

This I Believe: Touching the Fingertips of God

By Jody Price

When I first read the guidelines at NPR.org for writing a "This I Believe" piece, it said I had to state my belief in one or two sentences. That's when I panicked. I was never going to be able to ferret out my belief and put it into such a small segment. But once I was finished writing, I discovered I had.

I believe in the battle of the heart to find a reason to keep beating in the midst of terrible pain and grief. Does this mean that it is human nature not to give up? No, it is deeper than that. It's more the struggle of the heart to find a reason to keep living, and in that struggle begin to touch the hand of the Divine. Without that purpose, I would find life very difficult to live.

In these past 2 years, the image of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel has fluttered through my brain. Not the whole ceiling, but in particular, the panel of God creating Adam. This is surprising to me because it is one of the most patriarchal images in the Judaic-Christian tradition. The physical beauty of God and Adam is stunning. The men-only world that exists for

that incredible moment of power and creation. The absolute absence of woman in the instant of birth is infuriating. But what holds me, surprises me, causes me to grasp, and gasp, at this image are the hands of man and God, more precisely, the fingers. They touch each other for just an instant, at the fingertips. That is the moment I believe in and hunger for, that instant when we can touch the fingertips of the Divine, of the Spirit, of what some may call "God." As I was beginning to ready myself to write a draft of this piece, I found a copy of the poem by Rumi you heard this morning. It was read at a meditation retreat I attended in October 2005. The poem was painful to me when I first heard it, four months after I lost my dad and a month after I lost my dear, twenty-year old nephew, Nicholas. Coming to it again, over a year later, it still holds its power. Five lines are those for fingertips touching:

This being human is a guest house.

Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,

Some momentary awareness comes

As an unexpected visitor.

"The momentary awareness/as an unexpected visitor" is the fingertips touching. That second when we find the Divine. Virginia Woolf called it an epiphany, in her British, upper middle class fashion of a Mrs. Dalloway, when the dinner table is perfect or the light on the sea with the children playing on the beach: a moment of perfection, connecting us to some higher perfection, some instance of supreme peace that some of us struggle to find throughout our lives. And are left breathless and heartsick when the instant comes, then vanishes. It's like grabbing at water running through our hands. Clearly, we cannot hang onto it. However the drops remain.

Eric challenged me, during my year of intense grief, to write about the times I touched the Spirit and held the soul. I can hear my writing coach of last summer now chastising me with, "Well, what is your story of touching the fingertips of the Spirit." So, what is my story; it is really so many little stories of awakening, awareness, happiness and joy, disappointment, grief, and laziness.

I'm sure you don't want to hear all of the stories, but my mind always travels to the first place, to Cayuga Lake, one of the Finger Lakes in upstate New York. My mother's family had farmed the land on the slopes of the huge hills the lake is carved into for generations. The farm was located

about half way between Waterloo and Ithaca, the towns on the opposite ends of the thirty-mile lake. Down the old dirt, bumpy, and twisty lane, past the huge deserted barn where they once held local barn dances, sitting at the base of a cliff, about a mile down, sat The Cottage. The Cottage was a rough, two-storey building, built into and onto the cliff side, which allowed for only small beaches of slate rock, between the cliff walls and the Lake. The front porch of the cottage jutted out into the lake on stilts. It separated the North and South sides of the Lake for us. In the morning, going out the door on the north side the water was always churning and loud. It was chilly and shadowed. On the south, the sun was always warm, and it was blissfully quiet. I'm still not too sure how the sun worked down there to make it happen. We were in a crevice and could not see the sun until it moved up over the top of the hill and cliffside. My great grandfather and grandfather built this cottage. My Dad helped build the dock of railroad ties, boulders, and 2x4's when he came into the family in 1946, after his time in the War.

