

Encountering Grace

By Dan Justin

I grew up in a small town outside St. Louis, Missouri, in a neighborhood where a kid's worth was measured by one thing: the size of his Star Wars toy collection. In our subdivision, kids could be placed on a scale of sorts. At one end you had Jeff Potts, who was more into sports and did not really even like Star Wars. Oh, he had couple of toys just to try to fit in, but nothing to write home about. So he was pretty much worthless. On the other side of the spectrum was me. I lived, breathed and ate Star Wars, and had every toy there was to be had.

The only kids in the neighborhood who even came close to my level were Justin and Simon—two brothers, one year apart. They loved Star Wars just as much as I did, and the only reason their collections had not surpassed mine was their parents had to buy two of everything. Sharing was out of the question. Each week we would add to our collections in hopes of out doing the other—our own mini-Cold War right in our neighborhood.

When the *Return of the Jedi* movie was released, along with it came a whole new line of Star Wars figures to be collected. And we set out to collect them all. But there was one figure that we wanted more than any other: Princess Leia in Endor gear. This figure represented a new technology in Star Wars figures because she had a cloth poncho instead of the regular plastic one, but even more than that, she had a removable helmet.

Each week we would search to find this figure and each week we would be disappointed. It went on for months—as if the entire state of Missouri had been omitted from the shipping lists for this one particular toy.

Then one day, I saw it. I wandered over to Justin and Simon’s house, where I found them sitting on the couch with evil grins on their face. They spoke in unison, in the same sing-song voice, “Guess what w-e-e-e-e got!”

I had a sinking feeling in my stomach. Without even waiting for my response they each pulled out a Princess Leia in Endor gear – cloth poncho, removable helmet and all.

“Where did you get that?” I demanded through clenched teeth.

“The grocery store” they said.

The grocery store? Never in its entire existence had the grocery store ever carried a good toy, except now it had the one toy that every child in America needed.

Then the two brothers put the final nail in my Star Wars toy collection coffin: “There’s only one left.”

I knew then that they had already called every kid we knew and told them where to get this one remaining figure, because that is exactly what I would have done.

I ran home as fast as my little legs could carry me and burst into the living room where my mother and father were having a conversation. I told them we had to make an emergency trip to the grocery store immediately. They told me no.

I explained the situation: If I did not get to the grocery store as soon as possible, the Communists up the hill were finally going to outdo me on my Star Wars collection. My mother said no again; it was time for dinner. How she could even think about food at a time like that was beyond me.

I did the only thing a kid could do; I threw the biggest temper tantrum I could muster. It landed me in my room without my trip to the grocery store—and without my dinner.

Hours later, when I was finally allowed out my room, I came into the kitchen, sat down, and proceeded to give my mother the evil eye. She didn't say a thing. She simply turned around, opened a drawer, and pulled out a Princess Leia in Endor gear that she had bought for me long before Justin and Simon had ever gotten theirs, and gave it to me.

I was stunned. In that moment I no longer cared about the toy. I was amazed at the magnitude of my mother's love. She knew what I wanted and she gave it to me. I can honestly say that this was my first encounter with grace—and I was undone.

Grace is the life-changing, life-saving love of God freely offered. It is a love that rescues and redeems, a love that takes us out of a life of meaningless pursuits in which we only care for ourselves. Grace calls us to a life of meaning, caring, and giving.

On that day, in the kitchen of my parents' house, I thought that all I wanted in the world was Princess Leila in Endor gear. And there she was—cloth poncho, removable helmet, and all. But I received so much more that day, more than I could ever have asked for or imagined.

As I look back now on this moment and all the other episodes of grace in my life, how can I respond? All I can do is give back, as best I can, in gratefulness and gratitude—all because of God's abundant love for me.

Dan Justin is a newly ordained Episcopal priest and the Assistant Rector at St Mary's Episcopal Church in Park Ridge, IL.