunrise, Grace had a revelation. A well-formed plan unfolded in her mind to do the work she had always done best in the past. She would devote her time to increasing Harold’s wealth and bringing his legacy of compassionate kindness to the world.

When Grace turned her considerable intellect, focused attention, and shrewd street-smarts to Harold's investments, she was able to triple their combined assets within six years. During that period, she started a foundation to fund shelters for abused women, some of the first in the country. Abuse was a topic rarely spoken about at a time when women were still expected to be good wives and obey their husbands "no matter what." Within her social circle, there were those who thought her shameful for focusing attention on such private matters. Grace continued to do exactly as she pleased.

She had heard too many stories of abuse from her New York and Las Vegas coworkers to be slowed down by a few sheltered hothouse plants with their thorny opinions. Over time, she engaged many willing and influential society matrons in fundraising efforts for their less-fortunate sisters. They, in turn, convinced their well-connected husbands to support legislation to better protect women. She could almost hear Harold laughing.

Returning

About five years after Harold's death, Grace reentered New York's social world. Though some long-remembered gossips still remained dubious about her interests and activities, none could deny Grace's magnetic attraction or minimize the impact of her good work. Their fascination with what this unorthodox woman would do next ran high. Grace was frequently mentioned in the society pages as she was escorted around New York on the arm of one prominent man after another, but these affairs never seemed to last long—that is—until she met Great-Uncle George.

Great-Uncle George was my father's uncle, and everyone adored him for his humor, his wisdom, and his effervescent curiosity about life.

He had been married young and was gladly divorced after enduring a shrill, greedy, unappeasable wife for eight years who had managed to present him with three unhappy children. The whole sad experience led George to believe that he was clearly not cut out for marriage. He was linked to a succession of women, but none who managed to capture his heart.

His strange and estranged wife did everything to alienate his children from him, and so George saw them infrequently and under strained conditions. Therefore, he directed all his love to his nieces and nephews who vied for his time and happy attention. George, my father, and his brother were especially close, and when Dad talks about his adventures camping and fishing (and later clubbing and traveling) with his Uncle George and his brother, Tim, his voice still catches a bit as he reminisces about good times and good men now gone.

When George first met Grace at one of her charity events, he was instantly and irrationally attracted to her and proceeded to run as fast as he could in the opposite direction. It was clear to him that this very appealing woman could upset his well-defined, comfortable existence. George steered clear of Grace and ducked her on every occasion. To his dismay, however, he found himself frequently seated next to her at private dinners. (Grace confessed later that she had arranged all of these in-proximity meetings as it was evident to her that George was incapable of making the first move. When Grace first met George, she, too, felt an instant attraction, the first since Harold's death. On the spot, Grace decided that she wanted to get to know George better. He never really had a chance.)

They dated for almost eighteen months before Grace scandalously moved in with Uncle George and messed up every routine he had.

Uncle George was reborn, and though he was persistent in his attempts to get Grace to marry him, she always firmly but gently refused. Wise woman that she was, Grace knew that marriage would alienate his distant children even more. She convinced George that living happily in sin would keep their relationship alive and interesting. And so it did. Since many people already saw her as a sinful woman, Grace unabashedly embraced the role.

We did not see much of Aunt Grace when Uncle George suddenly died from a brain aneurysm. She once again went into seclusion and retrained herself to live on her own once more. Though she has occasionally dated, Grace has never become serious about another man. She thinks that having two great loves in her life is enough for her, and now she simply wants to enjoy male companionship without the commitments.

For the past six months, she has been with a “much younger man,” a 72-year-old retired real estate developer from Italy who satisfies her and makes her laugh. I recalled my last conversation with her as I watched Grace approach. Her coat flapped wildly as the wind that was bringing a predicted nor’easter swept her to the front door.

Reunion

How did she do it? My one attempt at marriage had ended five months earlier after a mere three years. Like Grace, I remained childless, but I had grown up anticipating the Norman Rockwell life of adoring husband and happy children. I had not even met my first real love, and my reproductive clock was ticking as loudly as an imminent bomb blast. What was I doing wrong?

These were the thoughts swirling in my head as I met them in the

foyer. I looked at Aunt Grace, and all I could do was smile. She made me feel so happy. Then I saw the understanding in her eyes, and my eyes filled with an ocean of unshed tears. She knew. She always knew. I felt 10 years old again coming with my woes of being teased by the boys because I was so tall. They said I looked like a beanpole creature from another planet or a rubber ball that had been stretched too far for too long. (When they are 8 years old, boys' name-calling expertise can be limited.)

As she had so many years ago, Grace simply hugged me, held me, and rocked me ever so slightly until my tension began to drain. I was home, and I would be all right. Later, the words would come.

My mother hurried from the kitchen to offer her own greetings, hugs, and kisses. Grace was the same height as my mother and, in more ways than one, they saw eye-to-eye. I watched the two most important women in my life as they reconnected.

My brother and his wife would not be up until Friday, so I had almost four full days of Aunt Grace and my parents all to myself. Already, I was feeling better.