I spent hundreds of hours here as a child, until I was 13, when a split in my mother's family caused us to lose access to the cottage. But for those precious years, I was in heaven. The cottage had limited electricity and no

plumbing. We had an outhouse up next to the ravine. For people like my Dad, this place was definitely not Heaven. For me, it was, in the biggest, most comprehensive sense of the word. I was completely enveloped by the Divine. In my child's mind and heart, I was at peace with my world. All avenues of existence converged for me in this spot. The rush and roar of the waterfall on the Southside, when it rained hard and the water came down the ravine. It was so loud that we could not even hear ourselves speaking to each other. The meteorites embedded in the beach and the ravine from a star shower who knows how many millennia old. Looking for lucky stones—the flat, slate rocks with a perfect hole through them—that my sister, Krista, and I could put a string through and wear as necklaces all summer long. We knew we were carrying on the tradition of native children who lived on these shores not so many years before us. The beach fires my grandfather and mother built after Krista and I looked for wood all day long. The sounds of the gentle lapping water out the open window, as my sister and I drifted to sleep in the big double bed in the middle room, careful not to touch each other.

Everyone in my family knew how much I loved the Lake, so much they all called it "Jody's Lake." I never felt ownership. I felt complete and utter

connection to all that surrounded me, to all that touched me. I'm sure you'll understand how much I resented having to put on a dress, gloves, hat, and patent leather shoes on the Sundays when my traditionally Catholic father was visiting and insisted that we go to church. In my own childlike way, I knew I was constantly and always holding hands with the Divine with every step I took. The Lake, in the words of William Wordsworth, was to me, "all in all"...All in All, in the deepest meaning of those words.

I lost the grasp of that hand the older I became and the farther I moved from the lake. But it provided me a spiritual foundation that I have come to over and over again in my life.

The grief at my loss of the Lake has been an open wound my whole life. My husband, Griff and I have returned to the area twice in our life together. Once as newlyweds to discover that the cottage was torn down by the new owners. Another time with my mother and sister and our families, when the kids were all little. We stayed for a week at a rented cottage. It felt all wrong, plus the smell of the fields, the sound of the meadowlarks, and the sight of the Power Station across the Lake were too painful. I haven't been back. For many years, I unconsciously believed my spiritual life, my hand in the Spirit's, was gone.

I saw moments of fingertips touching, but did not know what I was looking at. Going to Wordsworth's beloved Lake District in England for the first time overwhelmed my senses. The fells, the lakes, the sheep, the sky, the sun. But the feeling of sadness, as I hiked those hills that I could not hang onto that beauty—or at least thought I couldn't--was my most pervasive feeling. In writing this I finally understand what Wordsworth meant when he wrote: "Wherever nature led; more like a man/Flying from something that he dreads, than one who sought the thing he loved" ("Tintern," ll. 71-73).

Then there were the painfully funny moments, while in graduate school and living above a garage on a beach in Westport, Massachusetts, when I would go out on the beach and force myself to put Wordsworth's theory of Natural Supernaturalism to the test. Why wouldn't it work? I read all of his poetry; I had as much marginalia as Coleridge ever did. I read all of the literary criticism. Why couldn't I feel the Spirit in the huge roll of the waves and the play of the sun in the sky and on the water? My intellect was ready, but my heart and soul didn't budge. I was making it way too hard. To spread my arms and feel the wind and allow the roar of the water to

encompass me was all I had to do. Instead I decided that the Divine no longer existed in nature. Times had changed since 1798 England.

It wasn't until I met my husband that I began to truly "come to my senses." He was a man who found nothing but peace and solace walking in the woods; sitting in a canoe on a pond for hours; standing on an icy lake on a cold winter's morning, watching the sun come up, after he had set his five ice fishing traps. This time required no speech for him and definitely no intellectualizing. Just listening, watching, and being. He has taught me to be at peace, but I still was unaware of the presence of the Divine. I had found the peace of being once again enveloped by the natural world, but had not discovered the realization. I wasn't putting my hand out to even try and grasp the hand I once held.

