

Water

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The two of us rocked lazily, sipping coffee, still in p.j.s,
on the gingerbreaded porch of the old cottage,
drinking in the view: down the hill,
beyond the town's park and bandstand,
across the rippling gray-watered bay,
to the old boathouses and cottages nestled at the foot
of the wooded ridge that forms the eastern horizon.
Cloud boiled across the sky after an all-night rain

The two ancient pine trees that stand in front of the house and tower
over the porch, offering shade, scent,
bird perchings, and infinite varieties of green light, were dark and heavy.

Unpredictably bursting the cloud apart,
sunshine streamed out of the vast blueness of the vaster sky,
through a small rectangular cloudless keyhole,
turned the gray baywater Prussian blue,
filtered through the green pines
and ignited into glittering diamonds
thousands of beads of water that had been, under gray sky,
invisibly clinging to their separate tips of needle.

We were overwhelmed by sun-ignited droplets of water
revealing the glory of creation and Creator.

He never tired, nor did the frogman blue flippers inhibit him.
While his little brother jumped thoughtfully
toward patient parents standing in shoulder deep water,
over and over, methodically, relentlessly,
with calculated boldness,
the older brother swam back to the float,
slapped his flippered feet up the rocking ladder,
flap-slapped his way through the other children to take his turn,
placed his blond haired, precious bodied, red swimsuited self
in ebullient profile against water, pines, and sky,
positioned his flapping flipper feet over the lip of the float,
and glancing briefly at sky, pines, water, family, playmates,
leapt shrieking in courageous abandon,
flippers splayed, arms akimbo, fanny first,
into the waiting water.

Swim, climb, jump, swim, climb, jump, swim, climb, jump,
most of the morning, after a rest, before supper.

We were overwhelmed by the unending playfulness
water draws out of a six-year-old child.

His mother and I stood maybe ten feet apart.
thigh deep in shallow water.

Most other families had gone home, but he refused to leave.
He was on the verge of swimming. He desperately wanted to swim.
He had all the motions—leaning on the water, paddling, kicking.

But disbelief kept overwhelming his yearning.
He could not resist touching the sand each time he kicked.
He could not quite dare trust the water to hold him.
Swimming depends on trusting that the water,
which everyone buoyantly assures you will support you
as it does them, really will.

At three years old, you wonder how others swim.
At thirty years old, or fifty, or seventy,
you still marvel at the gift of trust
by which others seem to be so much more
securely centered and steadied.

But finally he did it; lifted his feet;
rested on the water; trusted its promise; swam.
And grinning wider than his mouth could stretch,
he welcomed our shouts, applause, and hugs.
We were overwhelmed again by the delicate invitation
water issues to children of all ages
to enter it and trust it.

Once or twice a summer we regamble the old dare.
Little boys again, we step back into our childhood.
Midnight, one-thirty in the morning, after a cigar on the porch,
we walk quietly under the pines, between the cottages,
back to the secluded cover where effervescent energy and emerging
trust frolicked by day.

“Swimming area closed,” the sign says, clearly and firmly.
“Violators will be disciplined,” warn the pious folk
who administer our summer community’s private beach.
We are grown men repeating a childhood adventure,
and checking cautiously to guarantee
that the good pious folk are soundly sleeping, as they ought be,
and we’ll get away with it again, we lay shorts, shirts, sneakers on
the lifeguard stand and slip naked into the water.
Skinnydipping is mingled innocence and prank.

We swim silently out to the sandbar beyond the float.

We listen for loon calls, name constellations, observe how good the water

and the prank feel,
remember earlier years and other mischief-making,
and savor our continuing delight in and loyalty to each other.
Boys again for a few delicious moments,
water slashes a joyful, rowdy, tender, affirming sparkle
into our deepening, aging, brother-bonded grins.

In just one day, water's mystery exceeds chemical analysis.
Somehow, it prisms all the glory of creation.
Somehow, it invites us to play.
Somehow, it coaxes us to dare to trust.
Somehow, it bonds us in adventure and commitment.
Weeks later, in our parishes, each of us faces a young family.
Mother, cheeks flushed, eyes bright, steps forward.
The ancient words are spoken; water is sprinkled on her head;
the mark of the cross is etched wetly on her forehead.

The congregation stirs, witnessing her newly witnessed faith.
Father courageously steps forward.
presents and surrenders their newborn
to the pastor, the people, the Creator.
The white ruffled lacy baptismal gown cascades to the floor.
The tiny curious face watches as the pastor's wet hand comes
nearer and nearer. Clumsily a tiny hand lurches out and
grabs the wet fingers as they touch her head.
Together mother, infant, congregation, pastor, are baptized.
The baby is handed back to her parents' stewardship.
A wet diamond of love and joy and awe and hope
trickles down her father's cheek.

Water, H₂O, by the grace of God, carries life.
In happy convergence, science and Genesis both testify
that in primordial, turbulent, soupy wetness life began.
In the wetness of our mothers' wombs we began.
At their breasts, by their milk, we grew.
After Noah's cleansing flood, God made a new unending covenant.
At the wells of the Promised Land,
Abraham and Sarah nourished their flocks.
Through the parted waters of the Reed Sea
Moses led and Miriam danced into freedom.
In the Jordan, Jesus entered his vow.
With her tears, Mary washed Jesus' feet.
Under water poured from a scallop shell,
immersed in pond or stream,
or sprinkled with reserved Presbyterian sincerity,
the followers of Jesus turn back to water to open themselves to be bound
to Him in life-giving covenant.

Isaiah says even the Lord God has to become vulnerable in order to wash and heal and redeem humanity.

Jesus says the only way to greatness is through the drowning of our idolatries, and our immersion in humility.

So we take adults by the hand and children in our arms, and lead them underneath the water,

and somehow, mysteriously, sacramentally, they, like we, who might have been outside promise, hope, love, life, joy, who might never have identified the glory in creation, or the playful, trustworthy embrace of the Creator's love, or been enveloped in God's life-birthing covenant, are overwhelmed: drawn inside promise, inside hope, inside love, inside life, inside joy.

And somehow, mysteriously, by accepting this particular sacramental water, they like we, each and all together are enveloped in the encircling love of God.