

# ALTERNATIVES TO MISTRUST

## The State of Grace Document — by Maureen K. McCarthy



**M**y realtor, Ed, cultivated a friendship with a realtor in a neighboring city after trading leads and family stories over a three-year period, talking only by phone. Recently Ed found himself in a car accident when someone ran a stop sign. He and the other man got out of their cars screaming and swearing at one another. When they calmed down enough to exchange insurance information, he realized it was his friend and colleague of three years whom he had never met in person. Both men went white and simultaneously apologized and claimed total responsibility for the accident.

I love that story because it so clearly illustrates how enveloped we are in our culture of mistrust. Rather than trusting the other person's intent, we've learned first to assume a stance of power or defensiveness to protect ourselves, initiating a downward spiral. We applaud those who protect themselves and seek those who offer protection. Our business foundations such as legal contracts and employee manuals, which are seen as tools to avoid difficulty, actually start with the premise "I believe you just might screw me." Then we wonder why our business situations erupt, we dread going to work, or our client stops calling. The foundations of mistrust are so ingrained that even when you make a personal choice to trust, society doesn't recognize relationships as legitimate unless there's a legally binding contract. Have you bought a house/car, started a business, new job, gotten married without one lately?

I've spent my career in the corporate world, currently through my company *Engaging the Soul @ Work*, questioning the way we do business so that people cease sleepwalking and

create workplaces that really work—for profit and for people. It's an exhilarating experience when a business deeply reevaluates the way they measure success. Yet it still seems their emphasis is on fixing what's broken, rather than creating new foundations so there's less to fix in the long run. The pervasive lack of trust we build as a foundation is a leading reason our relationships, organizations, and societies are experiencing a fierce pain. These paths of protection might ensure the deal is adhered to or consequences will be rendered, but they don't help navigate the rough spots or ensure our self-esteem is left intact if things go awry.

Years ago I went into business with my best friend. We were so full of enthusiasm and passion for the business idea, and for the partnership.

Then nine months after we launched, she wanted me to leave.

I was devastated. It was a mere twenty-minute conversation about what bits she would take over and when my laptop could be returned. If you saw us for the first time that day, you would never have envisioned the storehouse of memories we'd captured. I knew as well as she did that things weren't working out, so I wasn't sorry to leave. Those things rarely come as a surprise. But it's a blow to the gut when it happens because you never set out to fail. Even with the best of intentions between trusting individuals, we remain a product of the society that says "business is business" and "draw a line in the sand with someone who hurts you." It took us two-and-a-half years before we spoke again, and in the meantime, I questioned my instincts and no longer trusted others or myself. I mistakenly thought the relationship ended that day, but I inadvertently carried it around with me everywhere. And was it heavy.

### Peace as the Ultimate Goal

An ultimate goal of maintaining or returning to a peaceful state would prove a more valuable foundation than protecting our financial investments. And yet, paying better attention to the people in the relationship will more than likely also preserve the financial investment. Keeping the status quo at all costs or ending things bitterly within our relationships, projects, companies, and communities creates a filter through which we enter all future relationships.

Realizing we needed a more trusting and honorable way to build, sustain, and transition relationships, I created what I call The State of Grace Document which is appropriate for both personal and professional situations. In fact, my company no longer uses legal contracts, only State of Grace Documents, even with large global corporations. They've all agreed and the work we create together is richer for it. See a sample State of Grace Document on page 21.

The State of Grace Document is a 1-to-3-page document designed and created in unison by those in the relationship, and is very personal and explicit. It's created at the beginning of the relationship, or at the very least, while things are in a good place. It takes into consideration who they are as individuals, as well as the nature of the relationship; be it between colleagues, employee and manager, partners, husband and wife, landlord and tenant, client and supplier, or any other relationship situation that exists. The Document consists of the "story" of the individuals as they

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see one another and their connection while things are going smoothly, as well as a bullet-pointed list of work styles and the warning signs they might show if things begin to get off track. Most important, it includes a series of questions, answered together in an agreed upon timeframe such as three hours or three days, to help return to a state of peace if the need arises. This is done to capture that affirmative perspective and remind ourselves of the true beauty of the other person in case we lose sight of what we once found so amazing. In the event that something unfathomable happens and we're not emotionally capable of seeing the other person, both people agree never to outright harm the other. They also agree on a long-range timeframe, such as five or ten years, to find their way back to each other and to peace.

It's remarkable that the very act of creating a State of Grace Document can almost ensure you never have to use it. When we agree to trust one another at the start, create an atmosphere where people can be vulnerable, and pay attention to signs along the way, we tend to avoid difficulties and shorten transition periods. Legal contracts solely address our situations, State of Grace Documents address the people, their intentions, and the situation.

As I help others around the world create their own State of Grace Documents, I've been advised to trademark the idea before someone runs off with it. That seems logical, yet it categorically contradicts the concept. If we want to heal our pain and author a healthier future, we need to build foundations of trust where the people involved are the central focus. Have you noticed how legal documents even strive to remove personal references so John Smith "will hereafter be referred to as Party A?" I know the two-inch thick stack of

paperwork I was required to sign when refinancing my house was as impersonal as it gets. Halfway through signing I stopped reading the fine print knowing the bank would enact the consequences no matter what the situation. I in no way felt I was in relationship with the bank or anyone who works there. When we depersonalize our interactions, we lose sight of the real purpose of living. What price are we paying for this protection? At the very least we need to supplement our legal contracts with more trusting tools.