My next story may not seem a story of being at one with the natural world, touching Spirit. But believe me, it encompasses it all: water, earth, air, and the fire of passion and love. This is the story of Nicholas and the water tube.

I must first start with the story of me on the tube. I can't water ski, have never been able to water ski and am now afraid to water ski. I would get up just so far, out of the water, then collapse. I don't think it is a

physical malfunction: arms not strong enough, legs too wobbly. Too heavy. Look, my sister could get out of the water and she has really skinny arms. My husband can get out of the water, and he weighs a lot more than I do. But I could never get out of the water—or all of the way out—and I refuse to go into counseling for that.

But one summer on Sampson's Pond in Carver, there was a new way to ride around behind the boat: The Tube. The tube was a large inner tube, like the old black airplane inner tubes we used to float around on in the Lake. But these new tubes were way fancier. First, they didn't have those air nozzles on the inside that you always had to watch out for, and in worrying about, always ruined your leisurely float. And worrying never worked anyway because you always ended up with a nasty scratch on your side or leg the minute you let your guard down. No, these new tubes were brightly colored with neat water splash designs. They had huge rubber handles to hang onto and in the well was a kind of seat. They were made entirely to be dragged behind a motorboat. And my brother in law, Ted, bought one for his boat and the kids. This was my vehicle. How easy to just hang onto the tube and go for a fast ride. I could do that.

So everyone had to go in the boat to see this: Grammie, Krista, Little Griff, Shauna, Andrew, and Nicholas. My nephews, Andrew and Nick, were full of all kinds of advice—as they always were and are—about how to get the wildest and fastest ride. I was a mother and wanted none of that. I told Nick I was going to sit up in the tube. He was adamant that sitting up was the worst possible way to do this. It was too bumpy, and I could be thrown out. He certainly seemed to know what he was talking about. So I lay on my stomach, across the tube, grabbed the handles, and away we went.

I thought I was going to die. At first the exhilaration was overwhelming, but that was soon overtaken by the real fear that my arms were going to be pulled right out of the shoulder sockets. I think I made it halfway around the pond, with Uncle Teddy having great fun whipping me over every wake from the boat he could hit. I could see him looking back, grinning at me. I was afraid to let go because I thought I would skid across the water and be maimed.

My mother saved me. A mother seems to know, no matter how old the child, when the child is no longer having any fun. Mom had Teddy stop. They hauled me in like a stunned seal, everyone hysterically laughing.

The greatest blow to my wounded ego, not to mention my rubbery arms, was when my little nephew, Nicholas Pratt, says, "I'll show you how to do it, Jody." Now Nick was maybe 10 and all of 50 pounds, if he was an ounce. I just looked at him and thought, "Yeah, right." He clipped on his life jacket and jumped over. This was a kid who was scared to water ski. If he fell, his brother or sister had to jump in the water and swim out to him and stay, until the boat came around to get him, so he wouldn't cry. He would never even try dropping one ski, the way his parents, sister, and brother could do so gracefully. No way.

But he hopped into that tube, crossed-legged, ears sticking out from under his summer whiffle, grinning, teeth glistening, and away we went. Nick was a revelation on that tube. He wasn't still for a second. He sat and swayed his body side to side, as the tube skidded across the boat wake, like a laughing baby Buddha. He flipped himself onto his stomach, and threw his legs out behind him and became one with the tube. Sometimes the speed of the boat and the wind swirling around him, grabbed him just right, and he became airborne. Legs, feet, torso all flying, like a spindly, gawky kite behind the tube, with only his tiny hands firmly clenched to the handles. When he would finally come down, he would do one of the funniest things I

have ever seen: he stuck his head into the well of the tube, so that only his legs stuck out, all akimbo and flapping in the air. And it wasn't like he was doing this all in slow motion. He would go from position to position in a flash. Always with a grin that consumed his entire face. The clearest image I will carry with me the rest of my life is the grin and the legs. Nick in flight, Nick free as a bird, Nick as pure joy. This was a fingertips moment of the sacred, of pure and utter exaltation: water, sky, fire of love, and freedom from the earth. His gift to me: my most perfect image of him in this life.

This story may not have meant much, if Nick lived to a ripe old age and was there to pay homage to me when I die. That was not to be. And my last image of Nick, lying on a hospital gurney or in a coffin, are not images of the Divine. And my story of Nicholas has nothing do to with those last images, but has everything to do with him on the tube.

I hope I have made my point: that those moments in the presence of the sacred are fleeting, not always clear, and infuriating. But they do come if we are open to them. My sacred clearly revolves around Beauty, Nature, and Love. All three are deeply interwoven in my life. My favorite hymn here has always been: "For the Beauty of the earth, For the splendor of the sky, For the love which from our birth over and around us lies, Source of all to

thee we sing this our hymn of grateful praise." But since losing my Dad and Nicholas in such a short span of time, it has been very hard for me to sing, or recognize, anything that looks like grateful praise. But I know I must.

This year the search for beauty, peace, and Spirit has been more serious, more deliberate than ever before. It is a path towards connection and towards the relief from the pain and grief. Where has it happened that I have touched the center of the universe, the fingertips of the Divine? Have there been any moments when I have felt there is something larger? It seems impossible to believe that there would be in such a horrible year of such intense pain. But they have existed and truly in the deepest pain comes the most powerful certainty that I am not alone.

I have to start with the moments of deep peace that I have found. Unlike any other times when I have thought I have found peace. Maybe I feel it because I have been in the presence of death, visiting and taking twice in a short time. Helping someone die is a profound, beautiful experience, no matter how sad or gut-wrenching. One was slow, the other quick, but their souls lingered with us. I know they did and while they were still with us, there was peace. I felt the value of the death rituals of the wake and the prayers, even though they were no longer my prayers.

However, my deepest moments of touching Soul and Spirit have come in the gardens, mine and my Dad's, which I have brought back to life as my wheel-chaired bound mother and her cats watched from the window. To work through the dirt he so lovingly nurtured, to discover the tools or paraphernalia he tucked away in the shed, connect me with him as he watches me work. I listen to the cardinals, "chip, chip" away, as I plant the hydrangea and deadhead the pansies. I have no chores in the house calling to me, no need to speak to anyone. It's just me and the garden. Great peace, an unexpected gift. These are moments that I am touching the Spirit.

At home the work in the gardens is slower but is a process of prayer: hauling the hose, picking the raspberries, pruning the forsythia, avoiding the racing dogs. But there have been Moments: in the side yard at twilight in late spring, a breath swept the back of my neck. There was no breeze, no one I could see standing behind me. Just a soft, smooth breathe. I smiled and continued my work, slowly and mindfully, grateful for the breathe of the moment and connection to a place I am just beginning to find. This is the exact spot in my last dream of Nick where we sat and began to talk of "how he was dead and now he is alive." This is my sacred spot now. Why this spot,

I'll never know. Why not the pool where he loved to swim, the porch where he and I talked, for hours? But I just accept the gift.

Then one evening as I prepared the garden for night, I looked up into the sky. There had been no sound, no disturbance to cause me to take attention from my ritual. But I looked up to see a magnificent Great Blue Heron, slowly and silently going to its evening roost, "my heart was stirred by a bird." I held my arms out to it as it disappeared, thanking the Spirit, the Source of All, to allow me that prayer of beauty and peace.

What do I feel when I am able to hang onto Spirit, to touch it? I feel a quiet in my very center which connects me with a certainty that this is not all there is. These are moments when I know Nicholas is healthy, learning, waiting with Papa. I just know. I light his candle and kiss his picture and know we will meet again. They are moments when I let go of rational thought and give over to "faith," a faith that I can't possibly know all and that I cannot ignore that intangible Beauty that I can barely touch. This I believe.