For several years I've been working with BP (British Petroleum) in the U.K. They were very open to creating new foundations including The State of Grace Document. After several months, I saw how their decision to place a state of grace as their top priority affected the company. BP was involved in a highly expensive, four-year lawsuit with a man fighting a zoning change forcing him to sell his land to accommodate an oil platform safety procedure. The lawyers involved asked the leadership team to refrain from any contact with the plaintiff, even though he had repeatedly requested it. Yet somewhere in their hearts, now that they were seeing business from a different perspective, they knew it was wrong to remain out of a state of grace with this man. So two men from the leadership team asked this man to lunch. They genuinely apologized for the agony he was caused and acknowledged how difficult it must have been to sell his land. Over the course of their meeting, they learned the man was only looking for a personal response from a very large, impersonal corporation. A few short hours later the entire lawsuit was dropped.

It's not to say we should never protect ourselves or that some people aren't trustworthy, but we need to give people an alternative to the culture of

mistrust. When the BP leadership team met the "other side" in person, or when my realtor recognized a friend, each affirmed the other's humanity and realized that trust was not the huge risk it's believed to be. In fact it's becoming a greater risk to live behind the impenetrable fortress walls our current foundations foster.

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## Sample State of Grace Document Created Between Two Business Associates

**W**e both agree that staying in a state of grace with one other is more important than keeping our business relationship status quo. Sometimes we'll get into rough spots along the way. This list of questions, written by the two of us, is a way of ensuring we'll have the difficult conversations that are sometimes needed, and come through them knowing we only have the best intentions for ourselves, each other, and the business at hand. Sometimes things need to be confronted or transitioned, but what's most important is that our underlying foundation is one of true respect.

[Many people include an **Expectations** section in the Document where they can list the type of things contracts traditionally cover in terms of what's to be done, agreed upon or intentioned.]

### The Story of Us

**Anne:** We came upon the decision to work together because our thoughts on this project were very much in alignment. I admire the way you're so passionate on the topic when you talk to the group and your knowledge of our specific software package is incredibly valued. You bring a lot of energy and life to the project and I respect the way you do business. Your honesty is impeccable, you value other people's time, and I trust that you want what's best for the company as well as yourself.

**Brian:** I'm grateful for the chance to work on a project that really aligns with my skills. I appreciate the fact that you've put your trust in me and are willing to give so much of your time to assist me. Your ability to run the numbers yet see the bigger picture is critical. The entire team greatly respects your leadership style because you're willing to let us take risks. I'm glad you're a risk taker, because I know this project is risky. I like your sense of humor in tough times and the fact that you can say so much in your silence at times.

### Work Styles

**Anne:** I am at once a very hands-on person with details, but also very hands-off when it comes to letting my people do their best work. I'm confident in letting go of control, because I've done my homework ahead of time. If I can see you're prepared, I can let go of control, but don't come to me unprepared.

**Brian:** I tend to work at a very fast pace and am very frenetic when it comes to creating the software solutions. When working with others I am gregarious and enjoy a relaxed, casual atmosphere.

### Warning Signs

**Anne:** If I go into my office and shut the door, look out. I only shut my door when I am unsatisfied with the situation. When I come out, I need rational, straight answers, not opinions or roses. I also tend to get irritable when I skip meals, so it wouldn't be a bad idea to have some food on hand during crunch time.

**Brian:** When things get stressful, I often get more excited and impatient when others don't pick up on what I'm trying to tell them. At that point I need someone to remind me that I'm not helping the situation by adding more stress and I may need a five-minute breather.

### Questions to Return to Peace

**If at any given moment one of us feels there is something out of place, we commit to coming together within four hours to go over these questions we've written together ahead of time:**

1. What does it mean to stay in a state of grace?
2. How comfortable are each of us having this conversation right now? Is it the best time? Should we agree to a later time?
3. Peel away the layers of fear and ask yourself why there's tension or why we're feeling disconnected.
4. What are the pluses that we have each brought to the project so far?
5. Are you getting what you need?
6. What do you need from me right now?
7. Set aside blame.
8. What am I afraid of really saying to you?
9. What part does money play in this situation?
10. Has the work we planned on doing together panned out as expected so far?
11. Have I let you down?
12. Is it possible this could be occurring because of some sort of a power struggle. If it is, who is the power struggle between and how is it impacting us?
13. What do I appreciate most about you?
14. What do we each have to gain by disconnecting at this stage of the work?
15. What am I afraid of in losing my connection to you or the work relationship, as we know it?
16. What do we have to gain by staying connected versus letting this be?
17. What is the deep down knowing we have about how this will eventually end up?
18. What do I need to forgive myself and/or you for?
19. What gifts have we given each other?
20. Now that we have answered these questions, what are you still afraid of?
21. Thank each other.

We also agree that if by chance something unimaginable happens and we can't manage to come together to go over the questions to return to a state of grace, **we commit that we will not do anything to outright harm, speak negatively to others about, or create more pain for the other. We also agree on a long-range timeframe of five years to get back together to find peace if we can't seem to make it happen before then.**